

Ensuring All Canadians Enjoy The Right To Food

Context: The Right to Food and Food Insecurity

All Canadians have the right to food, as recognized by the Canadian government's ratification of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, developed under the auspices of the United Nations. Yet 4 million Canadians, including 1.15 million children, experience some level of food insecurity,¹ and current government policies have done little to adequately address this problem. Disturbingly, food insecurity levels are twice as high among minority and indigenous populations. While the causes and experiences of food insecurity are complex, the overwhelming factor is poverty, and policy solutions must therefore address income levels. Whether because of low wages, unemployment, inadequate social assistance levels or demographic, geographic or health factors, Canadians living in food insecurity need a basic income that will allow them to fully enjoy their human right to food.

Vital Facts

- Nearly 13% of Canadian households experience some level of food insecurity.
- Severe food insecurity, defined as the need to skip meals, reduce food intake, or go entire days without food, affected 2.6% of households in 2012.
- Nearly 70% of Canadian households relying on social assistance are food insecure, yet over 62 % of food insecure households are comprised of the working poor.
- Lack of income is the primary determinant of health. Food insecurity takes a very big toll on physical and mental health, engendering significant costs to the health care system.
- The risk of food insecurity for Canadian seniors is cut by half as soon as they become eligible for Old Age Security and the Guaranteed Income Supplement.

What Needs to Be Done: A Basic Income Floor

The federal government must ensure that all Canadians can afford sufficient, safe, healthy and culturally appropriate food and can most effectively accomplish this by setting an income floor beneath which no Canadian can fall. A basic income (sometimes called a guaranteed annual income) would establish a minimum level of income security for all Canadians by topping up the income of anyone who falls below a designated poverty line. The impact of such a basic income would be most significant for people living in extreme levels of food insecurity.

In a country as prosperous as Canada, eradicating food insecurity is an ethical obligation. It is also financially responsible: federal transfer payments for a multitude of benefits that could be included in a basic income total tens of billions of dollars,² and conservative estimates put the

¹ At the household level, food insecurity is the state of lacking access to sufficient, safe, and healthy food and can range from experiencing anxiety about whether one will have enough to eat to regularly going without food. This state can lead to serious physical and mental health outcomes. For more information on rates of household food insecurity in Canada, as well as on proposals for basic income, see the PROOF website (<http://nutritionalsciences.lamp.utoronto.ca/>).

² In 2013-2014, transfers for seniors' benefits totalled \$41.8 billion; transfers for Employment Insurance, \$17.1 billion; transfers for children's benefits, \$13.1 billion; the Canada Social Transfer, part of which is spent on social assistance, \$12.2 billion; and transfers to persons through the Canada Revenue Agency, including GST/HST credits for low-income Canadians, \$3.4 billion.



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annual public and private costs of poverty in Canada at \$86 billion. In addition to tackling a root cause of food insecurity and fostering basic human dignity, a basic income would have many other cost-saving benefits: pilots have demonstrated remarkable health and educational outcomes, and it has been suggested as a method of decreasing crime and incarceration rates. We know that basic income is an effective solution to food insecurity: Canadian seniors receive basic income through Old Age Security and the Guaranteed Income Supplement, and, upon reaching the age of eligibility, their risk of food insecurity is cut in half.

Given the seeming intractability of poverty and food insecurity, many voices are calling for the issue of basic income to be reinstated as part of the public policy agenda. Though there is extensive existing research on the issue, given the wide-ranging ramifications of such a significant change in how income security is approached in Canada, we are recommending that a feasibility study be undertaken as a first step in starting the conversation on the costs and benefits of a basic income policy for Canada.

The Eat Think Vote Campaign led by Food Secure Canada and Community Food Centres Canada recommends that the Government of Canada undertake a feasibility study on the implementation of a basic income to be administered through the tax system and set above the Low Income Measure. The mandate could be given to the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities to explore different models of delivery and implementation: for example through a pilot, as suggested by the Canadian Medical Association, or through a staged roll-out, as suggested by the PROOF researchers.

Immediate Recommendations

There are a number of other, more immediate measures that should be taken to help combat food insecurity in Canada,³ such as:

- Increasing the National Child Benefit to a level that adequately addresses child poverty and indexing it to the cost of living.
- Developing a national housing strategy, including an increased federal investment in affordable housing.
- Instituting a national Pharmacare program to provide affordable access to pharmaceutical drugs and reduce overall Canadian drug spending.
- Developing a publicly funded childcare system that ensures affordable access to child care for low-income parents.
- Increasing the Working Income Tax Benefit.

Addressing poverty through a variety of corresponding policies is a great start. Ultimately, however, ensuring that every Canadian can afford sufficient, safe, healthy and culturally appropriate food is socially and economically responsible and obligatory in the Canadian government's protection of its citizens' human rights.

³ Many other organizations are putting forth anti-poverty policies. See Dignity for All (www.dignityforall.ca) for an anti-poverty strategy proposal, including many of the planks put forth in this document, and Food Banks Canada's (www.foodbankscanada.ca) HungerCount reports.

This brief was prepared by Community Food Centres Canada, in collaboration with Food Secure Canada.

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