Introduction

One objective of public policy is to reduce income disparity in Canada. An earlier bulletin (Singh, 2002) provided an analysis of the rural-urban income gap over the 1980 to 1995 period. The objective of this bulletin is to update those findings with data from 2000. As with the previous bulletin, we will address two questions:

- Do the rural regions in each province always have lower average incomes?
- Do all the rural regions in Canada show a similar incidence of low incomes or are there any differences across provinces?
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Background

As with the previous study, we consider “income disparity” in terms of the absolute income gap between the rural and urban regions within and between each of the Canadian provinces. All income figures are measured in constant dollars (i.e. after adjusting for inflation\(^1\)). The income gap is further investigated by looking at the incidence and the change in the incidence of low incomes among individuals living in the rural regions across provinces. The low income cut-off (LICO) measure is used to measure the relative income gap or incidence of low income in rural regions across Canadian provinces\(^2\). It should be mentioned that LICOs are not suitable to measure poverty (i.e. they are not intended to identify who are poor\(^3\)). On the other hand, they reflect a consistent and well-defined methodology used to identify those who are substantially worse off than the average. LICOs have been widely used by analysts to study the characteristics of relatively worse off individuals and families in Canada. In this paper, we use LICOs to highlight the incidence of low income across Canadian provinces by calculating and analyzing the percent of individuals living below the low income cut-off.

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1. Throughout this paper, we shall use 2000 as the base year for conversion to constant dollars as the 2001 Census of Population enumerated income data for the 2000 calendar year.
2. We should note that LICO differs by urbanisation class, largely due to the lower cost (especially lower housing cost) in rural areas. The LICO therefore accounts for these variations. See Cotton (2001) for a detailed explanation of how LICO is calculated for each urbanisation class. Note that the LICO level for a given urbanisation class, e.g. “rural” is used across Canada and thus there is no adjustment for differences in living costs within rural Canada.
3. For further discussion, see Fellegi (1997).
Box 1: Definitions

Census Consolidated Subdivisions (CCS): is a grouping of census subdivisions. Generally, smaller more urban census subdivisions (towns, villages, etc.) are combined with surrounding, larger, more rural subdivisions to create a geographical level between the census subdivision and the census division.

Rural: The term “rural” in this paper refers to “predominantly rural regions” across Canada. The OECD defines a region as “predominantly rural (PR)” if more than 50 percent of the population lives in rural communities. A “community” is defined as rural if the population density is less than 150 individuals per square kilometre. We apply this definition of rural using the census consolidated subdivision (CCS) as the community and census divisions as the region. For further details, see du Plessis et al. (2001).

Urban: The term “urban” in this paper refers to “predominantly urban and intermediate regions” across Canada. Regions are classified as “predominantly urban” if less than 15 percent of the individuals live in rural communities and are classified as “intermediate” if 15 to 50 percent of the individuals live in rural communities. Thus, regions are classified as “predominantly urban and intermediate” if less than 50 percent of the population lives in rural communities. For further details, see du Plessis et al. (2001).

Incidence of low income: is the proportion or percent of members of economic families or unattached individuals who are living below the Statistics Canada measure of low income (i.e. below the low income cut-off or LICO).

Economic family: refers to a group of two or more persons who live in the same dwelling and are related to each other by blood, marriage, common-law or adoption.

Low income cut-off (LICO): is an income threshold below which a family is likely to devote a larger share of its income to the necessities of food, shelter and clothing than an average family would. Specifically, the threshold is defined as the income below which a family is likely to spend 20 percentage points more of its income on food, shelter and clothing than an average family. When the cut-off was first established on the basis of the 1959 Family Expenditures Survey, an average family spent 50 percent of its pre-tax income on these necessities. Twenty points were added to this percentage on the assumption that a family spending 70 percent of its income on these items would be in “straitened circumstances”. The income level associated with this 70 percent threshold was then converted into a set of LICOs for each urbanisation class. LICOs are established using data from Statistics Canada’s Family Expenditure Survey, now known as the Survey of Household Spending.
**Data**

We look at the data from the Census of Population for 1981, 1986, 1991, 1996 and 2001 and use the OECD classification of “predominantly rural” and “predominantly urban and intermediate” to identify rural and urban regions respectively (see Box 1). The building block for this definition of rural and urban regions is the census division and each census division may have individuals living in a number of urbanisation classes. Our analysis of the incidence of low income is derived from the tabulation of the individual data, where each household is coded as “above” or “below” LICO according to household income. The LICOs are in turn determined by the urbanisation class in which the household is located within the census division.

**Per capita income across provinces**

**Provincial rural regions**

The per capita income in the rural regions of Canada’s three highest income provinces, British Columbia, Alberta and Ontario, consistently exceeded the rural per capita income in each of the other provinces over the period 1980–2000 (Figure 1 and Appendix Table 1). There is a wide range in per capita income in predominantly rural regions across the provinces – from $19,216 in predominantly rural regions of British Columbia to $13,103 in predominantly rural regions of Newfoundland and Labrador (average for 1980–2000 in constant $2000).

Rural income increased in each province between 1980 and 2000. New Brunswick had the strongest rural income growth (8.7 percent per year) and rural regions in Saskatchewan experienced the weakest rural income growth (2.3 percent per year) from 1980 to 2000.

In the first intercensal period, 1980 to 1985, overall Canadian rural per capita incomes increased only marginally (0.4 percent), which was mainly due to the recession of the early 1980s. At the provincial level, this period produced mixed results. Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Ontario and Manitoba experienced growth in their rural incomes while the remaining provinces experienced declines.

In the second intercensal period, 1985 to 1990, overall Canadian rural per capita income showed a healthy growth rate of 14.2 percent. All provinces experienced rural income growth due to the end of the recession in the Canadian economy.

In the third intercensal period, 1990 to 1995, rural income declined by 1.2 percent at the Canada level with most of the provinces experiencing stagnant or declining incomes.

In the fourth intercensal period, 1995 to 2000, rural income increased by 11 percent at the Canada level with most of the provinces experiencing double-digit increase in their rural incomes.

New Brunswick was the only province where rural per capita income grew at a higher rate than the average Canadian rural per capita income during each of the four intercensal periods.

The Atlantic Provinces ranked at the top for rural income growth for the 1980–2000 period, led by New Brunswick. Since most of the Atlantic Provinces had lower per capita income in 1980, this meant that they experienced a larger ‘catch-up effect’ leading to higher rural per capita income growth than the other provinces. Ontario which had high rural per capita income, also showed strong growth over the 1980 to 2000 period and was ranked fifth. On the other hand, provinces such as British Columbia and Alberta with higher per capita rural incomes showed only marginal growth rates and were ranked at the bottom. It is interesting to note that Saskatchewan, which had low per capita rural
income over the last 5 census years, experienced only marginal growth over the 1980 to 2000 period and thus showed a relative decline in the economic prosperity in its rural regions, compared to the average Canadian rural region. This may be attributed, in part, to the decline in agricultural prices, which constrained income growth in its rural regions.

**Provincial urban regions**

Ontario and British Columbia were the only provinces with urban per capita income above the Canadian urban per capita income in each of the last 5 census years (Figure 2 and Appendix Table 1). On the other hand, urban regions of Quebec, New Brunswick and Newfoundland and Labrador were at the bottom of the list reporting lower urban per capita income than the other provinces over most of the last 5 census years.

We find a similar ranking of provinces in terms of their urban per capita income as we found regarding their rural per capita income – Alberta, British Columbia and Ontario rank at the top and New Brunswick and Newfoundland and Labrador rank at the bottom in terms of both urban and rural per capita incomes.


Comparing the growth in per capita income in urban and rural regions, we find that the rankings are similar. The Atlantic Provinces rank at the top while Alberta, British Columbia and Saskatchewan rank at the bottom in terms of urban and rural income growth.

**Rural-urban gap in per capita income within provinces**

During the overall 1980 to 2000 period, the rural-urban gap at the Canada level has ranged from a high of $4,821 (in 1985) to a low of $3,725 (in 1995) in favour of urban regions (Figure 3 and Appendix Table 1). There is a wide range in the size of the rural-urban per capita income gap across the provinces, ranging from $2,586 in New Brunswick to $5,242 in Nova Scotia in favour of urban regions (average for 1980–2000 in constant $2000). Nova Scotia and Manitoba had the largest rural-urban gap in per capita incomes.

The rural-urban per capita income gap within most of the provinces was consistently smaller than the overall Canadian rural-urban per capita income gap over the last 5 census years. The exceptions were Alberta in 1980 and 2000, Manitoba in 1980, 1985, 1995 and 2000 and Nova Scotia in all periods. (All of Prince Edward Island is classified as a predominantly rural region and thus a rural-urban income gap was not calculated for Prince Edward Island.)

During the 1980 to 1985 period, the rural-urban per capita income gap increased for most of the provinces since the urban incomes increased at a faster rate than the rural incomes. This gap then narrowed marginally during the 1985–1990 period for most of the provinces. The rural per capita incomes grew at a faster rate than the urban per capita incomes. The gap closed within each province in the 1990 to 1995 period. This was mainly because the urban per capita incomes fell...
faster than the rural per capita incomes, i.e. the impact of recession was more severe in urban regions than the rural regions. This trend was reversed during the 1995-2000 period, when the gap increased for all the provinces. This was mainly because the urban per capita incomes rose faster than the rural per capita incomes. Overall the income gap between rural and urban regions increased seven percent from 1980 to 2000. Similar results were observed at the census division level in a study by Alasia and Rothwell (2003).

Looking at a longer time frame from 1980 to 2000, we find that whereas Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta experienced an increase in the rural-urban per capita income gap, the rest of the provinces experienced a decline. New Brunswick had the largest decline whereas Newfoundland and Labrador experienced the largest increase in the rural-urban per capita income gap.

It is interesting to note that the smallest and largest rural-urban income gap was found in the Atlantic provinces – the smallest was within New Brunswick and the largest was within Nova Scotia (on average over 1980–2000).

The incidence of low income among individuals

Provincial rural regions

Over the last five census years, the incidence of low incomes in rural regions was consistently higher in Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Quebec and Saskatchewan, compared to the other provinces (Figure 4 and Appendix Table 2). On the other hand, Ontario, which had relatively high rural and urban per capita income, reported a consistently lower incidence of low income in their rural regions.


Provincial urban regions

Ontario and Nova Scotia had a lower urban incidence of low income in each census year, compared to the Canadian average urban region, whereas Quebec and Manitoba had a higher urban incidence of low income (Figure 5 and Appendix Table 2).

All the provinces, except Newfoundland and Labrador, had an overall increase in the percent of urban individuals below the LICO over the period 1980–2000. This was in sharp contrast to the negative trend noticed for the percent of individuals below the LICO in rural regions. Thus, the incidence of low income showed a decline in rural regions while it rose in the urban regions.

Comparing 1980 to 2000, the largest percentage point increase in the urban incidence of low income occurred in British Columbia.

4. In this paper, the term “individuals” refers to “members of economic families” and “unattached individuals".
Rural – urban differences in the incidence of low incomes

In most provinces in 1980, the rural incidence of low incomes was larger than the urban incidence of low incomes (Figure 6 and Appendix Table 2). Over time, the incidence of low incomes in rural regions has declined relative to the incidence of low incomes in urban regions. This shift is substantial – note that only two provinces (British Columbia and Quebec) had a smaller incidence of low income in rural regions compared to urban regions in 1980 whereas all provinces except Nova Scotia and Newfoundland and Labrador had a smaller incidence of low incomes in rural regions compared to urban regions in 2000. This result is due to an increasing incidence of low incomes in urban areas and not due to a declining incidence of low incomes in rural areas.

The increase in incidence of low income in urban areas can be attributed to many factors. According to Heisz (2000), the increase in low income intensity occurred due to a lack of rise in market income and a decline in transfers received by low-income families, particularly the decline in Employment Insurance benefits.

Conclusions

Within each province, incomes in rural regions are lower than those in urban regions. Provinces with above average urban incomes (e.g. Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia) also have above average incomes in their rural regions.

The rural-urban income disparity is largest within Nova Scotia and Manitoba and smallest within New Brunswick and Newfoundland and Labrador.

The rural-urban income gap has declined in six provinces. The gap increased in Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, Ontario and Saskatchewan. For Canada as a whole, the rural-urban gap also slightly widened between 1980 and 2000.

The share of the rural population with low incomes has declined, relative to the share of urban population with low incomes (due largely to an increase in the incidence of low incomes in urban regions).

Thus, rural income disparities are decreasing within most provinces because the rural-urban income gap is decreasing and because the incidence of low incomes in rural regions is declining, relatively.
Rural per capita income shows a consistent pattern across the provinces over time.

Note: All of Prince Edward Island is designated as a predominantly rural region.
Figure 2

Urban per capita income shows a consistent pattern across the provinces over time

Note: All of Prince Edward Island is designated as a predominantly rural region.
Consistent pattern (New Brunswick-small, Nova Scotia-large) of rural-urban income gap in per capita income within each province over time

Note: All of Prince Edward Island is designated as a predominantly rural region.
Figure 4

Consistent pattern (Newfoundland and Labrador-high, Ontario-low) of incidence of low income in rural regions within each province over time

Note: All of Prince Edward Island is designated as a predominantly rural region.
Figure 5

Incidence of urban low income increased to 1995 and declined to 2000

Note: All of Prince Edward Island is designated as a predominantly rural region.
Incidence of low income in rural regions, relative to urban regions, decreased in each province

Note: All of Prince Edward Island is designated as a predominantly rural region.
References


Vik Singh is an analyst in the Culture, Tourism and Centre for Education Statistics Division, Statistics Canada. He prepared this bulletin when he worked in the research and rural data section, Agriculture Division, Statistics Canada.
**Appendix Table 1: Per capita income in rural and urban regions, Canada and Provinces, 1980 - 2000**

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Predominantly rural regions in:</th>
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<th>Income growth / decline over time</th>
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**Notes:**
1. A negative change in the rural - urban income gap means that the gap increased.

### Appendix Table 2: Incidence of low income in rural and urban regions, Canada and Provinces, 1980 - 2000

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#### Rural minus urban percentage point difference in incidence of low income

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**Notes:**
1. The incidence of low income is the percent of individuals living below the low income cut-off (LICO).
3. "..." not applicable (all of Prince Edward Island is designated as "predominantly rural").

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