Food insecurity and COVID-19

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CCHS excludes full-time members of the Canadian Forces, individuals living on First Nations reserves, Crown Lands, or in the Quebec health regions of Région du Nunavik and Région des Terres-Cries-de-la-Baie-James, and persons in prisons or care facilities.

The results in this report are based on population-weighted data from approximately 103,500 households included in the 2017-18 Canadian Community Health Survey.
Household Food Security Survey Module
(administered on the Canadian Community Health Survey since 2004)

18 questions, differentiating adults’ and children’s experiences over last 12 months:

- Worry about not having enough food
- Reliance on low-cost foods
- Not able to afford balanced meals
- Adults/children skip meals
- Adults/children cut size of meals
- Adults/children not having enough to eat
- Adult lost weight
- Adults/children not eating for whole day

“because there wasn’t enough money to buy food?”
1.8 million CANADIAN HOUSEHOLDS

12.7% of households, one in eight, are food-insecure

- 3.0% Households in Canada are severely food insecure
- 5.7% Households in Canada are moderately food insecure
- 4.0% Households in Canada are marginally food insecure

- Missing meals, reducing food intake and at the most extreme, going whole day(s) without food.
- Compromise in quality and/or quantity of food due to a lack of money for food.
- Worry about running out of food and/or limit food selection because of lack of money for food.
Prevalence of household food insecurity, 2017-18
No children < 18 in household

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Severe Food Insecure</th>
<th>Moderately Food Insecure</th>
<th>Marginally Food Insecure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
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</table>

11.4% total food insecure

One or more children < 18 in household

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Severe Food Insecure</th>
<th>Moderately Food Insecure</th>
<th>Marginally Food Insecure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
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</table>

16.2% total food insecure
Proportion of children under 18 years of age living in food-insecure households, 2017-18
4.4 million individuals including 1.2 million children in Canada are living in food-insecure households.

Ontario, Québec, Alberta & British Columbia accounted for the largest share of food insecure households in Canada, accounting for:

84% OF THE FOOD INSECURE POPULATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Number of People</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NL</td>
<td>67,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PE</td>
<td>18,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NS</td>
<td>128,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NB</td>
<td>93,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QC</td>
<td>888,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ON</td>
<td>1,719,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MB</td>
<td>175,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SK</td>
<td>164,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AB</td>
<td>518,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BC</td>
<td>555,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YT</td>
<td>6,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NT</td>
<td>9,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NU</td>
<td>24,500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Prevalence of household food insecurity in 2015-16 and 2017-18

Food insecurity fell significantly in Quebec, from 12.7% to 11.1%
The number of people living in food-insecure households in 2017-18 is higher than anything recorded previously.

- **2007-08**: 3.4 million
- **2011-12**: 3.9 million
- **2017-18**: 4.4 million

The increase in 2017-18 is due to a survey redesign and change in sampling method in 2015.
The health implications of food insecurity in Canada:

**Children**
- Poorer development and learning
- Impaired disease management
- Increased likelihood of developing asthma, depression, other chronic conditions.

**Adults**
- Poorer mental health
- Increased probability of infectious and non-infectious diseases
- Poorer disease management
- Increased health care utilization
- Higher mortality rates.

Before COVID-19

Kaplan-Meier survival curve on all-cause premature mortality by household food insecurity status among Canadian adults, 18-82 years old

Severe food insecurity:
- associated with increased mortality from all causes except cancer.
- strongest associations seen for infectious/parasitic diseases, unintentional injuries, and suicides.

(Men et al, Can Med Assoc J 2020)
The chronic diseases associated with poorer outcomes from COVID-19 are more prevalent among food-insecure adults.

- Cardiovascular disease
- Diabetes
- Chronic respiratory diseases
- Hypertension

Everything we know about household food insecurity in Canada suggests that without effective responses to the hardships brought on by COVID-19, food insecurity will increase in prevalence and severity, and the health implications of being food-insecure will become even more dire.
Food insecurity is a measure of **material deprivation**, reflecting an imbalance of available financial resources and necessary expenses.

**Financial resources:**
- Size, stability, security of income
- Assets, savings, access to credit

**Housing costs**
- Other expenses: food, medications, debts, etc
As household income declines, the probability and severity of food insecurity rises.

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Prevalence of household food insecurity by main source of income:

- Seniors' incomes: 6.8%
- Employment: 11.9%
- Other/none: 18.4%
- EI, Workers' Comp: 32.0%
- Social Assistance: 60.4%

Severe food insecurity: dark red
Moderate food insecurity: dark blue
Marginal food insecurity: light blue
Food-insecure households’ main source of income:

- 65.0% Wages, salaries, self-employment
- 14.5% Social assistance
- 12.2% Seniors’ incomes (pensions, dividends, interest)
- 5.8% Other
- 2.6% Employment Insurance, Workers’ Compensation
Defining features of food-insecure households reliant on employment incomes:

- low-waged jobs
- short-term, part-time employment – “precarious work”
- multi-person households reliant on wages of one earner
- workers who are Aboriginal or Black

Implications of COVID-19:

- Many of these workers are likely in jobs without benefits or EI coverage.
- Any uncompensated loss of employment income will increase the severity of their food insecurity.

(McIntyre et al, Public Health Nutrition, 2012)
In addition to income, housing circumstances influence vulnerability to food insecurity.

- In 2017-18, 61% of food-insecure households were renters, and the prevalence of food insecurity among renters was more than triple that for home owners.
  - After taking into account income and other socio-demographic characteristics, renters still have 2-3 times the odds of food insecurity compared to owners.

- Among home-owners, risk is greater among those with mortgages and homes of lower market value.

Implications of COVID-19:
- Homeownership reflects greater assets and access to credit ➔ protection against income shocks.
- Food-insecure renters are more likely than others to live in crowded conditions, thwarting the isolation of members who are sick.

Because COVID-19 is triggering income shocks, the prevalence and severity of food insecurity can be expected to rise.
The case for a basic income now:

- Pre-COVID-19, income assistance programs other than pensions were insufficient for many households:
  - Almost 2/3 households reliant on social assistance and >1/3 of households reliant on Employment Insurance were food insecure in 2017-18.
  - The inadequacies of these programs may now increase.

- We need an income floor that is sufficient to meet basic needs and available to all.
  - Coverage and impact of newly-announced Emergency Support Benefit is unclear, but it appears to be tied to labour force participation.
Evidence of the effectiveness of a basic income on food insecurity comes from studies of the impact of Canada’s old-age pension:

(McIntyre et al., *Canadian Public Policy*, 2016)
Why can’t we manage the growing vulnerability of food-insecure households with more food charity?

**Before COVID-19:**

- Only a small fraction of food-insecure received assistance from food banks.
  
  ◆ 1.1 million visits to food banks in March 2018 (Food Banks Canada, 2018) vs 4.4 million in food-insecure households.

- Food charity was a strategy of last-resort, but there is no evidence that it rendered households food secure.

Simply maintaining emergency food assistance now requires a rapid infusion of public funds, given the dependence of this system on donations and volunteer labour.
Even before COVID-19, food banks were struggling to meet demands, and many publicly acknowledged that they could not substitute for adequate income supports.

Daily Bread Food Bank’s ‘Who’s Hungry, 2017’ report:

- 77%* Food banks that had to give people less food than usual because they were running out
- 59%* Food banks that had to buy more food than usual due to lack of donations
- 13%* Food banks that had to close early or not open due to lack of food
- 21%* Food banks that had to turn people away because there was no food left to give out
- 22%* Food banks that had difficulty in providing waiting room to accommodate people accessing the program

*Percentages for Daily Bread member agencies only

Probability of **severely food-insecure** households using food banks and other strategies when short of money

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Probability</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ask Financial Help From Friends/Family</td>
<td>59.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Bill Payment</td>
<td>47.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask Help from Organizations</td>
<td>29.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Rent/Mortgage Payment</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use Food Bank</td>
<td>20.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pawn/Sell Possession</td>
<td>19.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*From Tarasuk et al, Voluntas 2019.*


*Measure of food insecurity:* "In the last 12 months, have you or your family ever had to eat less because you did not have enough money to buy food?"
Why not try to tackle food insecurity now with food subsidies or US-style public food assistance programs like food stamps?

- There is no evidence to suggest that benefits need to be tied to food purchasing. Food-insecure households already prioritize spending on essentials.

- Given improved financial benefits, the prevalence and/or severity of food insecurity goes down.
  - Canada Child Benefit - Brown & Tarasuk, Prev Med 2019

- The deprivation experienced by food-insecure households is not confined to food.
  - Rent, utilities, mortgage payments (Fafard St-Germain & Tarasuk, Int J Equity Health 2020)
  - Ability to afford prescription medications (Men et al, CMAJ Open, 2019)
Conclusions:

- The number of Canadians living in food-insecure households was higher in 2017-18 than ever before, suggesting that the problem was festering in the face of current responses.

- Everything we have come to understand about the effects of COVID-19 suggests that the prevalence and severity of food insecurity and its impacts on health will worsen now.

- In contemplating response options, it is important not to conflate economic stimulus initiatives with the measures required to enable people to meet basic needs.

- If no one is to be left behind now, we need to implement a basic income.
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