

## Food (In)Security and COVID-19

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Consider this: Even before the global pandemic, there were more food insecure people in Canada than ever before - 4.4 million, or nearly 13% of all households.<sup>i</sup> The burden of food insecurity is not felt equally, however. In Canada, Black households are 3.5 times more likely to be food insecure than White households;<sup>ii</sup> 28.2% of Indigenous households off-reserve experience food insecurity;<sup>iii</sup> and 54.2% of adults living on First Nations reserves and communities in the North are food insecure.<sup>iv</sup>

Here in Peterborough, the situation is serious. 14.5% of households are food insecure and, in 2011-14, half of all female lone-parent families lived with food insecurity.<sup>v</sup> Currently, the food banks supported by Kawartha Food Share see between 8500 and 9100 people each month.<sup>vi</sup>

Given the pervasiveness of food insecurity in this country, you might be surprised to hear that, over many decades, our federal government has committed to several international agreements guaranteeing all Canadians the right to food.<sup>vii</sup> That so many people don't have enough to eat is an abject policy, political, and humanitarian failure. Food, along with air and water, are basic necessities for survival, and yet food insecurity is endemic—and the pandemic has exacerbated it. In just the first two months of the pandemic's descent on Canada, the number of people living with food insecurity increased by 39% so that, as of May, 2020, approximately 1 in 7 or 14.6% of Canadians were food insecure.<sup>viii</sup>

The unprecedented nature of this global crisis has illuminated all-too-familiar patterns of food insecurity. Our own Peterborough-area research<sup>ix</sup> on food access (involving resident surveys, food organization surveys, and semi-structured interviews with low-income residents) during the pandemic suggests that already-marginalized local residents, such as those identifying as low-income, lone mothers, youth, and LGBTQ+ people, experienced increased challenges around accessing food during

the first wave of the pandemic. We found that parents, especially mothers, had trouble accessing food while juggling home schooling, caregiving, and their own employment during the first wave of lockdowns. Youth, meanwhile, experienced lower incomes and higher rates of loss of part-time employment compared to other groups. Seniors who responded, however, did not seem to experience food access challenges to nearly the same degree as other groups, even though the percentage of seniors shopping at grocery stores and farmers' markets to access food dropped more sharply than it did for other groups. Although people responded differently in their food practices—with some eating more healthy and local food and others eating less healthy and more industrial food—this discrepancy seemed to be influenced by: income for food and the means to access, prepare, and store it; time available for foodwork; isolation; and the emotional impacts of living in a pandemic.

Local food programs and organizations were also greatly affected by the onset of the pandemic. In large part they shifted program delivery methods from those that encourage social engagement to more physically distanced methods including online, home delivery, and curbside pick-up to allow for physical distancing. Local food programs and organizations, which by and large are chronically underfunded, were faced with greater, more serious, and more urgent community need, all while adapting to having fewer volunteers (many organizations asked their volunteers to stay home in order to keep them safe). Not surprisingly, the increased work load under such stressful circumstances impacted the mental and emotional health of staff and remaining volunteers.

The most significant root of food insecurity is lack of income, something that intensified with the onset of the pandemic. Almost immediately, the federal government responded with the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) which provided \$2000 a month for those who had lost employment. However, CERB was not designed to assist social assistance recipients, who saw no increase in monthly rates from the provincially-funded, municipally administered Ontario Works (\$733/month for a single person) and Ontario Disability Support Program (\$1169/month for a single person).<sup>x</sup> Instead, during the first wave of the pandemic, the Ontario Government made available an emergency discretionary benefit of \$100/month to those OW and ODSP recipients who were: aware of the benefit, able to make contact with their workers, and able to convince their workers of their eligibility for it.<sup>xi</sup> Now the Ontario Government is beginning a process of overhauling social assistance to re-emphasize employment as the key to “stabilize” the lives of people living with poverty,<sup>xii</sup> even though stabilization is required for job attainment

and most households living with food insecurity in Canada already rely primarily on employment income.<sup>xiii</sup>

The federal government also invested unprecedented sums in the charitable food system by committing \$330 million to 6 umbrella organizations (Food Banks Canada, Second Harvest, Community Food Centres Canada, Breakfast Club of Canada, Salvation Army, and La Table des Chefs), to distribute primarily to local level food banks across Canada to address food deprivation.<sup>xiv</sup> The Government has encouraged Canadians to follow suit by donating to food banks. However, Canada's 40-year history of relying on food banks to address a poverty-based issue has only led to ever-higher levels of food insecurity. Additionally, in 2019 the number of visits to food banks in Canada was only a quarter of the number of people affected by food insecurity, leading Men and Tarasuk to determine that "Going to a food bank appears to be a strategy of last resort, most commonly used by those experiencing severe food insecurity"<sup>xv</sup>

Anecdotally, the pandemic seems to have increased people's thinking about food insecurity. Initially, going to grocery stores to access food was perceived by many as potentially dangerous. People who had never worried about getting enough food to live well started to rethink how they were accessing food. This led several people to expand their thinking and give more consideration to those for whom access to healthy food is always more problematic. As the pandemic lingered and more lockdowns took place, conversations about food insecurity grew. This fall saw publications from food banks (Who's Hungry Report<sup>xvi</sup> and HungerCount 2021<sup>xvii</sup>) that highlighted a sharp increase in usage. In the past, significant food insecurity increases have paralleled recessions and economic crisis, for example in 1995 and 2008. In fact, it was a deep recession in the 1980s that led to the establishment of the first food bank in Canada in Edmonton in 1981. Maybe this pandemic will usher in new thinking about how to deal with food insecurity. Local involvement around the web-based Hungry for Income series indicates that more residents involved in food charity are growing increasingly drawn to consider approaches that have shown capacity to not simply offer a band aid but actually move the dial around food insecurity. Hungry for Income, a 7-week web-based training series offered by Nourish, provides individuals and organizations the opportunity to learn more about poverty and its links to food insecurity, through the use of relevant data and interactive discussions.

Now, more than ever, we make the following recommendations:

- All sectors need to regard food as a right guaranteed to all people—and dignified access to it as contingent on income. Food's treatment as a commodity must be questioned.
- Because food insecurity is deeply rooted in poverty, addressing it must include livable and stable incomes supported through strategies like living wages, Basic Income Guarantee, and robust employment standards.
- Parents, especially lone mothers, require universal affordable childcare to earn incomes that will allow them to afford to feed their children.
- For most people, housing is their single biggest cost. Since it can eat into money available for food, affordable housing is essential for addressing food insecurity.<sup>xviii</sup>
- The pandemic accelerated the move to a digital age and showed how isolated people can be without digital tools and skills. To be able to access and engage with food from various sources and programs, digital technology and skills need to be available to everyone.
- If food organizations are going to have the stability to address the roots of food insecurity, they need to be promoted and supported financially.
- Greater investment is required in a range of production, local processing, and distribution infrastructure—and connections between local producers, processors, retailers/wholesalers, and consumers need to be strengthened.
- Peterborough requires an anti-poverty coalition to: amplify the voices of people living with food insecurity and poverty; and to identify and demand policy changes to address unacceptable conditions for many living in the Peterborough area.

The predictable inequity of food experiences during the pandemic demonstrates that people's food access struggles were not caused by the pandemic itself. Instead, they have resulted from the state's 40-year practice of downloading responsibility for food security onto food banks, individuals, and communities. Food insecurity costs people their physical and mental health<sup>xix</sup> and costs the health care system mightily.<sup>xx</sup> And yet, instead of using its power to establish robust, universal, and resilient structures that fulfil the right to food, the state has implicitly and explicitly directed community members to rally volunteers and donations to undertake the monumental task of ensuring that the basic food needs of the most

vulnerable people are met. However, it seems that perhaps people are beginning to look for more effective and enduring solutions.

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- <sup>iii</sup> Tarasuk, Valerie and Andy Mitchell. "Household Food Insecurity in Canada, 2017-2018." PROOF Food Insecurity Policy Research. 2020. <https://proof.utoronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Household-Food-Insecurity-in-Canada-2017-2018-Full-Reportpdf.pdf>
- <sup>iv</sup> First Nations Information Governance Centre. (2018). National Report of the First Nations Regional Health Survey Phase 3: Volume Two. [https://fnigc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/53b9881f96fc02e9352f7cc8b0914d7a\\_FNIGC\\_RHS-Phase-3-Volume-Two\\_EN\\_FINAL\\_Screen.pdf](https://fnigc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/53b9881f96fc02e9352f7cc8b0914d7a_FNIGC_RHS-Phase-3-Volume-Two_EN_FINAL_Screen.pdf)
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- <sup>vii</sup> Rideout, K., Riches, G., Ostry, A., Buckingham, D. & MacRae, R. (2007). Bringing home the right to food in Canada: challenges and possibilities for achieving food security. *Public Health Nutrition*, 10(6), 566–573. DOI: 10.1017/S1368980007246622
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- <sup>x</sup> Income Security Advocacy Centre. (2021). OW & ODSP Rates and the Ontario Child Benefit Current to October 2020. [http://incomesecurity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Oct-2020-OW-and-ODSP-rates-and-OCB-EN\\_-1.pdf](http://incomesecurity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Oct-2020-OW-and-ODSP-rates-and-OCB-EN_-1.pdf)
- <sup>xi</sup> City of Toronto. (2020). Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) COVID-19 Emergency Benefit <https://www.toronto.ca/311/knowledgebase/kb/docs/articles/provincial-government/ontario-disability-support-program-odsp.html>
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- <sup>xiv</sup> Agriculture and Agri-food Canada. (2021). Emergency Food Security Fund. <https://agriculture.canada.ca/en/agricultural-programs-and-services/emergency-food-security-fund>
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- <sup>xvi</sup> Jones, R.P. (2021). Toronto food banks record highest number of visits ever during pandemic, new report says. [CBC]. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/daily-break-food-bank-report-2021-1.6246880>
- <sup>xvii</sup> Reimer, W. (2021). Food bank use in Canada climbed 20% during pandemic, report shows. [Global News]. <https://globalnews.ca/news/8339332/food-bank-canada-use-rises-pandemic/>
- <sup>xviii</sup> Housing, an inflexible and substantial household cost, takes a bite out of food spending when incomes are not sufficient. The vast majority (86%) of renters who have annual incomes of \$25,000 to \$36,000 cannot "affordably" in Peterborough.
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