

Research report – Focus groups Sustainable Consumption for All Project

By Dr Desré Kramer

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Low-Income People talk about Food

Staff and clients are tripping over children running through the corridors. There are umbrellas and coats, and Halloween costumes and decorations everywhere at the community neighborhood house in a low-income neighborhood of Vancouver. The raised garden beds outdoors are filled with tall dill and kale plants that have gone to seed. The rooms on the ground floor and the basement are all occupied. Groups of seniors and teenagers, and a kindergarten class are full, and a tiny galley kitchen is feeding 20 to 30 people three times a day. The Centre sees about 300 children a year. There are 30 to 40 families on subsidies that take advantage of its services regularly.

The Executive Director, who is called Lillian for this report, says she thinks a focus group on food is important for her clients. She has raised money, and has hired a food coordinator, she has made her community neighborhood house a “Good Food Organization”, part of Community Food Centres Canada’s network. Lillian said that planning for the focus group for this study initiated many important discussions on food, food insecurity, and sustainably grown food.

As for most of the clients she has served over the last 30 years, food is not a straightforward concept for Lillian. She is first-generation Canadian. She is the second of five children raised by a mother and a disabled father. Food was fuel. The family never sat down to eat. There wasn’t the luxury of choice; food usually came via charitable donations with a large dose of stigma and humiliation.

When asked what “good food” means to her, she laughs: “It’s whatever my husband cooks for me.” She then looks away and adds:

It’s really hard to explain. Food is so personal. It is layered with other things. Everyone has their own story about food. It is the food you know; it is what you understand; it is what you experienced when you were young. It is comfort, access, ability to cook. It is other people, and having control. It is about personal independence and about wanting to be healthy. It is about having enough food to be healthy.

“Kitchen Table Talk” Focus Groups

Lillian was also the host of one of the study's six focus groups. Fifty-three people who self-identified as having low-incomes, met in groups of eight to 12 in community centres, food banks, and neighborhood houses. The groups were held in Toronto, Thunder Bay, Sudbury, Vancouver, Montreal, and Saskatoon from October 2018 to January 2019. These "kitchen table talk" focus groups were facilitated by local community workers who were also responsible for recruiting the participants from their networks.

The group participants were seniors, from Indigenous and Metis communities, people on pensions for physical and mental disabilities, newcomers, and students. The names of the participants have been fictionalized for reasons of confidentiality. Participants received \$20 to \$30 gift certificates for groceries, and after each group there was a communal meal.

The facilitators of the focus groups asked the participants what food they and their families ate – where they shopped, whether they ate out, what food they bought. We asked them: if money and time was not an issue, what food would you choose to buy and eat? We asked about sustainably grown food, and what that meant to them and whether this would be a choice if they could afford and access it. We asked them what prevented them from buying sustainably grown food. We asked them for ideas on what supports could make their life easier. The senior researcher on the study attended all the focus groups and answered questions when they were asked. The participants received a letter of information about the study, and consented to keeping the focus group discussion confidential, and to being recorded.

Analysis

The analysis of the data was informed by questions that were based upon a conceptual framework that looked at how food insecurity, affordability, and accessibility interact when it comes to barriers facing low-income people accessing sustainably grown food. In order to honour the voices of those who shared their ideas, knowledge, and experiences this report is rich in direct quotes which are evocative and memorable.

The focus groups bring forward very strongly the voices of low-income people that are seldom heard. The strongest theme in focus groups was the inability for people to afford the food they would like to buy for their families. The study also highlights other themes that emerged out of the focus groups. The primary barrier is the lack of income; then: difficulties with accessing the food they wanted to buy; how covering the cost of housing has to be prioritized; the importance of culture when it comes to food; how racism and discrimination plays a daily role in one's food choices; the challenges of buying local, sustainably grown food; issues with trusting food labels and the quality of available food.

Selected quotes from key informant interviews are woven in various parts of the discussion of focus group findings. The qualitative data that was collected from the key informants and from the focus group participants was distinctly different. They formed two groups with differing ideas, world views, priorities and perspectives. The key informants were mostly employed activists and academics who shared many decades of advocacy work, research, and analysis of the national and global food system. Their work is most strongly linked to the literature that can be found in the report's literature review. On the other hand, the focus group participants brought to the study their real-life experience and knowledge of living with low incomes, often on subsistence support payments, and trying to feed their families.

Focus group locations

Vancouver

The Vancouver focus group was hosted by Cedar Cottage Neighbourhood House. The House that has been going since the 1950s, served nearly 5,000 children, teenagers, adults, Aboriginal groups, and seniors in 2018. The focus group participants were indigenous members and seniors. It was a dynamic conversation that was only stopped because the Chinese take-out arrived and children needed to be fed. One of the women at the Vancouver group took the lead in talking about not having enough money to buy the food she needs. Deb is Indigenous and is a single mother of three. She is training to be a community negotiator and has begun to grow her own plants for medicinal tinctures. She and her kids go to communal dinners that are offered in her area of Vancouver's East End four times a week and remarked:

The cost to feed us all; Oh My God! When they have a growth spurt, that's when they start to eat all the time. It was okay when they were smaller, but as they grew bigger, all they do is eat. Even if you make pretty good size portions, it's when they want seconds that it's hard.

In Vancouver, as across Canada, many people are working in precarious, low-paying jobs. Lillian explained:

Precarious work leads to precarious food and precarious health. A lot of the single women are working in the hotels—long hours and low pay. They have to throw food on the table for their families, or they are picking up food at McDonald's. That isn't cheap either, and it leads to poor health.

Montreal

The Quebec focus group was made up of university students from across Canada who had come to Montreal for the Food Secure Canada Assembly in November 2018. One of the students talked about the decisions she is obliged to make to feed her family. She cooks and feeds six people, has a job, and is also taking classes. Being able to afford the food she would like to buy is a huge issue for her. She shared:

I would love to prioritize very healthy, organic food and have it all the time, but honestly, especially towards the end of a pay cheque, whatever is going to be able to spread the paycheque is what's okay. And it's probably noodles.

Toronto

The focus group in Toronto was made up of newcomers, or new immigrants to Canada. Some had only arrived in the last year. Many were Muslim following Halal diets. A dynamic focus group was facilitated by two people from The Neighborhood Organization in Thorncliffe Park. This unique area of Toronto has a population of approximately 30,000 living closely together in 34 high-rise and low-rise apartments in a 2.2 square kilometer area. An estimated 39% of the residents are defined as low income compared to 19% across the city. The focus group lasted a couple of hours and ended with a meal of butter chicken curry, rice, naan and salad, handmade by one of the small catering companies that is supported by the community office.

One of the younger women in the group was outspoken. The other group members nodded their heads in agreement to what she said “I have to be very economical. I can’t afford everything. The healthier food, the nutritious food, is so expensive. I just buy things that are affordable, and sometimes for survival.”

Sudbury

The focus group in Sudbury was mostly made up of people who are on physical or mental disability support, dealing with the challenges of the difficult winter. The participants were part of a community garden organized by the local social planning council. Shawn is a single man in his 40s who has not worked for many years. He has a daughter who is the centre of his universe. “There were months when I would starve so my daughter could eat, and that is what contributed to my health conditions.” Shawn has a long list of chronic illnesses that have left him disabled: gout, high blood pressure, obesity, and high cholesterol. “In March”, he told us, “I was diagnosed with diabetes, and I have other chronic illnesses that need special food. Sometimes the food for my diabetes is in conflict with what I should be eating for my gout.”

Shawn, like most of the people around the table, has been on the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) for many years. This support has gone through a number of cuts. “Every two years, ODSP reviews and adjusts what they give us. When my child turned 18, my Child Credit payment was cut off. \$600 per month for my child is no longer part of my income.” She may be 18, but she continues to live with him and needs to be fed. He shops whenever food is on sale. He lives month to month; cheque to cheque. “It’s pretty hard sometimes.” He often tries to cook for his neighbors. “It’s a challenge,” he admits. He has been trying to make a go of it, but as he says:

The bureaucrats make your life decisions. They say: ‘This is what you are going to live on, and this is where you are going to live, and this is what you can eat.’ They expect us to live on expired boxes of Kraft Dinner and dented cans of tuna. They might as well put us in front of a garbage can, put on a [nosebag] like we are horses, and tell us to eat the scraps. It is frustrating.

Thunder Bay

The focus group in Thunder Bay was held in December 2018. It was -21°C with the windchill outside, but inside the Regional Food Distribution Association warehouse building, it was warm and welcoming. The Association is a distribution centre serving 42 food banks, many of them are fly-in communities across Northwestern Ontario, an area roughly the size of France. In 2017, they served approximately 14,000 people a month, distributing \$3.2 million worth of food a year to the region.

The group was made up of nine women and one man, many of them recruited through the Thunder Bay Indigenous Friendship Centre. There were three seniors, a young woman with an intellectual disability, a number of people on social assistance for physical and psychological disabilities, five Indigenous women, and like in Vancouver, a toddler who was happily passed around from his mother to the other members of the group. The lunch meal at the end of the focus group was a homemade vegetarian soup, a chili, salad, and trimmings to make sandwiches on buns or croissants. No-one left hungry and the leftovers were taken home by the participants.

Maybe because of the cold outside, maybe because of how difficult it had been just getting to

the focus group, and maybe because of the safe environment that was created by the staff person who facilitated the group, there was a level of sharing and honesty that was heart wrenching. The young woman spoke first and she set the tone. She has been living on her own since she was 15 when her grandmother passed away. She shops for herself, cooks for herself, and eats by herself. She plays basketball in the Special Olympics. Her coach picks her up on Mondays and gives her pizza before the game. She sometimes has a meal at the Association and commented:

It is hard for me. Next Friday, I get my cheque and that has to last me to the end of January. It won't. By the time I have paid my bills and get groceries, I have maybe between \$100 to \$150 left. I am struggling so badly. I have my niece come over once in a while. It is so hard to feed her. Right now, I don't have any food in the house. I am really struggling. . . . It is my birthday tomorrow. I have told everybody to get me gift cards to Metro [the grocery store] because that will help me get through this month and next month.

One of the Indigenous women has eight in her family. She is busy. She is feeding five boys, aged 6, 9, 11, 12, 17, her daughter aged 21, herself and her husband. One of the boys is her nephew who she is fostering and explained:

It is really hard for me to buy nutritious stuff. We only get two cheques every month. I am on ODSP. The other cheque is my Child Tax. I get welfare for my nephew and that helps a little bit. And then I get support for my 17-year old son. He is going to high school and that is funded. The only time I can buy fresh fruit and vegetables for my kids is from the Good Food Box from the Friendship Centre. It is really hard for my family, for the eight of us. I buy ground beef and chicken and ribs from the Wholesale Club. I buy at least 10 loaves of bread if it is cheap, and then I freeze them. I buy the big yoghurts they have there. There is a lot of us so I need to buy the biggest ones. It is really hard. We are struggling really badly. It is hurting us.

One of the women cried as she shared how her life has changed recently. Both she and her husband have recently lost their jobs. She now has to buy more processed food. She can buy two pepperoni pizzas from Walmart for less than \$5 -- a lot less than making the pizza from scratch. She shared her challenges:

We are really struggling with our finances right now. My son has [behavioural problems]. We find that the processed foods contribute to his attitudes. But now I have had to go back to the processed foods because they are cheaper than the made-from-fresh stuff. It has totally changed his attitudes. It has made it really hard to shop.

Saskatoon

The Saskatoon focus group was held at the end of January 2019. It was a frigid -44°C with the wind chill, and all the flights out of the city had been cancelled. It had rained two days previously, and people were slipping and falling on the black ice that covered the sidewalks and roads. The group was held in the large basement room of a building that jointly housed five social enterprise organizations. The building was relatively new but was surrounded by old warehouses and shops with steel bars on their windows. This was the west end of the city, "the bad side of town", where crime is rife, and poverty is very visible.

The focus group was hosted by CHEP Good Food, an organization that promotes food security.

They provide student breakfasts, have a Good Food Box program and hold Community Markets, Collective Kitchens, and support 48 community gardens.

Twelve people had been recruited for the focus group, but only six could make it -- the weather! The organizers were not fazed. They called the Central Urban Métis Federation, and two people carefully walked across the street to join us to make up the group. This was the last of the focus groups and they offered to fill in the gaps in the research. They spoke about food waste, dumpster diving, and their dependency on the food banks and soup kitchens. They spoke about the cold and the difficulties with getting around in the winter, especially if you are in a wheelchair. They spoke about the violence, break-ins, thefts, alcoholism, and drug addiction that plagues their neighborhood. They also explored the relationship between food and health in relation to obesity and diabetes as well as cognitive disabilities. But the conversation always came back to the struggle of trying to feed your family in the cold on so little money.

Bridget is a large woman struggling with diabetes. She has a boy and a girl to support. As she said:

Recently, my income dropped and I don't eat as well as I used to. I cannot afford to buy what I used to. I am really stretching what I am buying and trying to make it last longer, but it is very hard. If it wasn't for the Community Market, I wouldn't be buying any fruit and vegetables. When your income drops, you tend to buy things that will fill you up. You go back to rice and pasta dishes that are more filling. You can buy brown rice and brown pasta that helps with the fibre, but you are still getting a ton of starch. It has also affected my medication. The doctor said that if I cannot bring my blood sugars down, I am going back to insulin shots.

Food is a Complex Issue that Includes More than Affordability

The essential importance of having enough money to buy the food you want to feed yourself and your family is uncontested. However, there is so more to the problem since food is a complex issue and means different things to different people. As a couple of food programme workers said in Thunder Bay, "food is linked to so many other problems. It is just the tip of the iceberg."

There are other contributing barriers facing low-income people accessing sustainably grown food. Diana Bronson, the Executive Director of Food Secure Canada, explains:

People are food insecure because they are poor. The biggest problem is simply not enough money in their wallets to buy food that will properly nourish them. But even if we were to adopt a basic income across Canada tomorrow, I don't think it would eliminate our food insecurity problems. There are all these other layers that haven't been dealt with.

Basic income is a payment that is given to eligible families to ensure a minimum income regardless of employment status. Funding for a pilot study on minimum income that was conducted in Ontario and involved about 4,000 people was withdrawn in March 2019.

The following sections highlight the other issues that strongly emerged out of the focus groups: (1) difficulties with accessing the food you want to buy; (2) how covering the cost of housing has to be prioritized; (3) the importance of culture when it comes to food; (4) how racism and

discrimination plays a daily role in one's food choices; (5) challenges buying local, sustainably grown food; (6) issues with trusting food labels and the quality of available food; (7) food programs, such as food banks, community kitchens and markets, are valued.

1. Accessibility

Difficulties with accessibility and transportation were mentioned in each of the focus groups, often. Sometimes in winter, with temperatures below minus 20 degrees, it is hard to get to the grocery store. It is hard carrying grocery bags on the bus. If you are in a wheelchair, the snow and the ice make it hard getting anywhere or navigating around once you have got where you want to be. It is hard finding a way to look after the children while you are at the store. Sometimes there is simply not a grocery store you can get to because you are so geographically isolated. A large number of people who identify as low-income live in "food deserts"; they cannot access the food they want. They live in dense areas of urban towers, or in the suburbs, or in rural areas where there are few grocery stores and you need a car.

Feeding your family three times a day can be an unrelenting burden to some. As one of the Thunder Bay focus group members said dreamily, "if I had enough time and money, I would hire someone to go to the store at 6 am every day, and then prepare a fresh breakfast, and prepare the lunch and the supper."

The Vancouver focus group participants spoke about the increase in the cost of public transportation. A recent increase in transportation costs has become a real barrier for people accessing food kitchens and food programs out of their immediate area.

Jessica, based in Halifax, works on community engagement, research and policy change on social justice and food issues. As she said:

The Toronto bubble is very, very different. Southern Ontario, Montreal and Vancouver are abnormal pockets compared to the food experience of most people living in more rural parts of Canada. Some people living in rural Nova Scotia have to get a ferry to the mainland to get to a grocery store. Communities are really small. Some of the problems are getting food to people, and some are about getting the people to food – and that is just healthy food. If you add "sustainably grown" food, you have to look at the whole system.

Adrienne lives in the southern interior of British Columbia working with farmers and helping them with marketing their produce. The closest big cities, Vancouver and Calgary are about seven-hour truck rides away in either direction as she explained:

The food systems of B.C. are significantly constrained by our topography, we have mountains everywhere. So, it affects where things are produced, how they are produced, what's produced, [how they get to market], and the scale.

Getting food to those who live in Canada's North is even more difficult says Cath, who works on anti-poverty and housing issues in the Yukon, as she described:

Transportation costs are always a problem, and people's ability to buy good food is very limited. The food that is available is seldom fresh and is not of good quality, especially in the fly-in communities.

The participants in the Saskatoon focus group would not concede that their winter was a barrier: “We are built tough in Saskatchewan. Not like you guys in Toronto!” said one woman making everyone laugh. But she was very sympathetic about those who live in the remote North, as she described, “in the North, it is insane! I had some women fly down for some training. They came with the clothes on their back and empty suitcases. They filled their suitcases with dry goods.”

Although Sudbury is not technically in northern Ontario, it has many of the problems that are faced by those living in Canada’s northern interior. Simeon who led the Sudbury focus group commented:

There’s an expectation that if you are in the rural or the remote North that there is, or there should be – and this is my understanding, a sort of assumption - a certain level of hardship that you are expected [to endure]. There’s a disempowering element to that.

2. Housing and Jobs

People with low income have to prioritize how they budget. Housing – paying the rent – always has to come first even if that means missing meals. If you lose your housing, you do not have an address to receive any support payments, you lose your ability to look for work, and you can lose your children. The Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) identified that “housing improves health, mental health and well-being, [however] housing alone is not the complete solution” (MHCC, n.d.). People on disability supports find that they have to spend all their money on their rent. A participant in Sudbury summarizes the issue succinctly, “the food bill is the only flexibility I have. My food is the only thing I can break down.”

It is estimated that there are 3,000 to 4,000 people without housing in Toronto. Newcomers have to prioritize their housing over food, says Mohammed, the head of an inner-city Toronto neighborhood house that hosted the Toronto focus group. He explained:

The situation has deteriorated in terms of the cost, whether it's renting or buying a house. It is really quite impossible.

People are staying longer. Most families are spending over 50% of their income on rent and that leaves less income for food and other necessities. That's not sustainable. And it's not getting better. The reality is that there is a lot of pain. Many of the skilled immigrants have low paying jobs. If people don't have good jobs, decent jobs, they can't pay the rent. But people have children. They don't want to be homeless so they will first pay the rent, and then pay for food second.

Paul Taylor in Toronto comments on how the cost of housing is affecting those in the bigger cities, “the whole city has been gentrified. Almost every week I see on social media someone saying I am leaving Toronto. I can’t afford it anymore. These are people with full time jobs who can’t afford to live in our city,”

Paul Taylor is the Executive Director of FoodShare, Canada's largest community food security organization, that in addition to their diverse programming, operates a number of social enterprises to generate revenue to support their work. “We find ways to support people who are materially poor to access good, affordable food that we know is wonderful and fills us.”

FoodShare, has restructured everyone's pay-scale so that the lowest paid got a 25% increase and management got no increase. He says: "It is ludicrous to me to think that it is legal for someone to pay someone an amount of money that doesn't afford them the ability to live in their city or community."

He was brought up in a poor area of Toronto by a single mother. It was not easy then, but he thinks the plight of the poor is, "much more difficult now. People who are living in poverty are under a great deal of stress and worry. It is definitely a lot worse for folks now." He gives the example of the welfare shopping list that was proposed to Ontarians by the Government of former Premier Mike Harris in the 1990s, that included "Pasta without sauce, bread without butter, no coffee, no tea, no salt or pepper." Taylor is outraged that "they encourage people who are on welfare to negotiate with grocers to purchase dented tins of tuna."

The affordable housing crisis is not only in the big cities of Toronto and Vancouver. Simeon says there are over 1,000 families on the waiting list for subsidized housing in Sudbury. Simeon, an academic, a social community leader, and a strong advocate for First Nations food sovereignty, was the facilitator of the Sudbury focus group. People on the waiting list will be waiting for at least two years for subsidized housing, he says.

Ken and Lin have three children. They were part of the Sudbury focus group. Ken recently got a good government job at \$20 an hour, but it is still not enough for the family to live off. They are living in social housing. Lin is a feisty woman – a community activist who leads her community garden. She is fighting for the right for her family to stay in social housing despite Ken now having a regular job. "The cost of living is so high that even a good government job is not enough to get above the poverty line." She said that a long time ago she decided to always try and feed her family well, but this has meant that sometimes they have not managed to make their bills. They seldom eat out. As she said, to feed her whole family at McDonald's would cost over \$50. "It is more important to have better food in the house than to pay rent or hydro."

As another member of the Sudbury focus group said, "the normal rent out there for a one bedroom is \$598. When you want to keep your child from the CAS [Children's Aid Society], you are forced to find a place. But there goes all your income on rent just so you can keep your family together. Then what?"

At CHEP Good Food, they have collected statistics compiled by the Saskatoon Poverty Reduction Partnerships on the demographics of the at-risk neighborhoods in order to strategize where to place their Mobile Food Markets. In the Saskatoon west-end core communities of Pleasant Hill and Riversdale with a population of about 8,000, home ownership is between 29-40%; the personal annual income ranges from \$21,290 to \$29,520; and unemployment is at the 49 to 55% level. To rent a 2-bedroom apartment costs about \$1,125 per month.

The situation in Canada's North is even more difficult, says Cath in the Yukon. There is a huge discrepancy in the North between those working in the public sector with all the perks of unionized jobs with benefits, and those in the private sector with precarious work. "The gap between the two is huge. The economy is not doing well. People are not making a lot of money."

3. Food is Culture

Culture, especially when it relates to food, means different things to different people, but the importance of cultural preference cannot be overstated. Food is not just nutrition. It is an expression of identity, and a central aspect of our social, cultural, historical and environmental realities. As a leader in the fight against poverty in the Yukon, Cath, who has lived in the North for over 25 years emphasized, it is very hard to make generalizations. One size does not fit all. Each jurisdiction, city, town, village and community is different, she emphasizes.

Food is not just nutrition. It is an expression of identity and a central aspect of our social, cultural, historical and environmental realities. As Wayne Roberts, a food policy expert in Toronto, so succinctly put it: “If you don’t consider culture, you really are screwed.”

Lillian, at the neighborhood house in Vancouver, shakes her head in wonder. She had hoped to create a cultural event for their Indigenous community, but she found out that it would be a mistake to make any presumptions about what food was culturally-relevant to any one group. “We wanted to have an event, and we thought to bring in traditional food – maybe moose-meat or fish. But they told us, ‘We are urban, and if you want to bring in the food we grew up with, then you are going to have to bring in hotdogs!’”

Culture came up in discussions repeatedly. Can Jewish people get kosher food for Passover if they live outside of Toronto or Montreal? Can the Australians get their jars of Vegemite? Can the Caribbean population get their yams? A Montreal focus group participant was from Afghanistan, “For my family, getting Afghan bread is a big thing. It means a lot to us. If we don’t have it for one day, there is a revolt. There are frantic phone calls between us all [until a loaf is found].”

Another Montreal focus group participant expressed dismay at leaving her Pakistan family in Toronto to study in Ottawa. “I go out of my way to make things my Mom would make and the things I am familiar with”. In Ottawa, there are no stores selling food from Pakistan close to the university. “It is a loss of my identity. It was such an integral part of my life at home. It is something I definitely long for. I now have to eat based on convenience, rather than enjoying the flavour of it. It is less about the enjoyment and community, and more about subsistence.”

The newcomers in Toronto also long for the food of their homelands. “Especially okra! And cucumbers too. It has to be like what we had in our own country. It is the taste you are used to!”

But a generational divide sometimes happens and culture can be a source of conflict. In Saskatoon, one of the women who is known as a wonderful cook, who shares her food with friends and neighbours (but not the recipe for her fabulous chicken broth), would love to share her culture through her cooking with her children, but it has been difficult:

I ask my son, ‘Can I cook some Afghani food?’ He does not answer me for a long time. Then he says, ‘Sometimes you can, but over the weekend.’ My kids just want brown rice with chicken and vegetables. I have forgot some of my recipes because of them. They don’t like the Afghani food because it is deep fried. They don’t want their eggs fried in the normal oil; they want avocado oil. I got it at Costco for \$10 a litre.

Yvonne Hanson, the Executive Director of CHEP Good Food, expands on this:

The new Canadians, especially the refugees, are dealing with compounding issues that are very complex. They are trying to assimilate into a new culture. The kids want food that

is different from the parents' cultural food. The kids are interpreting what it means to be Canadian, but the interpretation is not always accurate. The parents don't want to buy the [processed] food, but they feel pressured by their kids. They want their kids to feel comfortable in their new environment so they are caving into their demands. So there is a lot of conflict happening within families because of food preferences. It can be very perplexing.

4. Systemic Racism and Food Insecurity

Racism, being racialized, or being a visible minority, is a major determinant of food insecurity and this affects the access people with low income have to sustainably grown food.

People will only buy food where they feel comfortable and will not shop at certain places where they feel discriminated against, even if this affects the quality of food they buy. They feel uncomfortable most often because of implicit or explicit racism and discrimination. June in Vancouver commented:

I won't go to places that I don't feel comfortable. There are certain areas where there are certain group dynamics. So even if they have great food, if I don't feel welcome, I will stay away. In some of the farmers markets, you are overlooked. You don't get the same customer service. They don't hear you, and they don't see you. We deserve respect where we choose to spend our money. If we are choosing to spend an arm and a leg for this delicious food, I want good service.

The impact of racism on food insecurity and access to sustainably grown food can be directly linked to the legacy of colonialism, the lack of sovereignty (control over decision-making) over where and what you can source for food (especially relevant for Indigenous communities), and the dominance of the food industry. These are very complex, profound concepts that were expressed at the opening plenary of the 2018 Food Secure Canada Assembly in Montreal by Paul Taylor from FoodShare:

Dismantling systems that perpetuate inequality and discrimination should not be understood as additional work for the food movement; as a Board and organization we recognize that this is the work. Food security, food sovereignty and food justice cannot be realized without a consistent commitment to overcoming racism and oppression.

"We have four million hungry Canadians in this country. Four million! That is bigger than the size of Mississauga and Toronto combined!" Taylor says. His statistics come from PROOF Food Insecurity Policy Research (PROOF, n.d). and Toronto Public Health reports that one in seven households in Toronto is food insecure (2018). He commented:

However, when you apply a race lens to [food insecurity], particularly to Indigenous and to folks who are black, that number increases to 24 to 29 %. Food security and poverty are deeply connected to race, but that isn't part of the conversation. The nice middle-class white folks are afraid to have conversations, or don't know how to have conversations, about the intersection of race and poverty and food insecurity. The lovely middle-class white folks at non-profit organizations are designing interventions [to reduce food insecurity], but they don't necessarily ensure that the interventions will have an impact on the folks most affected by these issues.

Monique has had experience working at a community kitchen in Toronto. The clients, often newcomers, have confided in her, she shared:

There is the racialized aspect for the newcomers. They have lost all their savings and they are facing trauma and post-traumatic stress, and on top of that concern for their families. And when they arrive here, they have to face just outright racism in the system. [There are] barriers accessing employment, and experiencing food insecurity, and being labeled as something undignified. It just brings out so much sadness that they have to ask for food.

The concepts of racism and discrimination were discussed in the group made up of students in Montreal. The students are living on low incomes, often holding down multiple part-time jobs and studying, and experiencing food insecurity. However, they were also a highly informed group, either studying the subject of food security, or were volunteers and workers for food banks or food access centres on their campuses. A person in the focus group commented:

The majority of people using the food centre [food bank] are racialized, mono-parental and are women. We are seeing more women and racialized people being able to access post-secondary institutions, but once they are there, there is nothing to support them. Our school is putting on a big push to attract indigenous people, but once they get here, there is no support for them in the realm of their culture, or even where do they live, how can they support themselves. They are doing nothing to boost the people once they get them through the door. This is having a huge impact on the food they are eating. It is really difficult.

One of the most hurtful impacts of racism, is that it deprives people of the control they have over the food they want to eat. The Indigenous communities in Canada's North feel this most strongly, says Simeon. Food for Indigenous people is not only sustenance. It is a sharing, celebratory and spiritual experience. Over coffee following the focus group in Sudbury, he explained:

The way of distributing food [within communities] is not within the lens of what Public Health thinks is reasonable. So if there is an authority, typically a colonial authority like a health department or the police, they are going to say 'You can't consume that food, or you can't grow that medicine or share that meat.' So uninspected meats, or forest and freshwater foods, or the sale and trade or "gifting" of what we call 'wild meats', is stopped. But if we look to the original agreements like the treaties, we never conceded what we can and can't put into our bodies. I should be able to make the choice to say I know this hunter; I know this homesteader; I know this individual and I can look at this meat and decide with my senses, that this is something that I should eat, that I can eat, that I want to eat.

5. Challenges with Sustainably-Grown Food

The focus group participants were not familiar with the term "sustainable" food. When asked what "sustainable food" meant to them, there was often a discussion whether it meant "preserved food", "food that can be used for a long time", or "packaged" food. After a discussion about what the term meant, most expressed the reality that low-income people cannot be solely

concerned about the quality of the food they eat, or whether it was sustainably grown, when they have so many other concerns.

As one of the women in the Toronto group said:

The healthier food, the nutritious food, is so expensive. There is a health food shop, but when I went there I had to spend \$20, so it is not affordable. We all have low income. So we do not care about GMO. As long as we can live for today.

Despite “sustainably grown” being considered a luxury that is out of the reach of most people on low-income, it was mentioned by many as what they most wanted. One of the women, June, who was part of the Vancouver focus group, was clearly torn between the food she would like to buy and the food she has to buy to feed herself and her children, and described:

If I had the money for the food that I want to buy, I would buy more organic. I would have such a variety of non-GMO products. I would buy the \$10 non-GMO cereals, the prime organic vegetables. I pretty much have opted out from eating meat. I eat vegetables most of the time because of the hormones that go into the meat and the cruelty to animals. But I would love to buy meat again! I would love some bacon; sausages; a good roast! I would fatten up my children. I would have all of this food!

This wish to buy and even support sustainably grown food and the farmers who produce it, has been the experience of ML, a Toronto-based food advocate, initiator of multiple food social enterprise companies, and a leader of the food movement for many decades. She tells the story:

The word ‘sustainable’ has problems. To the rich it means local and organic or somewhere on that spectrum but maybe to the less fortunate it means ‘fair’. A good price, available to me and my family. But also, top quality, fresh food, that does not exploit those who grow or harvest it. I do feel that low income people will try to buy the best food they can. Even immigrants and the people on welfare are buying what they can.

We went to a community meeting in one of the most isolated and colourless housing projects when we were exploring the idea of [bringing wholesale food directly to the community]. All the people were poor. They surprised me by asking, ‘But where will the food come from?’ They said they would be interested [in participating] if the produce came from local farmers. I was never able to figure out their thinking. I always wondered if they came from farm families or had had jobs on farms, but that is highly doubtful. Perhaps they had an image of a farm [that was important to them].

When [FoodShare] was finally able to buy directly from local farmers and they sent their food to the warehouse, I saw with my own eyes how healing being around fresh, high quality fruit and vegetables could be -- for both for the packing volunteers and the homeless and immigrant kids we had in the training programs at that time. There was such excitement seeing the bins of beautiful, colourful, abundant fresh produce.

6. Trust in the Food System

The gap between field to table leads to mistrust in the food system especially if you have had the experience of once knowing who produces and processes your food. The focus group in Toronto highlighted some of the trust issues newcomers were having with the food they bought since they were so separated from the producers and processors of their food. Where once they went to the farmer for their meat and produce, now they have to buy food in the supermarkets that is usually imported from out of the country.

Yes, they prioritized quality, freshness, access and low prices. As one said, “We prefer to go for quality because it is best for the whole family.” However, they were also worried that the gelatin in dairy products like yoghurt and cheese was made with [religiously forbidden] pork, and were similarly concerned about how liquor [also religiously forbidden] could be hidden in chocolates or puddings. They were worried how dietary and nutrition rules changed:

There was a time when Omega 3, 6, 9 was everywhere. It was even in pills in the pharmaceuticals. Everyone was mad about eating the Omega pills. But suddenly the eggs no longer had Omega 6 and 9.

They were also distrustful whether “organic” means anything special, and whether they should be paying more for organic food. As one of the women mentioned:

I went to a shop where the organic foods and GMO food are in different places. I asked a guy who works there. And he laughed at me and said, ‘Please buy anything. Both have the same levels’. [He told me] they put any barcode on the food. The government is not following them or watching what they are doing. I was so surprised. I don’t think you can be 100% sure [what you buy is organic].

One of the older members of the group said:

How can you weigh the pros and cons of what you are eating? I have not been to the farm where that particular chicken was fed GMO grains. How are you meant to tell the different eggs apart? I have been eating GMO foods for 30 years, and I’m now a senior and I am healthy. Even in the taste there is not much of a difference in the eggs we are eating. The ordinary, the cheapest egg, still tastes the same.

In this discussion of the difficulties with trusting the food system, the most passionate responses came during a discussion the newcomers had about the Halal system of butchering meat. First there was a discussion of the way it should be done: “It has to be hand-slaughtered and you have to say ‘Allahu Akbar’ [Allah is Great]. The animals must be cut by hand, so the blood comes out. The blood has to pour out. It’s really better this way. It’s really tasty.” But then there was also significant insecurity and distress about whether the Halal meat they were buying in Canada could be trusted; how could they know if the animals were slaughtered mechanically, or even if there was a mechanical recorder saying the words, ‘Allahu Akbar’, as one of the women said she had seen. Another woman added:

In Canada it is not possible to know if it was hand-slaughtered. We have to buy what they say is halal because we cannot do this ourselves. We have no option but to buy it. There’s no way to check whether he is cheating me.

The question of trusting the food you buy also came up repeatedly in the Sudbury focus group. There were discussions about quality and that when you buy fruit on sale at the big supermarkets, it will often go rotten in a day.

But there were other issues of food safety and trust raised in the Sudbury focus group:

I try to avoid canned as much as possible. Any processed food is scary. There is a reason why it is 'processed'! For instance, if you buy those little baby carrots that are peeled, they have been put through a chemical bath so they last longer. But people buy them because it's cheaper and it's easier, and they buy them because it says 'carrots' [and that should be enough]. And they put them into the kids' lunches.

In comparison to the other focus groups, the participants at the Vancouver focus group had no issues with trusting the food system. When farmers in the farmers market say their produce is organic, they are believed, and their produce is desired over all others – if it were affordable. When the Toronto facilitator brought up the issue of distrust, it was rapidly dismissed as something typical of "Torontonians" and hence not relevant.

7. Food programs are valued

Food banks, food kitchens, food pantries, and other social enterprises that provide food to low income people was the most contentious issue between the two groups – the focus group participants and the key informants. The key informants highlighted many issues they saw as often being delivered through a charitable model. However, the low-income people at the focus groups said this access to free or very inexpensive food was invaluable and offered good quality food for their families.

Shawn at the Sudbury focus group was the only participant at any of the focus groups who spoke negatively about the food banks. His personal experience of having to be one of the recipients of this charity, was difficult for him. He shared:

I would rather starve than go to the food bank. I would prefer to last without food for three or four days. It's my pride stopping me. I had a bad experience. They belittled me so much. They said to me, 'We're not a grocery store, you know. You can't be doing this [taking food] every time.' It made me feel like crap. I told them, I don't smoke. I don't drink. I don't do any drugs. They said to me, 'Well, where's all your money going?' They need empathy training. My money's going to bills. The cost of living is going up. Every year we get about 1.5% increase on our disability cheques, but inflation goes up 4 to 5%. We can never get ahead.

It was notable that very few other people in the focus groups expressed the humiliation experienced by Shawn in Sudbury. Overall focus group participants did not state the same level of dismay and discontent with the food banks and food kitchens as the key informants did. They hardly said anything negative about food kitchens, community kitchens, Out of the Cold programs or food banks.

Yvonne Hanson in Saskatoon gave her thoughts on why there was this difference between the focus group participants and the key informants' opinions. She said:

Ideologically I am opposed to our society having food banks, but I also recognize that food banks are a lifeline. A lot of people depend on food banks to get from one week to the next. They depend on food banks to make sure they are not starving. We are caught in

this bizarre tension that we do not want food banks, but we can't close the doors of the food banks and say that we as a society will somehow deal with our most vulnerable citizens. We realize they have to exist otherwise we are taking away people's lifeline.

Most of the focus groups took place in food banks or food kitchens. The Vancouver focus group participants expressed that are taking full advantage of the meals that are made available through the not-for-profit sector. They trust the food that is served through the network of community kitchens and community neighborhood houses and centres. They believe the food is of high quality and nutritious, it saves them money, and it is a good way for them to be able to ensure that their families are well fed. In Thunder Bay, a focus group participant made everyone laugh. She has always wanted to try eggplant lasagne, but she does not feel that she can afford to buy the produce to make it and then find out that she does not like it. At the community kitchen, she can try out new food that is not necessarily part of her own tradition.

Summary

In summary, from the perspective of the low-income participants of the focus groups, the following themes emerged most strongly:

- The social safety net has been cut severely, so people are struggling to buy food for themselves or their families;
- The unstable employment market and precarious work have made people's lives even more difficult;
- Food is a complex issue that includes more than the affordability of food;
- Accessing food is difficult, and there are food deserts. The cost of public transport is a barrier, as are the difficulties getting to the stores that carry the food you want;
- If you have limited income, you have to prioritize paying for housing. If you lose the place you are living you can lose your children. Food has to come second;
- Food is an essential part of people's culture. Food is not just nutrition. It is an expression of identity, and a central aspect of our social, cultural, historical and environmental realities;
- Food insecurity is a problem that disproportionately affects people belonging to racialized communities.
- People living on low-income feel they cannot be solely concerned about the quality of the food they eat, or whether it was sustainably grown, when they have so many other concerns including affording the quantity of food they need to feed their families;
- The gap between field to table leads to mistrust in the food system especially if you have had the experience from other countries of once knowing who produces and processes your food;
- Food banks, community kitchens, food pantries, and other social enterprises are perceived as invaluable by low-income people in focus groups who believe they offer good quality food for their families.