



National Food Policy Briefing Note:

Eliminating household food insecurity is fundamental to a national food policy

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Summary of the issue:

Eradicating household food insecurity is a prerequisite to the articulated vision of the national food policy. It is a serious population health problem in Canada, and all indications are that it is getting worse. Most alarming is the 47% prevalence in Nunavut. Food insecurity is a potent marker of nutrition inequity, but also tightly linked to a myriad of physical and mental health problems. Despite federal commitment to address food insecurity through *Canada's Action Plan for Food Security* (1998), the only policy interventions to date have been measures to expand food charity (e.g., "Good Samaritan" laws, tax credits for farm donations, public funds supporting food bank infrastructure).

The social epidemiology of food insecurity in Canada is well understood. Those most at risk are social assistance recipients, but 2/3 of food insecure households are reliant on salaries and wages. Food insecurity is primarily a problem of resource constraints. Studies of 'natural experiments' in Canada show that household food insecurity is reduced by interventions that improve the financial circumstances of vulnerable groups. Effective, evidence-based policy responses are possible, but national leadership is badly needed to spearhead action.

Vital Stats:

- Household food insecurity affected over 4 million Canadians in 2012 (most recent data).
- The problem appears to be getting worse: the national prevalence rose significantly between 2007-08 and 2011-12. (The next nationally representative measurement will occur in 2017-18.)
- Levels of household food insecurity are highest in the north and east, but nowhere in the country do rates fall below 10%.
- Food insecure individuals (adults and children) are less healthy than their food secure counterparts, and severe food insecurity is particularly detrimental to health.
- Food insecurity poses a substantial burden to our health care system.
- Households reliant on social assistance incomes are at high risk of food insecurity, but most (~2/3) food insecure households in Canada are reliant on incomes from employment.
- The only window into this problem is direct measurement, but national monitoring has been sporadic.

Solutions: What needs to be done:

While addressing household food insecurity is fundamental to the goals of the National Food Policy, the policy levers to tackle the household financial constraints that underpin food insecurity rest within the social policy domain. An inter-ministerial initiative is needed to coordinate effective policy responses across relevant federal departments but also with the provinces and territories to ensure that the social and economic conditions that give rise to household food insecurity are addressed. The primary responsibility of the private sector rests not with corporate philanthropy, but with ensuring working conditions that foster household food security among their employees.

One theme identified by the Government as integral to a food policy is increasing access to affordable food. Ensuring access to affordable high quality, nutritious food is important, but this requires more than attention to food prices and the geographic dispersion of food retail outlets. For households, the primary determinant of food affordability is purchasing power, which is a function of the adequacy and stability of their incomes. Measures are needed to ensure that all households have sufficient income to meet basic needs, recognizing that food is only one of many household expenditures. Ongoing measurement of household food insecurity is imperative to monitor progress.

National Food Policy Action

A national food policy that ensures all Canadians can afford the food they need must:

- (1) identify the reduction of household food insecurity as a clear goal;
- (2) include inter-ministerial and inter-jurisdictional action to address the root causes of household food insecurity; and
- (3) ensure annual monitoring of household food insecurity in all provinces/territories using the Household Food Security Survey Module through such surveys as the Canadian Community Health Survey. This module should serve as a key indicator of progress for the National Food Policy.

How can we resource this?

The annual, national monitoring of household food insecurity can be achieved with minimal cost by simply mandating the inclusion of this module on existing Statistics Canada surveys.

Reducing food insecurity is a policy goal of relevance to the mandates of other federal departments, most notably Employment and Social Development Canada. Coordinating interventions across departments, paying attention to how policy actions impact food insecurity rates, will likely lead to different allocations of funding, but not necessarily increase costs.

Maintaining over 4 million Canadians in food insecurity is costing money now. Reducing food insecurity will improve these people's health and thus reduce health care costs. Expenditures on more adequate income support programs can be expected to be offset, over the long run, by savings on health care and lost productivity.

Key Resources for Further Reading

- [PROOF](#)
- [Food Insecurity and Health Care Costs](#)
- [Food Insecurity and Food Waste Op-ed](#)
- [Dietitians of Canada Position Paper on Household Food Insecurity](#)
- [OSNPPH Food Security Workgroup](#)
- [Nunavut Food Security Coalition](#)
- [Simcoe Muskoka District Health](#)
- [Income-Related Household Food Security in Canada \(CCHS, Nutrition\)](#)
- [FoodARC](#)