



# Food Insecurity

National Day of Action 2023



Canadian Federation of Medical Students  
Fédération des étudiants en médecine du Canada



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## Introduction

Food security is a fundamental human right and refers to the ability of individuals, households, and communities to access safe, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food regularly through local non-emergency sources.<sup>1</sup> However, many Canadians struggle with food insecurity, which can be defined as the inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints or other barriers, which can lead to reduced food intake, poorer health outcomes, and other negative consequences.<sup>2</sup> Food sovereignty is another related concept that emphasizes the right of individuals and communities to control their food systems and have access to healthy, culturally appropriate food. On the other hand, food deserts refer to areas with limited access to healthy food options, such as grocery stores, farmers' markets, and other sources of fresh produce.

Food insecurity, as it is conceptualized in Canada, exists on a spectrum divided into marginal, moderate, and severe food insecurity. Marginal food insecurity refers to worry or uncertainty about food quality, variety, or sufficiency of food. Moderate food insecurity refers to a compromise on the quality and quantity of food and severe food insecurity refers to food deprivation and hunger.<sup>3</sup> The prevalence of food insecurity in Canada is a pressing concern. In 2022, over 1 in 6 Canadians lived in food-insecure households, representing approximately 6.9 million individuals and the highest recorded rate.<sup>4</sup> The percentage of people living in food-insecure households varies across provinces, with PEI and New Brunswick having the highest rates, at 23.6% and 22.7%, respectively, and Quebec having the lowest at 14.7%.<sup>4</sup> Among the territories, Nunavut has the highest food insecurity rate, at 46.1%.<sup>5</sup>

Several socio-economic factors such as low income, unemployment, inadequate social assistance, and high housing costs increase the risk of food insecurity. Consequently, certain communities are disproportionately impacted by food insecurity, including Indigenous peoples and racialized communities, due to systemic barriers and discrimination. In 2022, 39.2% of Black people and 33.4% of Indigenous Peoples lived in a food-insecure household, compared to 15.3% of people who were not a visible minority nor Indigenous.<sup>2,6,7</sup> Households headed by single parents, particularly women, are also disproportionately affected by food insecurity.<sup>8-11</sup> Additionally, households with children are more likely to experience food insecurity, with nearly 1 in 4 Canadian children in the 10 provinces – or nearly 1.8 million – living in food-insecure households.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, geographic location and transportation barriers can also limit access to affordable and nutritious food, particularly in rural and remote areas.

The downstream impacts of food insecurity are significant and wide-ranging, affecting physical, mental, and social wellbeing, particularly in vulnerable populations. Adults and children living in food-insecure households have poorer quality diets with higher ultra-processed food consumption and lower nutrient density.<sup>13,14</sup> Research has also shown that moderate or severe food insecurity leads to greater risk of developing type 2 diabetes.<sup>15</sup> However, implications of

food insecurity for health extend far beyond nutrition. Adults in food-insecure households are also more likely to have a wide range of chronic physical and mental health conditions, including heart disease, hypertension, depression, or anxiety, and be diagnosed with multiple conditions.<sup>16,17</sup> The consequences from the difficulty of managing existing health problems when food-insecure are grave; adults in food insecure households in Canada are more likely to be hospitalized, stay in acute care for longer, require other health care services, and die prematurely from all causes, except cancer.<sup>18-20</sup>

In summary, food insecurity is a complex issue that affects individuals and communities across Canada, with certain populations disproportionately impacted. Understanding the distribution of food insecurity is critical for effective policy and advocacy efforts to address the root causes of food insecurity and systemic barriers and promote health equity. As future healthcare professionals, medical students have a responsibility to address social determinants of health, including food insecurity. It is crucial to recognize that food insecurity is not simply an individual or family issue, but rather a systemic issue rooted in socio-economic inequalities and inadequate policies. Addressing food insecurity requires multi-sectoral approaches that include policy changes, community-based initiatives, and advocacy efforts. By raising awareness and advocating for policy changes that address food insecurity, medical students can contribute to promoting health equity and reducing health disparities. Furthermore, medical students can work alongside community organizations and engage in initiatives that increase food access and support local food systems. By prioritizing food security in their advocacy efforts and targeting interventions towards the communities and households most impacted, medical students can work towards a more equitable and just food system for all Canadians.

## Our Asks

- 1. Make food insecurity a policy objective and target its reduction through policy-making**
  - While there are many existing policies we know to impact food insecurity, there has been no policy action targeting the reduction in food insecurity rates, nor has food insecurity been a consideration for income policy design.
  - Currently, there are only policies that have been narrowly focused on supporting the charitable food sector.
  - The Community Food Centres Canada suggests an ideal goal would be a 50% reduction amongst those that experience severe food insecurity by 2030. Setting a target can support the development of a strategy for food insecurity reduction and guide the design of existing and future policies and income supports.
  
- 2. Work with Indigenous Peoples and Northerners to co-create a strategy to address the extreme vulnerability to food insecurity in the North**
  - Multiple studies have now demonstrated that food insecurity has gotten worse following the introduction of Nutrition North, signaling that a food subsidy may not be the right approach since it's not addressing poverty, other costs of living, and the structural inequities from colonialism. There is a need for a strategy that is led by Indigenous Peoples and Northerners and sets out to improve the financial circumstances of food-insecure households through adequate income supports and support Indigenous food sovereignty and self-determination.
  - A 2021 report by the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs called on the government to recognize that food insecurity cannot be solved by the Nutrition North Canada program in its current form, and to work with Inuit peoples towards Inuit-led reformation of the program and new poverty reduction initiatives.
  
- 3. Improve supports to low-income families through the Canada Child Benefit (CCB)**
  - The Canada Child Benefit is a major federal policy that supports the incomes of families with children, yet 1 in 4 Canadian children now live in a food-insecure household. . As an established policy lever, it could be something that is easier for the government to act on if they wanted to.
  - Although the benefit already provides more money to lower income households, the high percentage of children living in food insecure households tells us that more needs to be done to support these families. Increases to the benefit amount for low-income households is an evidence supported way to reduce the risk of household food insecurity.

- Redistributing the CCB benefit so that more of the current funds are provided to the lowest income households is one potential cost-neutral option to improve the benefit's impact on food insecurity.
- Another part of enhancing the CCB could be to increase the amounts for children over 6 to match those currently provided for those under 6 (currently up to ~\$1000 per child per year). Research has shown that the extra money provided has a measurable impact on food insecurity.
- There should be considerations for increasing the amount of benefit for families living in Nunavut and other remote Northern communities, recognizing the higher costs of living.

#### **4. Establishing an adequate income floor for working-age adults and their families**

- Research has repeatedly shown that household food insecurity can be reduced by policy interventions that improve the financial circumstances of households at the bottom of the income spectrum. When food-insecure households receive additional income, they spend it in ways that improve their food security.
- Establishing an income floor for working-age adults and their families through a basic income program has the potential to greatly reduce food insecurity, as demonstrated by the low rates of food insecurity for households relying on public seniors pensions, which act as an income floor for Canadian seniors. The federal government should investigate a basic income program in collaboration with provincial/territorial governments and/or redesign existing federal programs like Canada Child Benefit and Canada Workers Benefit to establish a comparable income floor.
  - Community Food Centres Canada (CFCC) and Maytree, a national poverty policy think tank, have proposed a Canadian Working-Age Supplement, a reimagining of the Canada Workers Benefit, which is a more adequate and stable income for low-income single adults, particularly those relying on provincial/territorial social assistance programs.



## Sub-Populations Affected by Food Insecurity

### Food insecurity prevalence across Canada

The latest Canadian Income Survey (CIS) data from Statistics Canada shows that in 2022, 18.6% of people in the ten provinces lived in households with inadequate and insecure access to food due to financial constraints.<sup>12</sup>

Food insecurity varies across the provinces. In 2022, the percentage of individuals living in food-insecure households was highest in the Atlantic provinces — 23.6% in P.E.I., 22.7% in New Brunswick, 22.5% in Newfoundland and Labrador, and 22.0% in Nova Scotia.

Province	Percentage of people living in food-insecure households
Newfoundland and Labrador	22.50%
Prince Edward Island	23.60%
Nova Scotia	22.00%
New Brunswick	22.70%
Québec	14.70%
Ontario	19.20%
Manitoba	19.60%
Saskatchewan	20.30%
Alberta	21.80%
British Columbia	16.80%

For as long as food insecurity has been monitored, the rates in the territories have been especially high. In 2022, nearly half of the people in Nunavut, 46.1%, lived in food-insecure households.

### Household structures disproportionately affected by food insecurity

Household structure was found to be associated with increased risk of food insecurity.<sup>2</sup> Households with children are more likely to be food insecure, especially those led by lone female parents. Even after keeping household income, homeownership, province of residence, and other sociodemographic factors the same, lone female-led households are still twice as likely to be food insecure as couples without children.<sup>4</sup> Intervening in households with children is

particularly important because, as proposed by the family stress model, families under economic strain are forced to make difficult decisions between necessities resulting in emotional distress and frustration which in turn, negatively impacts caregiving and children's well-being (ask #3).<sup>21</sup> Unattached adults living alone are also face higher rates of food insecurity, highlighting the importance of examining income supports for single adults (ask #4).<sup>3</sup>

Food insecurity disproportionately affects households with low incomes and limited assets. The core cause of food insecurity goes beyond just food; rather, it is rooted in inadequate income and requires policy upstream to charitable food assistance.<sup>22</sup> Food insecurity has strong ties to poverty.<sup>23,24</sup> Households with lower incomes are more likely to be food insecure and more severely so. (Ask #3 & 4)

While it may seem intuitive to believe that many of these low-income households are not part of the workforce, it was found that in 2021, 52% of food-insecure households were reliant on employment incomes.<sup>4</sup> Simply having a job is not enough to ensure that households have enough money to afford the food they need.

Although employment is the main source of income for the majority of food insecure households, households relying on provincial/territorial social assistance or Employment Insurance have much higher rates of food insecurity. Whereas 13.7% of households reliant on employment income were food insecure in 2021, 63.1% of households relying on provincial social assistance and 38.5% of households relying on Employment Insurance were food insecure.<sup>4</sup>

It is generally understood that households who rent their home are typically of lower socioeconomic status than households who own their home. In 2021, 25.9% of renter households were food-insecure, compared to 13.9% of homeowners with a mortgage and 7.2% of mortgage-free homeowners.<sup>3</sup> Renters also make up half of the households that experience food insecurity.<sup>3</sup>

A larger proportion of households with an immigrant in them were food-insecure in 2021 than households without any immigrants.<sup>4</sup> However, presence of an immigrant was not shown to be an independent predictor of food insecurity in multivariate models; the elevated risk of food insecurity can be accounted for by differences in other household sociodemographic and household characteristics like household income, homeownership, and household structure.

### **Food insecurity in racialized communities (BIPOC households)**

Food insecurity in Canada is a racialized issue.<sup>6,8-10,25</sup>

In 2022, 39.2% of Black Canadians lived in food insecure households compared to 15.3% of Canadians identifying as not a visible minority nor Indigenous.<sup>12</sup> Research on the disparity in food insecurity between Black and White people points to systemic racism in labour and housing that make Black people more vulnerable. Compared to their white counterparts, Black homeowners are still more likely to be food insecure, even after accounting for differences in household income, main source of income, and other sociodemographic characteristics.<sup>26</sup> Homeownership is attributed to lower risk of food insecurity compared to renting. As such, the fact that Black homeowners are more likely to be food-insecure than white homeowners may reflect higher prevalence of mortgages or lower value households, resulting from systemic racism in the housing market. Black people living in households reliant on senior's pensions are also more likely to be food-insecure compared to their white counterparts, which may reflect difficulty building up assets before retirement due to precarious and low-paying jobs or other manifestations of racism in the labour market.

Indigenous populations also experience disproportionate levels of food insecurity. In 2022, 33.4% of Indigenous Peoples off-reserve in the ten provinces and 41.2% of Indigenous Peoples in the territories lived in food-insecure households.<sup>12</sup> Since the CIS does not include individuals living on-reserve, the data do not represent the experience of First Nations people living on-reserve, who represent nearly half of status First Nations peoples in Canada. (Ask #2)

The First Nations Food, Nutrition and Environment Study (FNFNES), a collaborative community-based survey on on-reserve First Nations communities from 2008–2018, found that 48% of households on First Nations reserves were food-insecure.<sup>27</sup> Although the findings can not be directly compared with other surveys like the CIS, they underscore the dire circumstances that these communities face. Traditional foods and food sovereignty are also critically important - 47% also said that they had run out of traditional food before they could replenish their supplies.

In northern and remote contexts of Canada, patterns of food insecurity are linked to important considerations, including declining access to healthy and affordable foods, shifts to wage economy, climate change and other environmental changes, and the erosion of Indigenous knowledge.<sup>28,29</sup> Urbanization, or living off-reserve, has become increasingly prevalent, which is accompanied by a nutrition transition characterized by decreased dietary diversity, declining access to traditional foods, and increased tendency towards fats, sugars, and processed foods. This can be attributed to ongoing and historic effects of colonial policies including residential schools and forced relocations which has led to a disruption of the relationships of Indigenous communities with their land.

## Benefits of Food Security

Household food insecurity takes a serious toll on people's health and ability to manage health conditions. Taking policy action on alleviating food insecurity by ensuring households are able to afford enough food can improve Canadians' health and reduce healthcare costs and utilization.

Adults and children living in food-insecure households have poorer diets than those living in food secure households, marked by greater ultra-processed food consumption and less nutrient dense dietary intakes.<sup>14</sup> Research has shown that adolescents and adults that lived in food insecure households had higher prevalences of nutritional inadequacies, including protein, vitamin A, thiamin, protein, vitamin A, thiamin, riboflavin, vitamin B-6, folate, vitamin B-12, magnesium, phosphorus, and zinc.<sup>13</sup> Consuming nutritious foods including a healthy range of micro and macro nutrients ensures proper growth, development, and disease prevention. For example, micronutrients (e.g. vitamins and minerals) must be derived from the diet and are especially essential for the healthy growth and development of children. Micronutrients include iron, vitamin A, vitamin D, iodine, folate, and zinc.<sup>30,31</sup> Nutrients such as iron are critical for motor and cognitive development, whereas vitamin A is crucial for healthy vision and the immune system. Research following adults over 10 years also found that those living in food-insecure households were more likely to be diagnosed with diabetes later in life.

However, the implications of living in a food-insecure household go far beyond poor nutrition, nutrition-related diseases, and other health conditions related to food. They are also evident almost from birth, with infants born to food-insecure mothers more likely to be treated in emergency departments and mothers unable to follow optimal breastfeeding recommendations.<sup>32,33</sup> Adults living in food-insecure households are more likely to experience various health problems, including infectious diseases, poor oral health, injury, and chronic conditions such as heart disease, hypertension, arthritis, back problems, and chronic pain.<sup>17,34</sup> They also have greater difficulty managing their conditions and are more likely to delay or forego prescription medicine due to inadequate funds.<sup>35</sup>

There is also a very strong relationship between food insecurity and poor mental health. Adults and adolescents living in food insecure households are more likely to have depressive or suicidal thoughts, diagnosed mood or anxiety disorders, and major depressive episodes. Pregnant women in food-insecure households are more likely to develop postpartum depression. A Canadian health report showed during the COVID-19 pandemic, people living in food-insecure households were also more likely to report poorer mental health and increased symptoms of anxiety during the pandemic.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, a study conducted by PROOF showed that adults living in food insecure households accounted for 1 in 3 hospitalizations due to mental health in Ontario.<sup>37</sup>

Food insecurity significantly impacts children's mental well-being. Food insecurity during

childhood is associated with mental health challenges like hyperactivity and inattention. Experiences severe food insecurity (i.e. child hunger) can manifest as greater risks for depression and suicidal ideation later in life.<sup>38,39</sup> Even children living in food-insecure households that only report deprivation among adults are still more likely to have anxiety and poor mental health.<sup>40</sup>

Living in food insecure households also means compromises to people's ability to manage health conditions, like delaying or foregoing prescription medications due to their cost. Nearly half of adults living in severely food-insecure households reported delaying, reducing, or skipping medications because they could not afford them.<sup>35</sup> People living in food insecurity households are more likely to be hospitalized for physical and mental health conditions, require ER services, and die prematurely.<sup>18-20</sup>

The tight link between food insecurity and poor health outcomes persists even after accounting for other social determinants of health like income, making food insecurity a potent, yet entirely modifiable, predictor of health. Reducing food insecurity would improve the health and wellbeing of the people living in these circumstances. Not only is there a moral imperative to reduce negative health outcomes, doing so would allow people to participate more fully in their families, work, and communities.

### **Cost Benefit Analysis of Food Security**

Policy interventions aimed at improving the incomes of low-income households have been shown effective in reducing food insecurity. Expanding the supports provided to low-income households (e.g. through asks #3 & #4) inevitably comes with an additional cost.

To critically understand food security from the point of a cost-benefit analysis, it is first important to note the costs associated with food insecurity, especially expenditures incurred in healthcare services. There are major costs to inaction on food insecurity. One of the most well-evidenced is the burden on the healthcare system.

Studies done by PROOF have shown that adults in food-insecure households are more likely to be admitted into acute care for a wide range of reasons including mental disorders, injuries, digestive system diseases, circulatory system diseases, respiratory system diseases, and musculoskeletal diseases, and to stay in hospital longer. The healthcare costs associated with food insecurity are significant; in fact, even after adjusting for other social determinants of health (e.g. education and income levels), the healthcare costs incurred by a severely food-insecure adult in Ontario were found to be more than double that of a food-secure adult.<sup>41</sup> The healthcare costs incurred by a severely food-insecure adult in Ontario was around \$3930, whereas the cost was around \$1608 for a food-secure adult. Another Ontario study found that food insecurity is the strongest predictor of being a high-cost health care user, someone who ranks in the top 5% of

total annual spending.<sup>42</sup>

Although asks #2, #3, and #4 may come with additional costs, effective reduction of food insecurity would be offset by reductions in healthcare costs, and other opportunity costs to persistent material deprivation like lost productivity. The cost of effective policy action could be managed through the redistribution of existing funds, particularly in the example of the restructuring of Canada Child Benefit (Ask#3). With this ask, funds currently used to provide the benefit to high income households, unlikely to face food insecurity, could be redirected towards larger benefits to those on the bottom end of the income spectrum. Establishing an income floor (Ask#4) through a basic income will require federal, provincial, and territorial collaboration and cost-sharing. Depending on the design, costs could be recovered through replacing some other existing income supports.

In any case, the harm to Canadian's health and well-being is too great to ignore the high rates of food insecurity. As a potent social determinant of health, the potential costs of policy action could be remediated by the savings associated with healthier citizens.

## Policy Evidence and Current Landscape

The only policy interventions shown to reduce the rates or risk of household food insecurity have been those that improved the financial circumstance of vulnerable households. Canada's social safety net primarily consists of income supports at the federal level like the Canada Child Benefit, Employment Insurance, Canada Workers Benefit, GST credit, Old Age Security and the Guaranteed Income Supplement, and at the provincial/territorial level like social assistance, minimum wage, child benefits, and various other benefits. Research has identified reductions in food insecurity where policies have increased the amounts of money households receive from federal and provincial child benefits and social assistance and when households transition to more adequate and stable income support programs, like when low-income adults become eligible for public pensions (OAS/GIS) when they turn 65.<sup>1,43-48</sup>

One example of policy reducing food insecurity is the Newfoundland Poverty Reduction strategy 2007 - 2012. This strategy was spearheaded by Paul Shelley of the Progressive Conservative party, who was the Minister for Human Resources, Labour, and Employment.<sup>49</sup> The strategy targeted poverty through eliminating or lowering income taxes for the lowest and mid-low income households, increasing minimum wage, increasing social assistance rates, indexing them to inflation, increasing earnings exemptions for social assistance recipients, and a suite of other reforms to improve the support provided through social assistance. These changes resulted in the prevalence of food insecurity among people receiving social recipients decreasing by approximately half, which was responsible for most of the reduction in the overall rate of food insecurity. However, since 2012, backwards steps were taken due to political and economic changes which included the end of indexing benefits to inflation. As a result, food security returned to concerning baseline levels as shown in the 2017 - 2018 statistics.<sup>50</sup>

An example at the federal level is the lower risk of food insecurity for households reliant on public pensions i.e. Old Age Security and the Guaranteed Income Supplement. In addition to low rates of food insecurity, having public pensions as a household's main source of income is also independently associated with lower odds of food insecurity compared to relying on employment incomes, after controlling for other households characteristics, like household income amount. Research has shown that the risk of food insecurity for low-income, unattached adults is cut in half once they become eligible for these programs at age 65.<sup>48</sup>

Even though the income from pension programs for seniors is relatively low, it exceeds what they would receive from social assistance programs and provides a stable source of

income, helping them cope with financial uncertainties. Additionally, public pensions are adjusted for inflation, ensuring their value doesn't decrease over time.

These results emphasize how Canada's public pension system safeguards the food security of its elderly population and underlines the insufficiency of other support programs for low-income working adults. This highlights the idea of establishing a minimum income level to shield Canadians from food insecurity, supporting the argument for implementing a Basic Income program to alleviate poverty. (ask #4)

None of the policies studied were designed to explicitly reduce the rate of food insecurity, but had that effect because they improved the financial circumstances of food-insecure households. They likely would have more impact had they designed with the outcome of food insecurity reduction in mind (ask #1). In other words, they could be more effective had they provided more money and financial security for low-income households.

Food insecurity is now identified as a key indicator of poverty in the federal poverty reduction strategy led by Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) and Ministry of Families, Children and Social Development, the government bodies responsible for monitoring and designing most of the income supports at the federal level. With the policy levers and monitoring, ESDC is well-positioned to make food insecurity reduction a policy objective and establish an action plan with other federal ministries, departments like Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, provincial counterparts, and Indigenous governments/leadership (ask #1).

Despite income support policies being the policy levers for changing the conditions that lead to food insecurity, there has yet to be any explicit action to leverage them to reduce food insecurity. Instead, policies to address food insecurity in Canada have been narrowly focused on supporting food charity. This approach fails to address the underlying cause of food insecurity. While food charity is undoubtedly appreciated by those who receive it, there is no evidence that it can make households food secure. Furthermore, most food insecure households don't use charity, exemplified by how large the number of people living in food insecure households (6.9 million) is compared to food bank usage statistics (Food Bank Canada reports 1.5 million visits for an average month in 2022). The problem is too big and severe for food charity to address.

Legislation passed in the name of addressing food insecurity or hunger encourages food donations, with laws such as "Good Samaritan" regulations across provinces and territories relieving corporate donors of liability for donated food safety and tax credits to local producers donating unsold food to community organizations in some provinces.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, both federal and provincial governments allocated significant public funds to support food charity programs as a strategy to tackle food insecurity, including an unprecedented \$330 million through the Emergency Food



Security Fund and \$50 million through the Surplus Food Rescue Program. However, a recent evaluation by the Auditor General revealed a lack of evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of these federal initiatives in reducing food insecurity. Some provinces have maintained their financial support for food banks and other community food programs in response to the exceptionally high inflation rates and cost-of-living crisis.

The only federal policy that explicitly identifies reducing food insecurity as a goal is the Local Food Infrastructure Fund as part of Canada's Food Policy, launched in 2019. Currently, the Food Policy serves as an umbrella under which many other initiatives exist, including the Northern Isolated Community Initiatives Fund, AgriCommunication Initiative, Food Waste Reduction Challenge, initiatives to address food fraud, and the development of a National School Food Program. These initiatives are important for addressing pressing food issues facing Canada like food sovereignty, food waste reduction, local food production, and child nutrition, but should not be confused with interventions to reduce food insecurity.

The Local Food Infrastructure Fund funds infrastructure and equipment for local food charity programs and other community organizations providing food assistance. The continued framing of this fund as a solution to food insecurity funding presumes that food-insecure households are accessing food charity and that doing so resolves their food insecurity. It further contributes to the entrenchment of food charity as Canada's response to food insecurity, despite recognition by charities and policy makers that policies to address inadequate incomes are needed.<sup>51</sup>

The development of a National School Food Program has also been framed as a way to address food insecurity in government documents, despite the lack of evidence. There have been numerous federal bills by members from multiple parties calling for a national school food program over the years.

A national school food program is important for many reasons like improved student nutrition, food skills, education attainment, economic development, and more. However, conflating a national school food program and addressing food insecurity detracts from both school food advocates' work to build the case for a comprehensive and universal school food policy and advocacy around making income supports for struggling families adequate for enabling them to make ends meet.<sup>52,53</sup>

The development of a national school policy has been mentioned in recent federal budgets. The Ministry of Families, Children and Social Development recently completed the first phase of consultation on the development of a national school food policy.

It is important to recognize that there is a long history of publicly funded school food programs across provinces and territories and that the establishment of a federal policy to fund, oversee, or regulate standards for these programs requires collaboration between federal, provincial, and Indigenous governments.

In the North where food insecurity rates are especially high, the federal program provides support through Nutrition North, a food subsidy program introduced in 2011 to subsidize the cost of transporting perishable, nutritious foods to the remote Northern communities. Research showing food insecurity worsening in Nunavut following the introduction of Nutrition North raises serious questions around the continued focus on food subsidies and highlights the need for more effective initiatives to address food insecurity in the North.<sup>54</sup>

A recent study from the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs urged the government to acknowledge that the Nutrition North Canada program alone cannot address food insecurity.<sup>55</sup> The report emphasized the importance of collaborating with Inuit communities to develop Inuit-led reforms for the program and poverty reduction efforts.

### **Integration Barriers**

Addressing food security necessitates effective integration across ministries and jurisdictions. Although there is acknowledgement of food insecurity as an urgent problem to address in both the federal poverty reduction strategy and Food Policy, there is no clear framework for collaboration on reducing food insecurity through evidence-based policy action.

The Food Policy's approach of focusing on charitable food assistance, through the Local Food Infrastructure and its surplus food distribution, actually contradicts the understanding of food insecurity reflected in poverty reduction strategy, which centres food insecurity under "dignity" because it enshrines a two-tiered food system, where some Canadians can purchase food from shops and others are relegated to food rejected from retail and distributed through charity.

Collaboratively setting legislated targets for food insecurity reduction, creating a plan using policy levers shown to have an impact, and evaluating progress along the way is necessary to move towards more effective and impactful policy making (ask #1).

### **The Present State**

In conceptualizing barriers to food security, it is essential to consider food security in the context of current social realities. Throughout the past year, historic inflation and supply chain issues have significantly impaired Canadians' ability to afford everyday necessities including clothing, housing, food, and transportation, with people in the lowest income quintiles being disproportionately impacted.<sup>56</sup> Between April 2021 and 2022, the price of food increased by 9.7%.<sup>57</sup> In Canada, household income is the greatest predictor of food insecurity, with

lower-income households spending greater portions of their income on non-negotiable necessities such as housing.<sup>58</sup> Cost of housing, particularly rent, has increased at an unprecedented rate. The rise in interest rates also puts additional stress on households with mortgages or servicing other debts. As the cost of living rises, people are making sacrifices to various facets of their health and well-being, including their meals.<sup>59</sup> A survey conducted by Canada Food Banks finds that three of five people in Canada reported housing-related costs as the greatest barrier to affording food, a statistic which has increased from one in five in 2019. With food insecurity at a record high in 2022 and high and increasing costs of living since, there is an urgent need for policy action to prevent the worsening of food insecurity and its impact on Canada's health and well-being.

## Historical Social Determinant of Health Landscape in Canada

Although Canada's reputation for healthcare access is embedded within its national identity, there remain significant gaps in Canada's approach to social determinants of health, including food security. Despite a substantial history of stated commitments to various international human rights accords that endorse the right to food, little progress has been made domestically.<sup>60</sup> A key challenge to addressing food insecurity is a tendency to approach health problems in North America through the lens of individualism. Individualism entails the attribution of one's socio-economic status to personal efforts, thus relegating one's health and well-being to the domain of individual responsibility. The commitment to individualism neglects the potential of advocacy and societal reorganization.<sup>61</sup>

Concurrently, the shift towards neoliberal policy has entailed stricter eligibility for social security programs and decreased funding for social services.<sup>62</sup> A key moment of governmental restructuring occurred in 1995, when the federal government dissolved the Canada Assistance Plan and installed in its place the Canadian Health and Social Transfer plan (CGST).<sup>63</sup> In the Canada Assistance Plan, money was allocated to specific social services but with the CGST, the decisions regarding monetary allocation are left to provincial governments.<sup>60</sup> In the aftermath of this reform, spending towards welfare and social services declined and Canadian food banks were left to respond to these gaps.<sup>63</sup> While food banks are an important resource providing short-term relief for many Canadians, these agencies often lack the adequate resources to sufficiently address nutritional demands. Fundamentally, food banks fail to address the social structures and policies that ultimately underlie and perpetuate food insecurity in Canada.<sup>64</sup> The first food bank in Canada opened over 40 years ago and community food assistance has continued to grow exponentially to support the continued need.

Food insecurity has been monitored systematically for almost decades and the patterns of vulnerability (low income, renters, social assistance recipients, those with children especially lone-parents) have been long documented. However, food insecurity has persisted at high rates in Canada, with the latest estimates showing an increase to the highest rate recorded.

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