

# Food insecurity and COVID-19



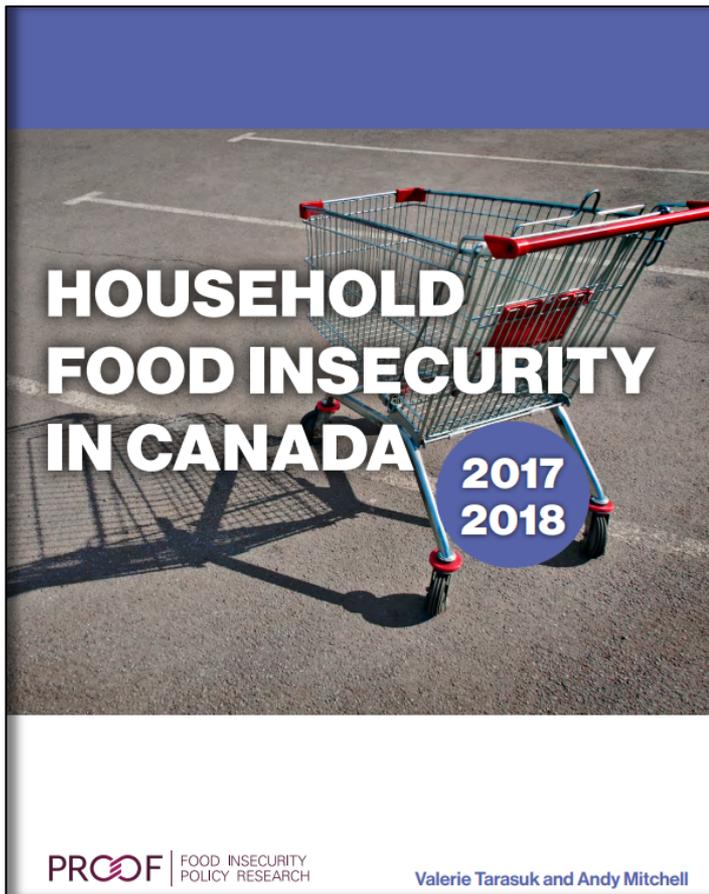
FOOD INSECURITY  
POLICY RESEARCH

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**Acknowledgements:** All of the original research in this presentation has been funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research.

This presentation draws heavily on the work of Andy Mitchell, Fei Men, Andree-Anne Fafard St-Germain, Erika Brown, Lynn McIntyre, Herb Emery, Sarah Anne Charlebois, and Steph Vasko.



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.

**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.

# Household Food Security Survey Module

*(administered on the Canadian Community Health Survey since 2004)*

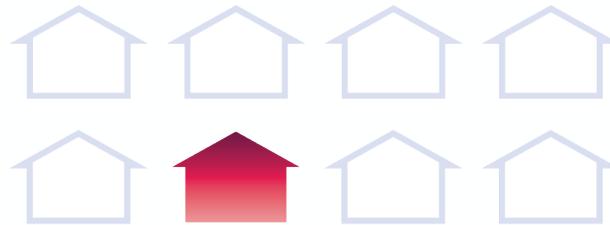
18 questions, differentiating adults' and children's experiences over last 12 months:

- 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%**

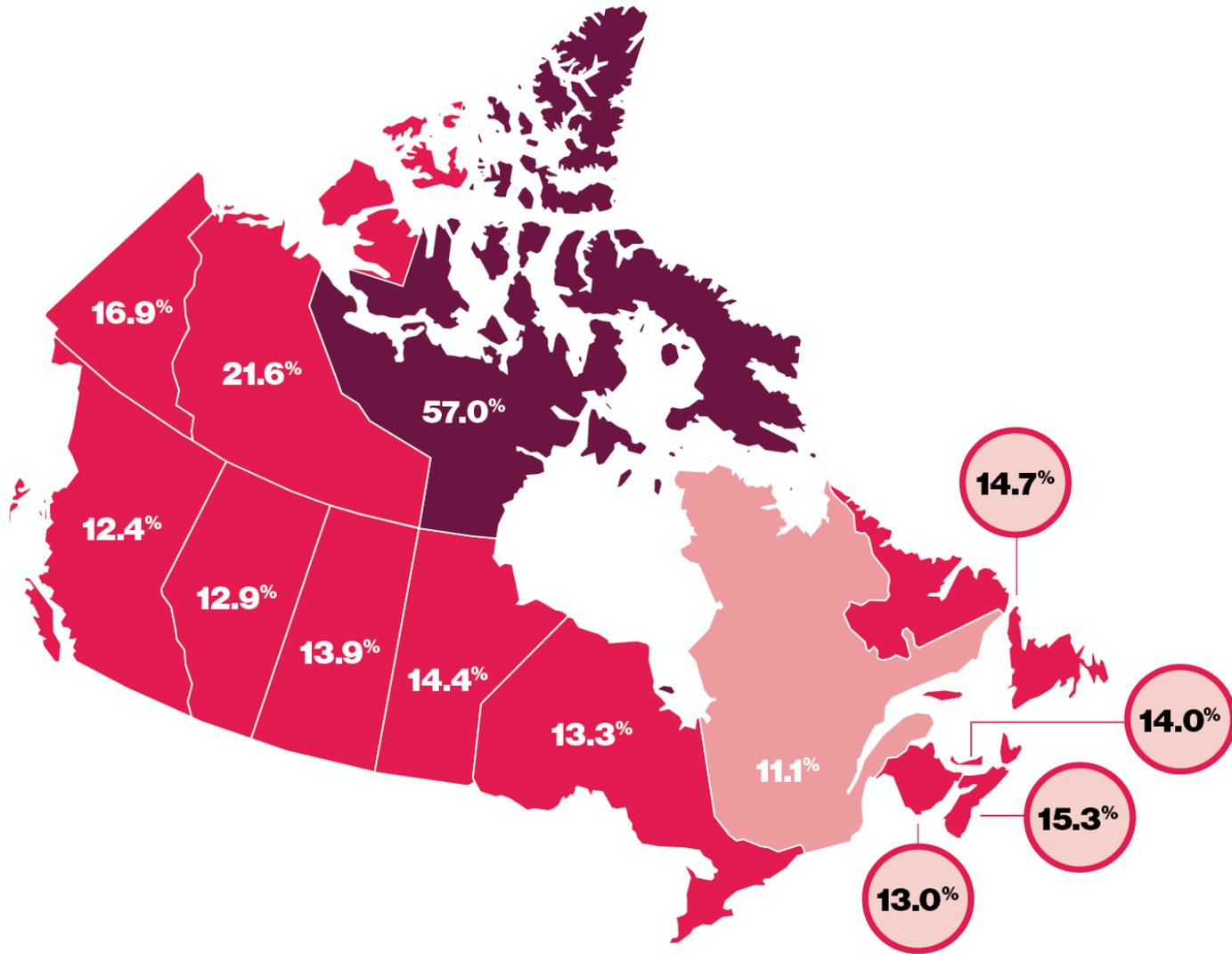
Households in Canada are marginally food insecure

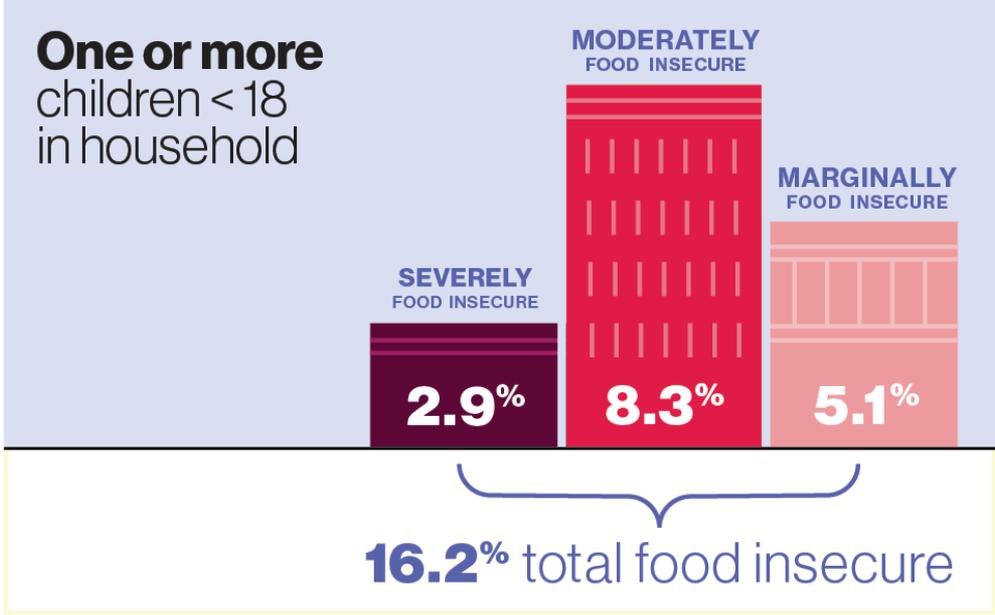
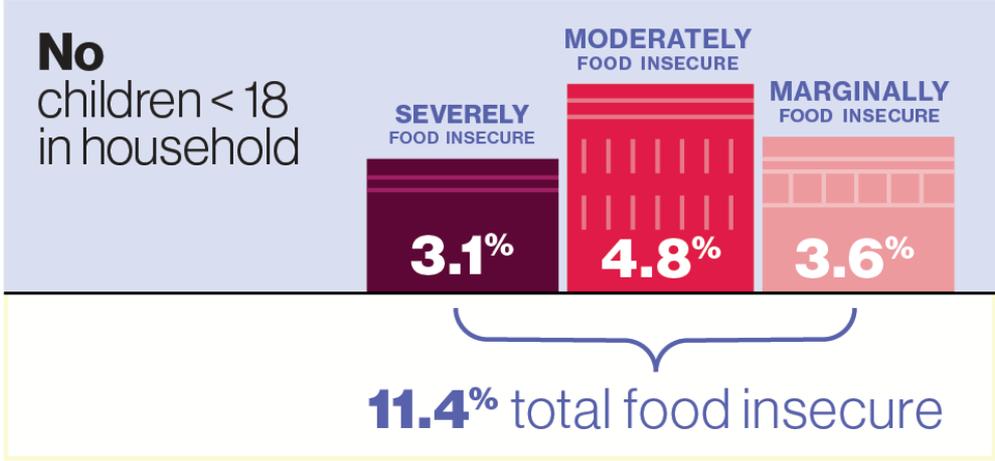
Missing meals, reducing food intake and at the most extreme, going whole day(s) without food.

Compromise in quality and/or quantity of food due to a lack of money for food.

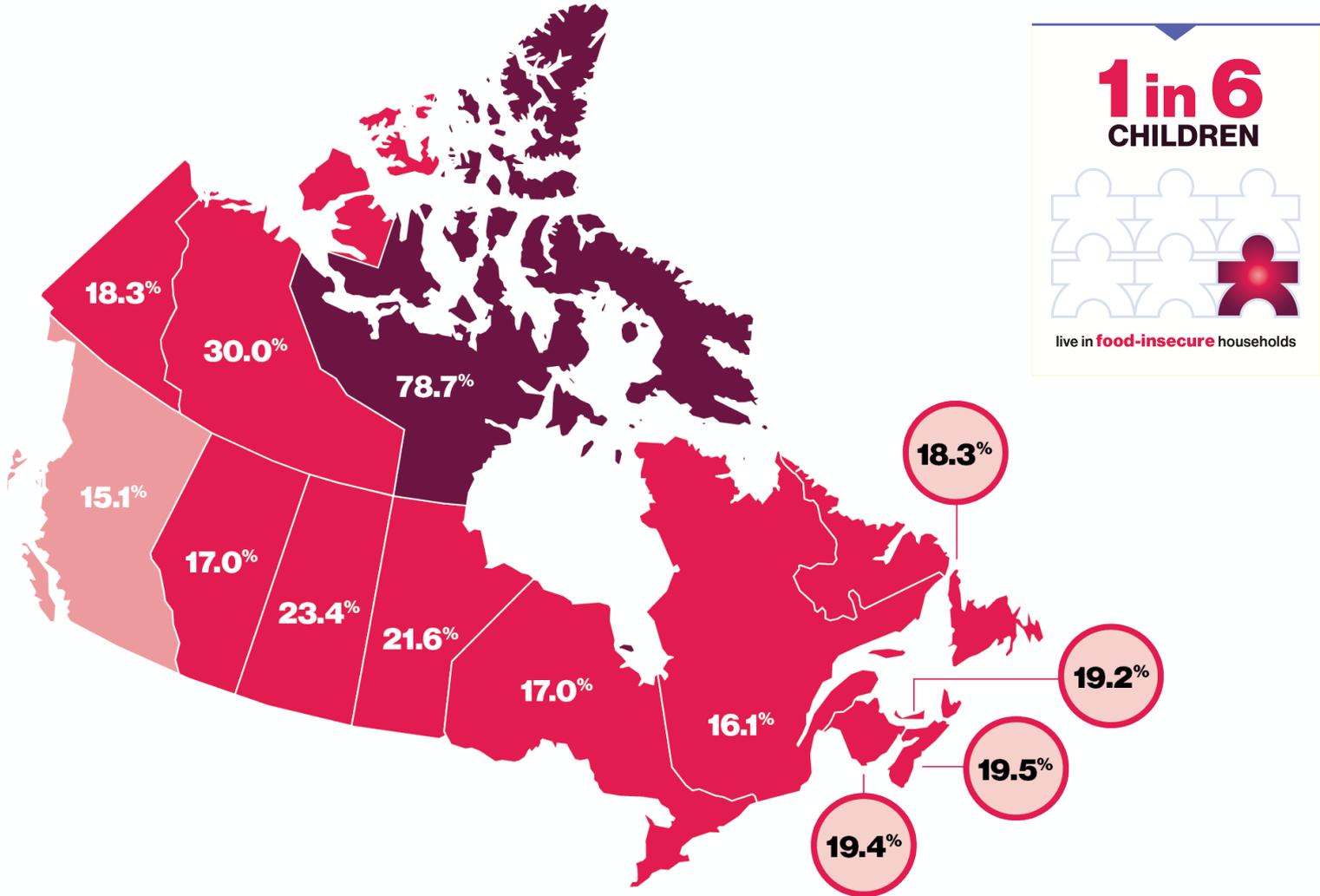
Worry about running out of food and/or limit food selection because of lack of money for food.

# Prevalence of household food insecurity, 2017-18





# Proportion of children under 18 years of age living in food-insecure households, 2017-18

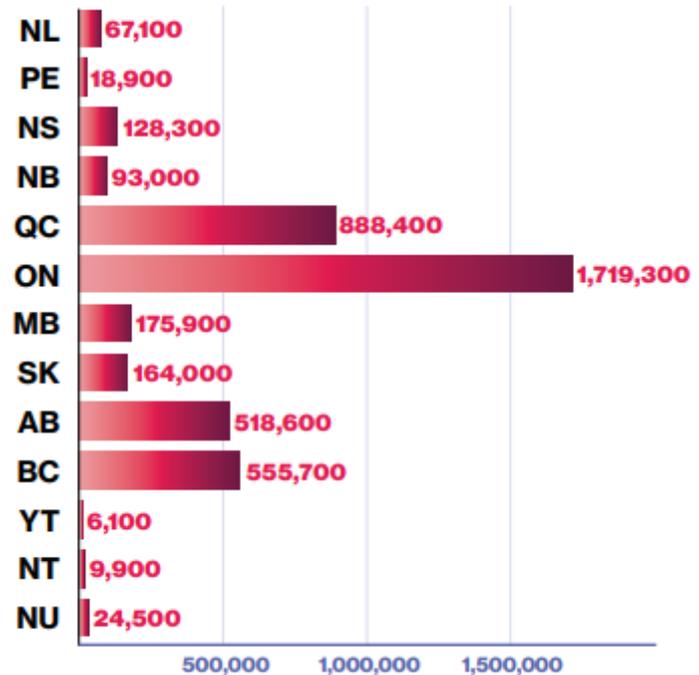


**4.4 million** INDIVIDUALS INCLUDING **1.2 MILLION CHILDREN** in Canada are living in food-insecure households.

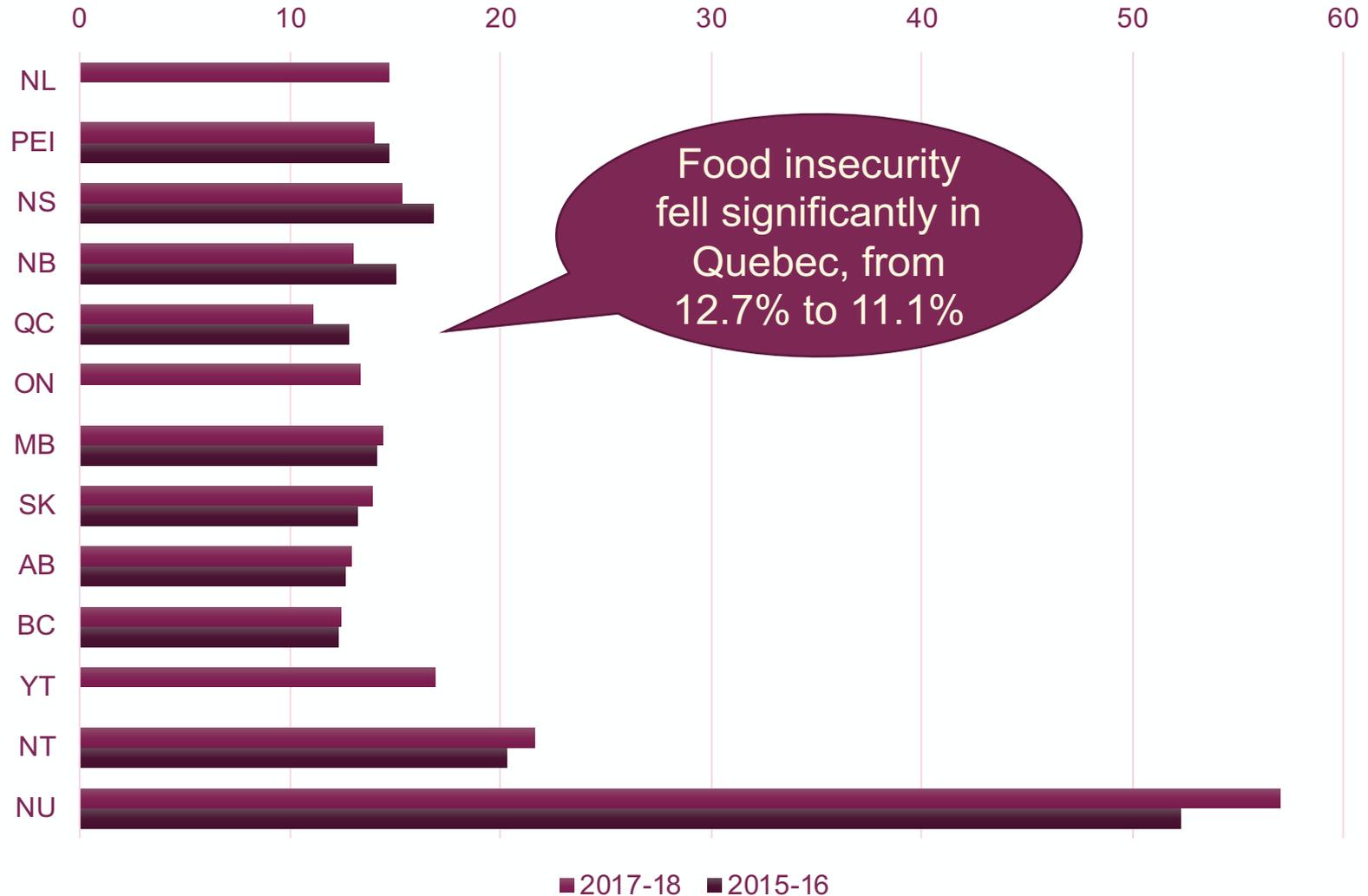
**Ontario, Québec, Alberta & British Columbia** accounted for the largest share of food insecure households in Canada, accounting for:

**84%** OF THE FOOD INSECURE POPULATION

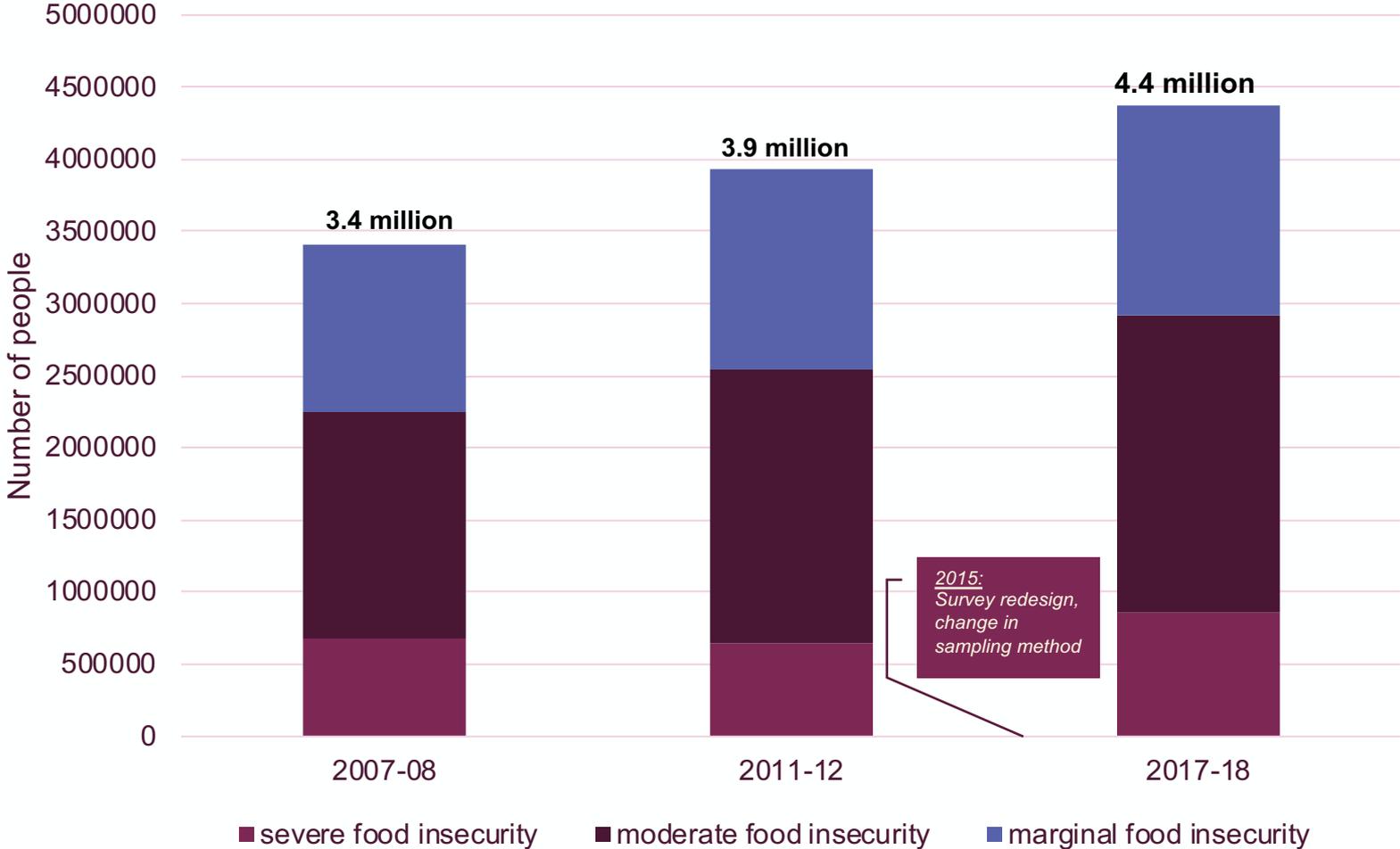
**NUMBER OF PEOPLE LIVING IN FOOD-INSECURE HOUSEHOLDS by Province & Territory**



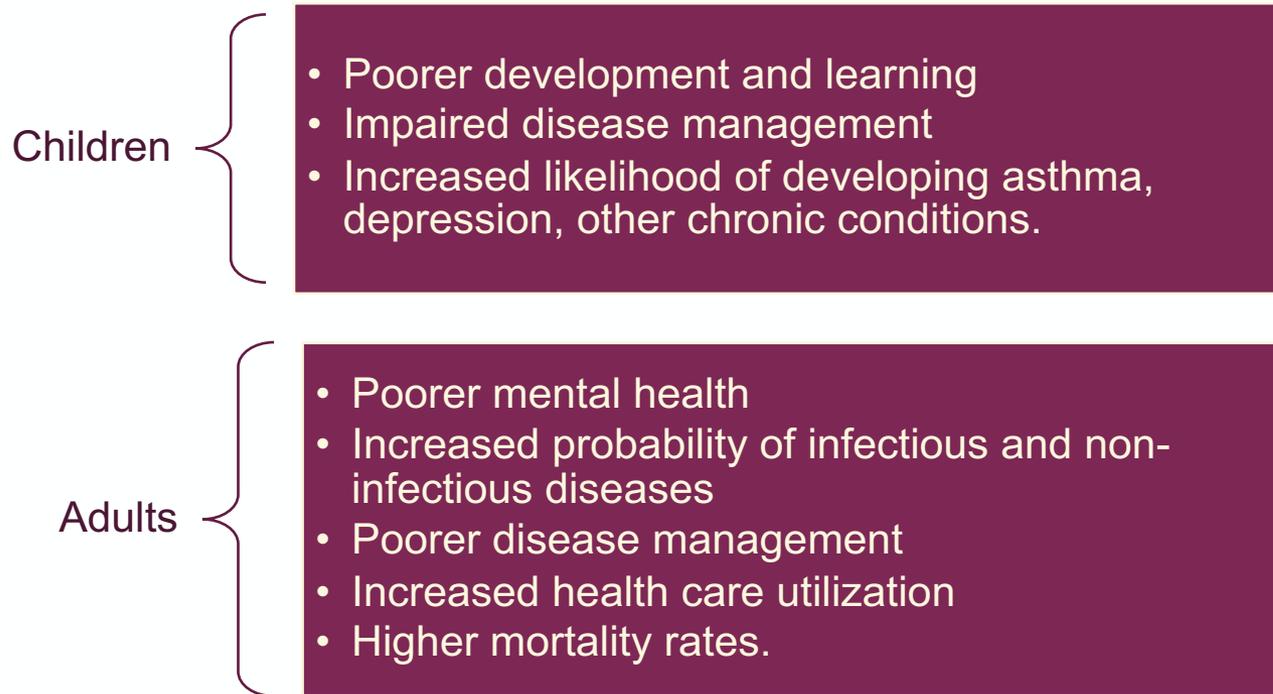
## Prevalence of household food insecurity in 2015-16 and 2017-18



# The number of people living in food-insecure households in 2017-18 is higher than anything recorded previously.



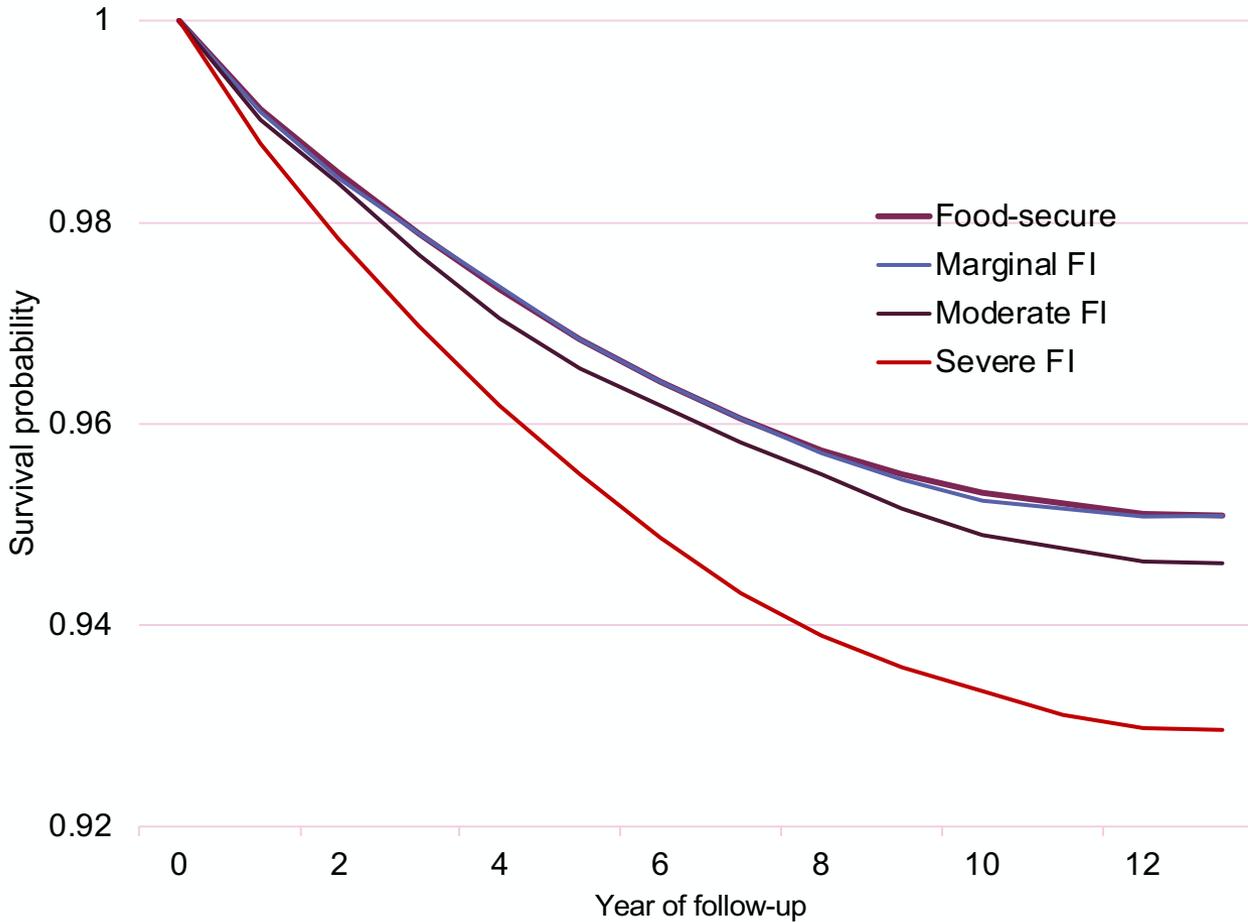
## The health implications of food insecurity in Canada:



(Aibibula et al. *AIDS Care*. 2016. Anema et al, *AIDS Care* 2011. Anema et al, *PLoS One*. 2013; Marjerrison et al, *J Pediatrics*, 2011;158:607-11; Gucciardi et al, *Diabetes Care* 2009; Gundersen et al, *PloS One* 2018; Jessiman-Perreault & McIntyre, *SSM Pop Health* 2017; Kirk et al, *Public Health Nutr* 2014; Kirkpatrick et al., *Arch Pediatric Adol Med* 2010; Men et al, *Can Med Assoc J* 2020; McIntyre et al., *J Affective Disorders* 2013, McIntyre et al. *J Social Psych Psych Epid*, 2017; Melchior et al, *PloS One* 2012; Tarasuk, Mitchell, McLaren & McIntyre, *J Nutr*, 2013; Tarasuk et al, *Can J Psychiat* 2018)

## 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.

The chronic diseases associated with poorer outcomes from COVID-19 are more prevalent among food-insecure adults.

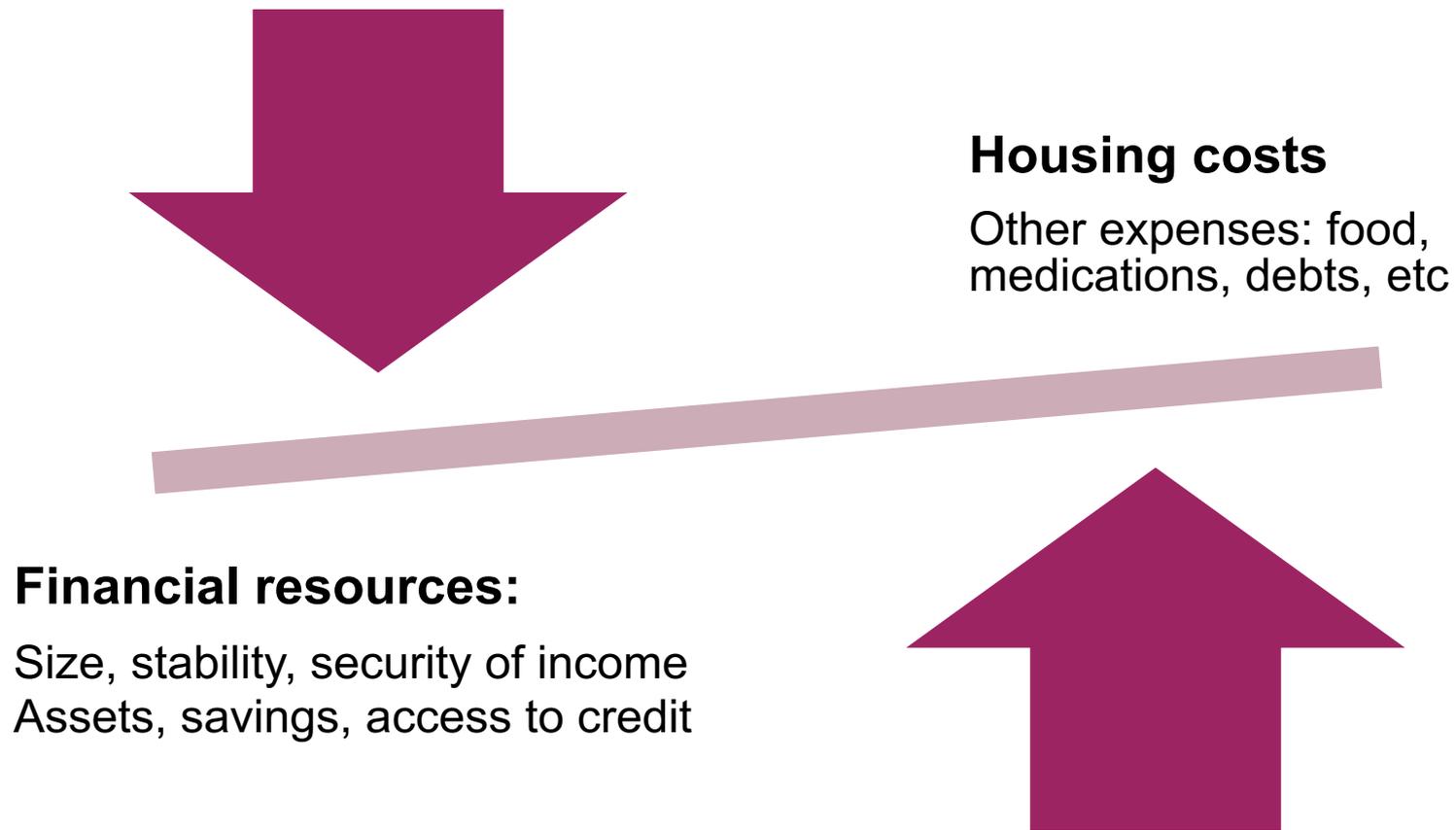
- Cardiovascular disease
- Diabetes
- Chronic respiratory diseases
- Hypertension

(Gucciardi et al, Diabetes Care 2009; Men et al, Can Med Assoc J 2020; Tarasuk, Mitchell, McLaren & McIntyre, J Nutr, 2013)

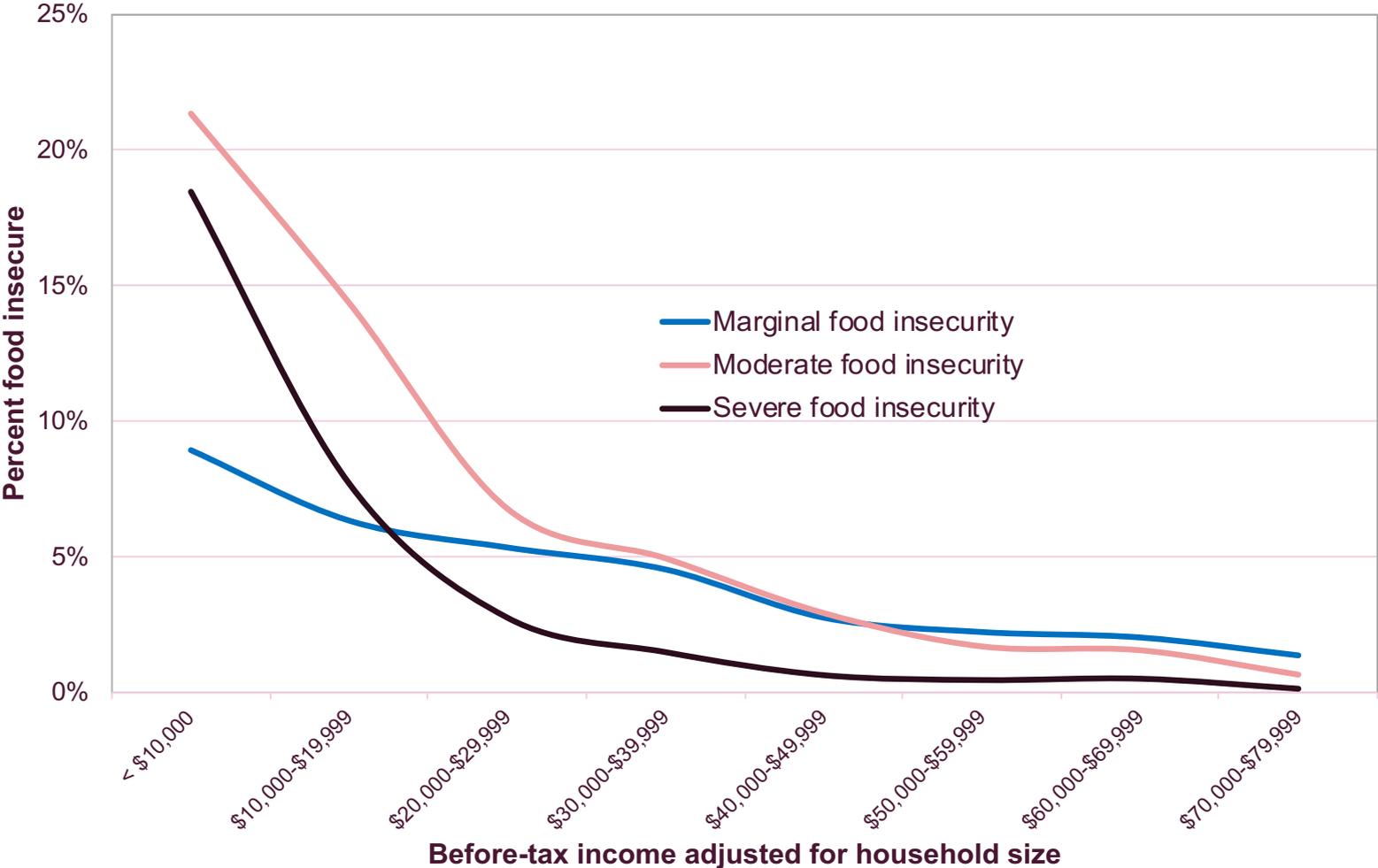


Everything we know about household food insecurity in Canada suggests that without effective responses to the hardships brought on by COVID-19, food insecurity will increase in prevalence and severity, and the health implications of being food-insecure will become even more dire.

Food insecurity is a measure of **material deprivation**, reflecting an imbalance of available financial resources and necessary expenses.

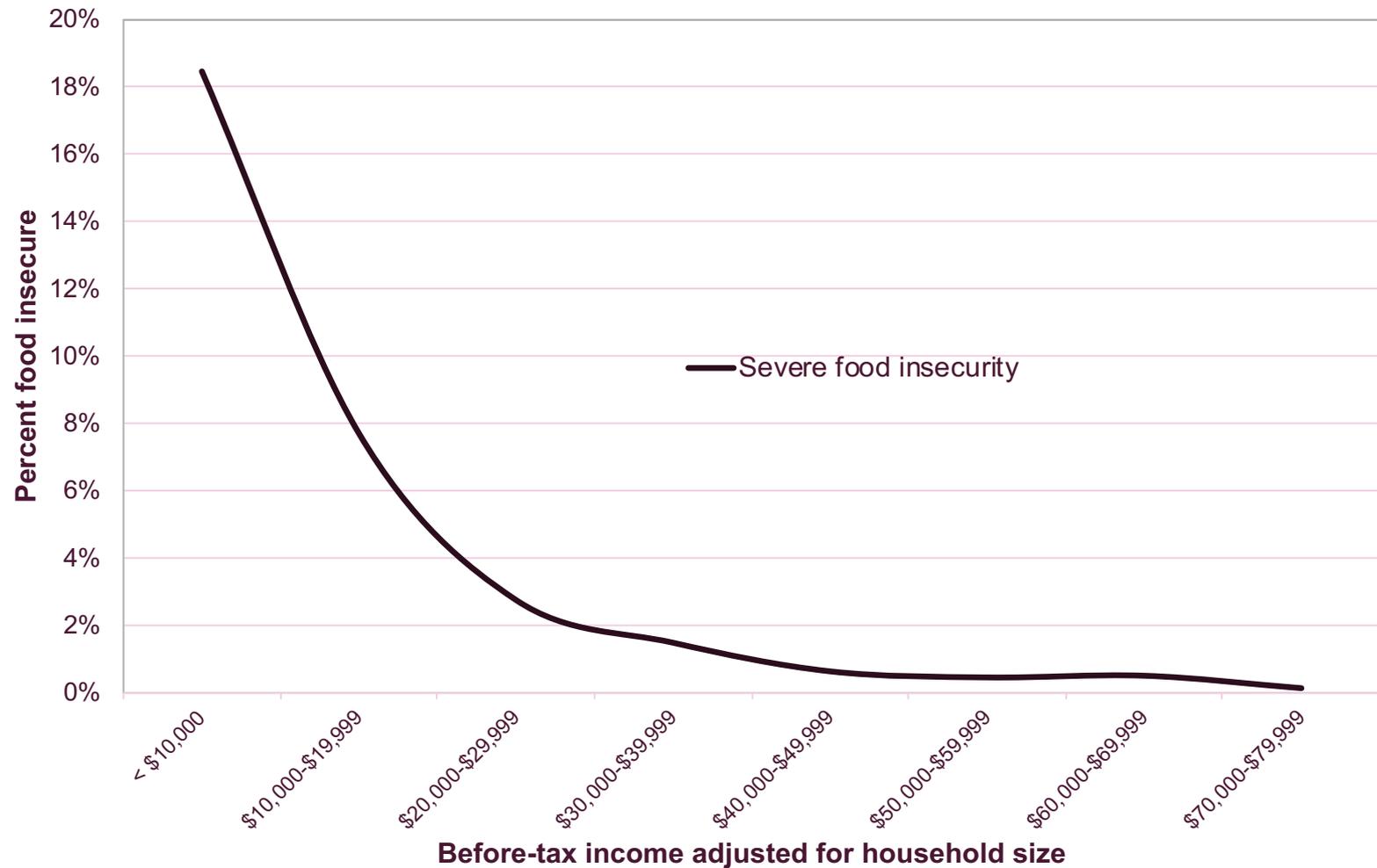


# As household income declines, the probability and severity of food insecurity rises.



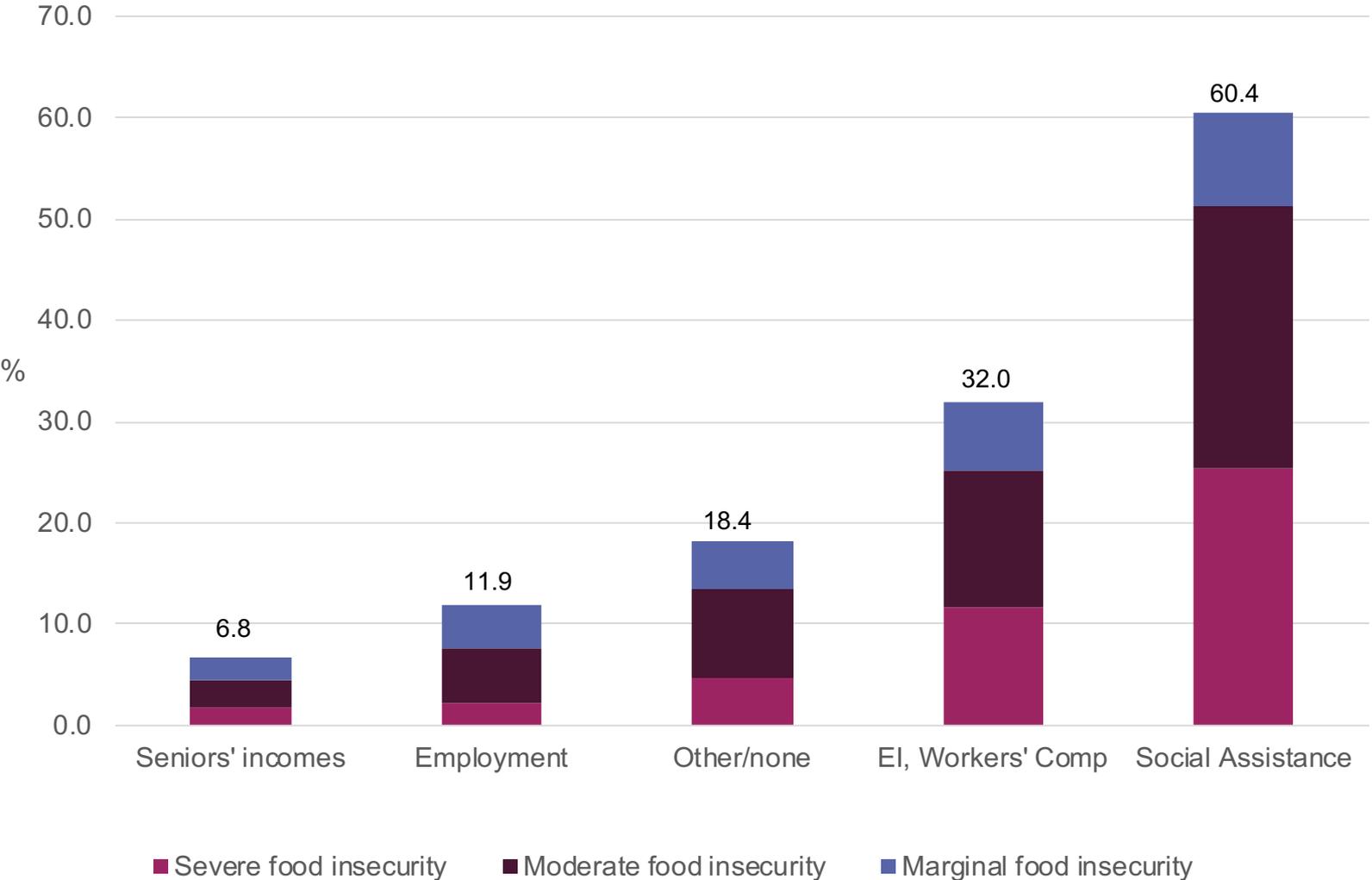
(Tarasuk, Mitchell & Dachner, *Household Food Insecurity in Canada*, 2014. 2016)

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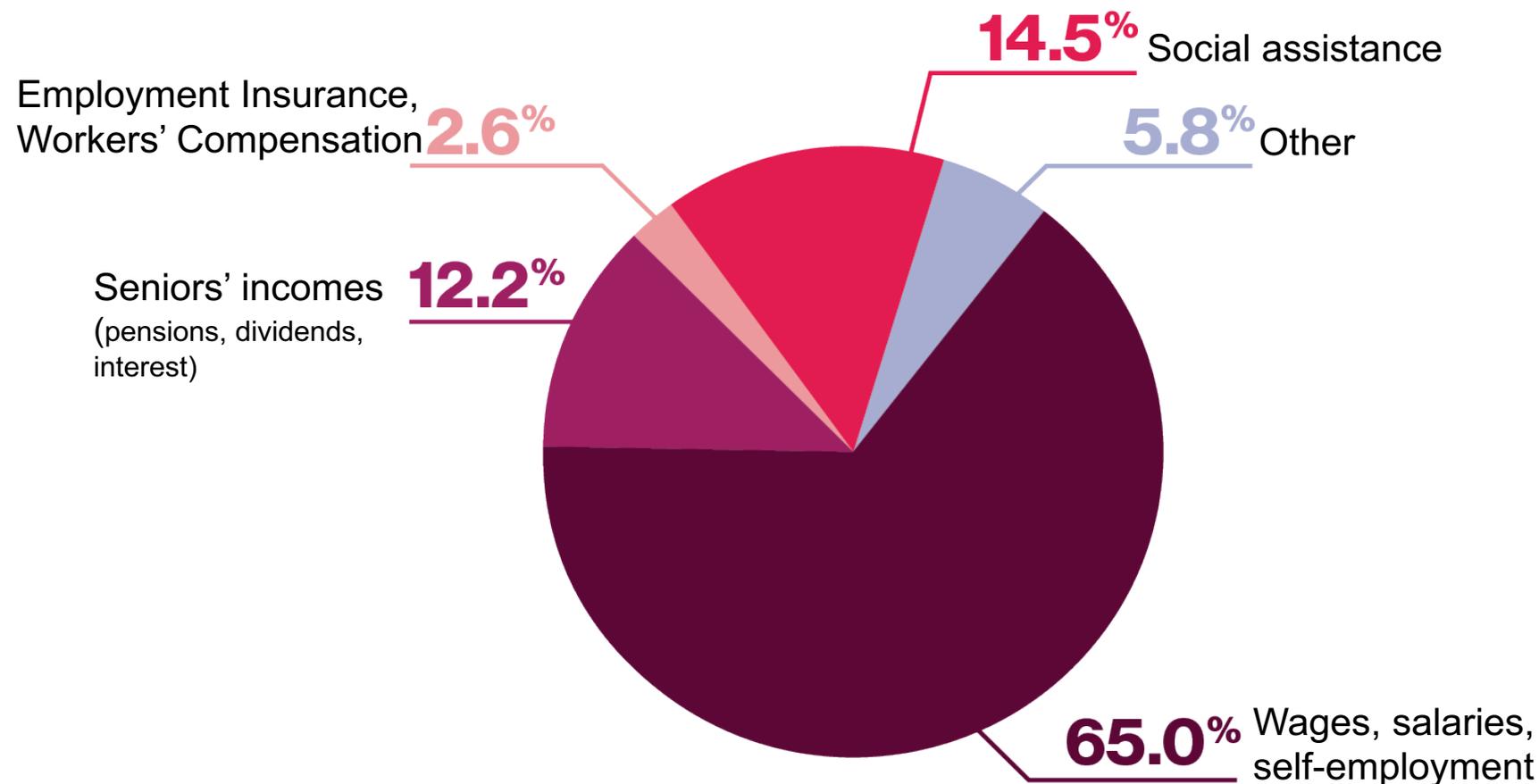


(Tarasuk, Mitchell & Dachner, *Household Food Insecurity in Canada*, 2014. 2016)

# Prevalence of household food insecurity by main source of income:



## Food-insecure households' main source of income:



## 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.

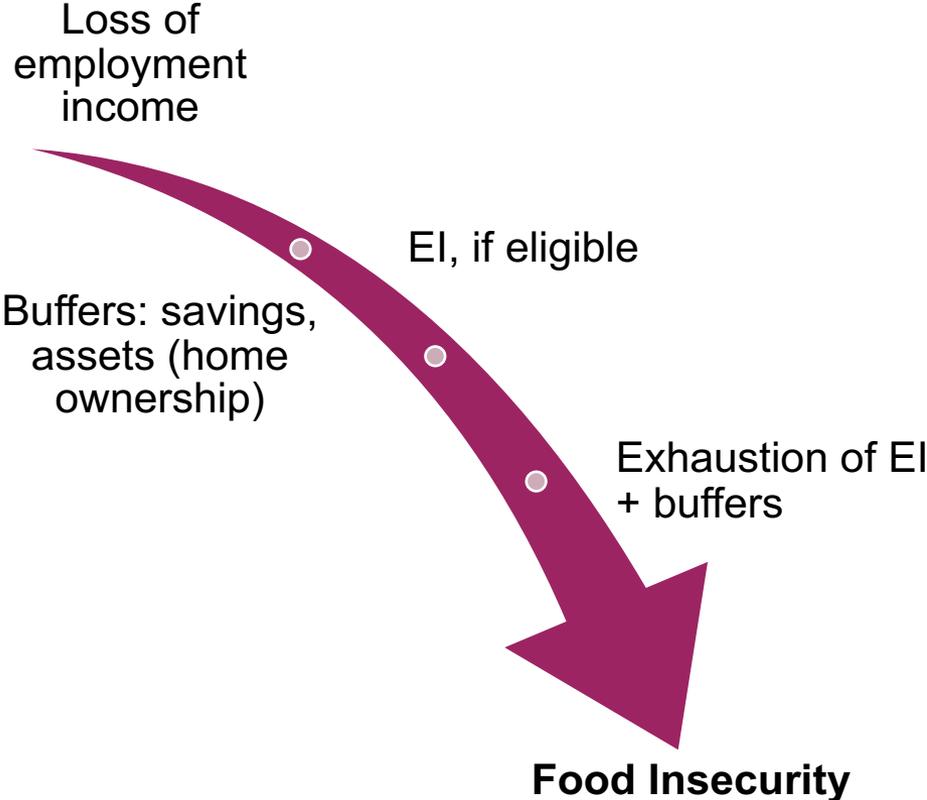
## In addition to income, housing circumstances influence vulnerability to food insecurity.

- 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.

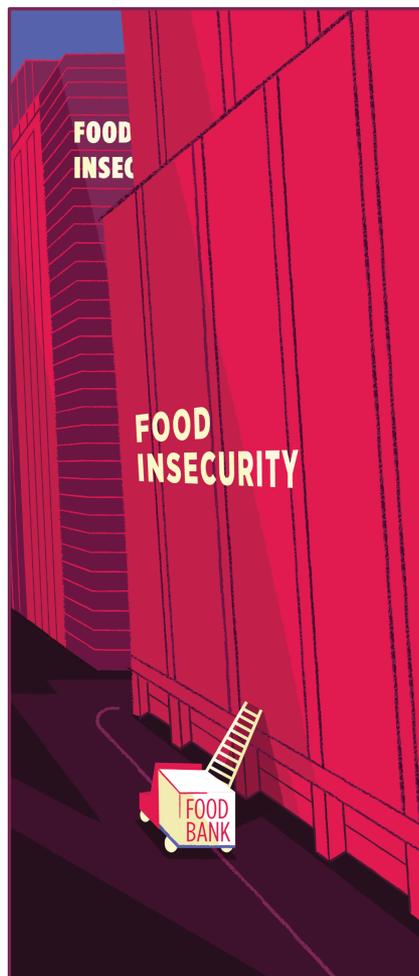
Evidence of the effectiveness of a basic income on food insecurity comes from studies of the impact of Canada's old-age pension:

### Probability of moderate and severe food insecurity by age among low-income unattached adults



(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:



<http://www.dailybread.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Whos-Hungry-2017.pdf>

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

59.1%

Ask Financial  
Help From  
Friends/Family

47.7%

Miss Bill  
Payment

29.5%

Ask Help from  
Organizations

28%

Miss Rent/  
Mortgage  
Payment

20.6%

Use Food Bank

19.6%

Pawn/Sell  
Possession

From Tarasuk et al, *Voluntas* 2019.

Data: Canadian Household Panel Survey Pilot, 2008, n=1606.

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.
  - ◆ See analysis of household expenditures: Fafard St-Germain & Tarasuk, Public Health Nutr, 2018.
- Given improved financial benefits, the prevalence and/or severity of food insecurity goes down.
  - ◆ Canada Child Benefit - Brown & Tarasuk, Prev Med 2019
  - ◆ Universal Child Benefit - Ionescu-Ittu et al, Prev Med 2015
  - ◆ NL Poverty Reduction Strategy – Loopstra et al, Can Public Pol 2015
- 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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