



community food centres
CANADA good food is just the beginning



BEYOND HUNGER

THE HIDDEN
IMPACTS OF
FOOD INSECURITY
IN CANADA

**Every day in Canada, one of the
wealthiest countries in the world,
one in eight households struggles
to put good food on the table.**

#beyondhunger



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1.1 FOREWORD

Even before COVID-19, nearly 4.5 million Canadians struggled to put good food on the table for themselves and their families. In the first 2 months of the pandemic, that number grew by 39%, affecting 1 in 7 people.

At Community Food Centres Canada (CFCC), we know that far too many Canadians lack sufficient access to food—and that the pandemic has exposed this urgent problem for the crisis that it is. CFCC works in 175 communities where people suffer from food insecurity—meaning they cannot afford adequate or secure access to food. We see first-hand the pernicious effects that such worry and lack of food can have.

We also know that food insecurity is not simply about a lack of food. Its ripple effects are wide and far-reaching, affecting physical and mental health, social connection and community, employment and aspirations, family life and more. In this report, we aim to shine light on this problem, revealing the ways food insecurity affects people's lives as well as the strategies they're using to manage.

While we provide important support to the communities in which we work, only policy change can address the systemic issues at the heart of the problem. That's because food insecurity is a complex issue with roots in our frayed social-safety net, the rising cost of living and a labour market that seems to have no end of precarious, poorly paid jobs, but not enough work that is meaningful and adequately compensated. People are food insecure not because they are poor budgeters or unwilling to work but because they lack the income to afford food on top of other basic needs. In order to meaningfully address this serious challenge, we need governments to take it on.

To create this report, we interviewed hundreds of Canadians who struggle with food insecurity. We heard stories from people across the country with diverse backgrounds, ages and genders. They told us about the stress, anxiety, hopelessness and poor health that they experience as a result of their lack of food. We are sharing these

stories and data to inspire the kind of transformative change that, for far too many, cannot come soon enough.

As we continue to grapple with the effects of COVID-19—and as we eventually transition out of the pandemic—we must ask ourselves: Are we willing to live in a society that leaves so many behind? And, if not, how can we invest in a more equitable future?

Nick Saul
CEO



Nick Saul

Dr. Kwame McKenzie
Board of Directors
CEO, Wellesley Institute



Dr. Kwame McKenzie

1.2 ABOUT COMMUNITY FOOD CENTRES CANADA

CFCC builds dynamic and responsive Community Food Centres and food programs that support people to eat well, connect with their neighbours and contribute, through advocacy and mutual support, to a more just and inclusive Canada. With our partners, we work to eradicate poverty and food insecurity and to improve the health and well-being of low-income Canadians.

As of fall 2020, CFCC supports 13 Community Food Centres across the country in Kamloops, British Columbia; Nelson, British Columbia; Calgary, Alberta; Turnor Lake, Saskatchewan; Winnipeg, Manitoba; Toronto, Ontario; Hamilton, Ontario; Perth, Ontario; Stratford, Ontario; Montreal, Quebec; Dartmouth, Nova Scotia; Eel Ground First Nation, New Brunswick; and Iqaluit, Nunavut, with 5 more partnerships in development.

CFCC also supports the broader community food sector in Canada and abroad through our Good Food Organization program.

CFCC is active in 175 communities and 1/3 of electoral ridings across Canada.

We currently work with 201 organizations through conferences, trainings, grants and other resources.

CFCC is building this movement of engaged people and organizations because we believe in the power of food to change lives. Food brings people together, builds health

and creates community. We are also working with people at Community Food Centres across the country to advocate for policies that will improve their lives and the lives of others. Together, we can build a nation where everyone has dignified and equitable access to good food.



1.3

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

FOOD INSECURITY

Even before COVID-19, food insecurity—defined as inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints—affected nearly 4.5 million Canadians, many of them among the most vulnerable people in our society. In the first 2 months of the pandemic, that number grew by 39%, affecting 1 in 7 people.

Children, Indigenous people, racialized people, single parents, newcomers and people in Northern communities all disproportionately experience food insecurity. This takes a toll on physical and mental health, and can lead to numerous other problems, such as social isolation.

Although there is growing data on food insecurity in Canada, this report seeks to paint a more complete picture of the problem, including how it affects people's lives and the strategies they use to deal with it.

CFCC builds dynamic and responsive Community Food Centres and food programs that support people to eat well, connect with their neighbours and contribute, through advocacy and mutual support, to a more just and inclusive Canada. With our partners, we work to eradicate poverty and food insecurity and to improve the health and well-being of low-income Canadians.

For this report, we surveyed 561 participants who experience food insecurity at Community Food Centres and Good Food Organizations across the country to find out how it affects their lives and how they deal with it. The quotes and stories in this report create a nuanced picture of what it is like to lack access to food.

THE IMPACT

Survey participants described an impact that goes far beyond what we traditionally think of as hunger and permeates all aspects of their lives. For example:

- 81%** said food insecurity had a negative impact on their physical health
- 79%** said it had a negative impact on their mental health
- 64%** said it affected their relationships with loved ones
- 59%** said it had a negative impact on their children
- 58%** said it isolated them socially
- 57%** said it was a barrier to finding and maintaining employment
- 53%** said it impeded their ability to find meaning and purpose in life
- 46%** said it impeded their ability to express and share their culture

SO WHY IS THIS HAPPENING?

Why are so many people struggling to make ends meet? The answer is complex but is ultimately linked to an economy that creates far too much vulnerability and government supports that often don't measure up when they're needed most. More and more Canadians are relying on an increasingly precarious labour market and low-wage jobs and a restrictive and inadequate Employment Insurance program when they get laid off. People who are looking for work or are unable to work are barely keeping afloat on unacceptably low social-assistance rates. The cost of housing, child care, prescriptions and food is increasing sharply. More and more people are living alone and shouldering these costs on one income. Racism and the lasting effects of colonialism are leaving racialized and Indigenous people to deal with deep societal inequities. And Canadians in Northern communities are spending more than twice as much for groceries as those in the South.

People are food insecure because they lack the money to buy food. As a result, we need government policies, legislation and programs that will increase incomes and improve affordability for the Canadians at the lowest end of the income spectrum.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

This report lays out policy recommendations that can reduce poverty and food insecurity, grouped under four main themes:

FOOD INSECURITY TARGETS & REPORTING

Setting targets to reduce food insecurity will ensure it's a higher priority. Reporting annually on progress and ensuring we have adequate race-based data can keep the government accountable and help them design effective policies.

INCOME SOLUTIONS

Millions of Canadians are living below the poverty line. The federal government can boost income supports to ensure that all food-insecure people can afford to put good food on their table.

SOCIAL PROGRAMS

The cost of living is increasing, and too many Canadians are struggling to cover their basic needs. Social programs, such as child care, affordable housing and pharmacare, can help people make ends meet.

EQUITABLE PROGRESS

Racialized and Indigenous Canadians experience food insecurity at a much higher rate. Policies and programs must ensure progress on food insecurity is achieved equitably.

CHANGE IS POSSIBLE.

We understand the problem and how it can be solved.
Now we need the political and social will to make it happen.

1.4 SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

Community Food Centres Canada surveyed **561 people who suffer from food insecurity at 10 Community Food Centres and 12 Good Food Organizations across the country.**

This was a participatory process, and our approach was guided by focus groups done with community members who experience food insecurity at two Community Food Centres (for more on this, see the Methods section on p. 55).

We have written this report in order to show how these community members live with food insecurity, an experience shared by nearly 4.5 million other Canadians.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Low-income

80%

Not in the workforce

35%

Unemployed but looking for work

23%

Retired

19%

Working part time

12%

Working full time

7%

Students

4%

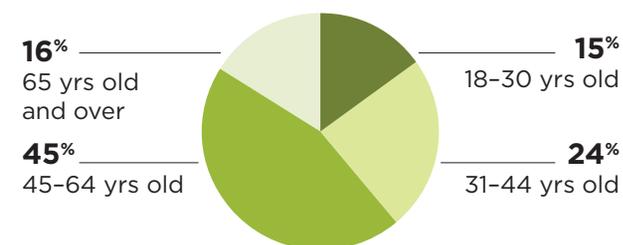
Gender

66% Female

32% Male

2% Another gender

The average age of adult respondents was 48 (we did not survey children under 18).



25% of respondents were immigrants.

The top five countries of origin were Bangladesh, Iraq, the United States, Pakistan and the United Kingdom.



25% of respondents self-identified as Indigenous.



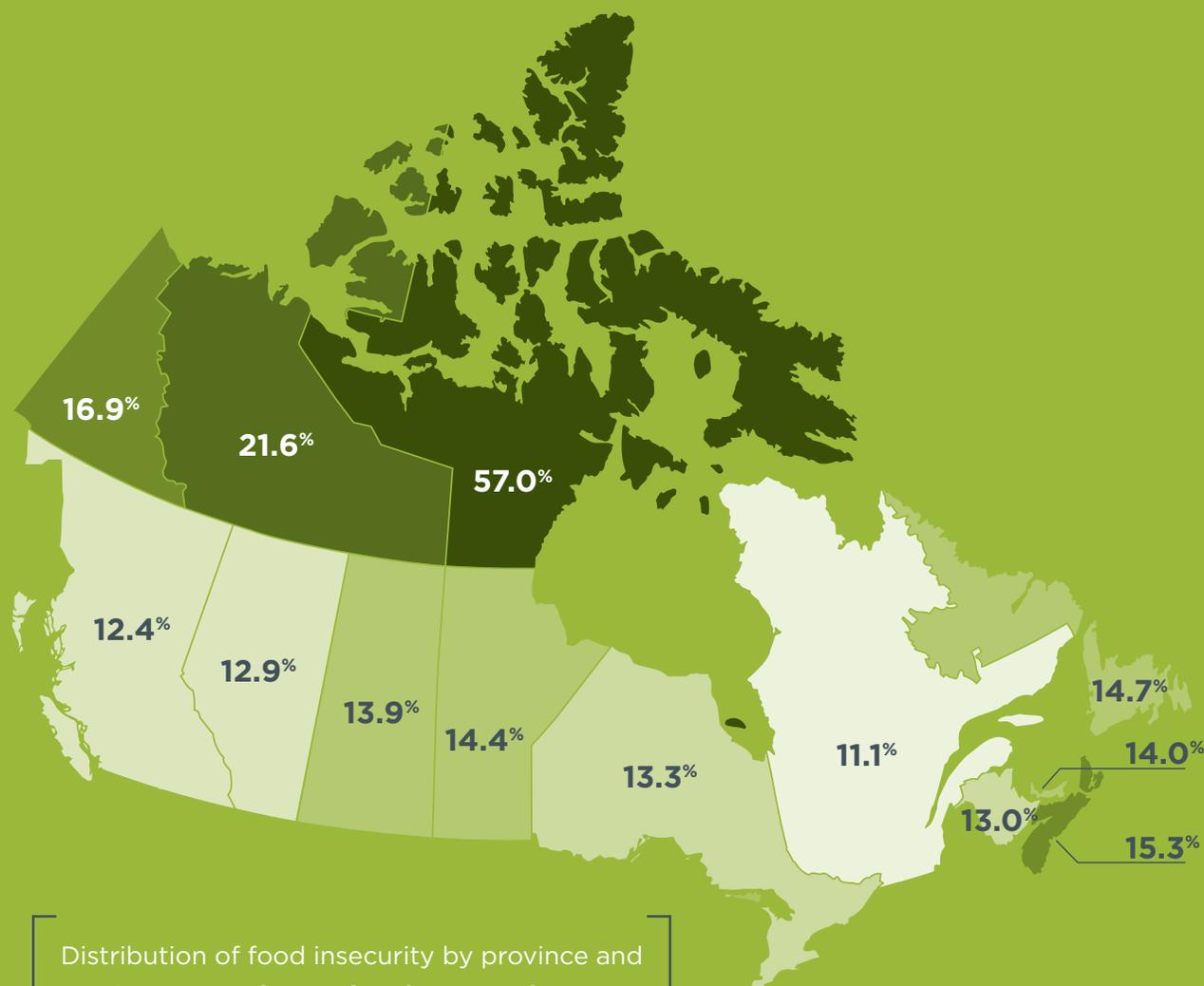
A black and white photograph of a man in profile, pushing a shopping cart through a grocery store aisle. The shelves are mostly empty, with only a few items visible on the left side. The man is wearing a dark t-shirt and pants. The overall mood is somber and highlights the issue of food insecurity.

2

**FOOD
INSECURITY IN
CANADA**

2.1 A PICTURE OF FOOD INSECURITY IN CANADA

“Food insecurity” is not a term that is universally understood. Indeed, many people would describe a lack of adequate food due to financial constraints as “hunger.” But *hunger* is a word and an idea that fails to capture the reality of many low-income Canadians who must worry about not being able to afford food; skip meals so their children can eat; buy the cheapest, most unhealthy food just to fill themselves; or even go days without eating in order to cover other bills.



THERE ARE THREE LEVELS OF FOOD INSECURITY:

MARGINAL food insecurity

consists of worrying about running out of food and/or limiting food selection.

MODERATE food insecurity

consists of compromising the quality or quantity of food for fear of running out.

SEVERE food insecurity

consists of skipping meals, reducing food intake or going entire days without eating.



Even before COVID-19, nearly 4.5 million Canadians experienced food insecurity every day,¹ many of them among the most vulnerable people in our society. In the first two months of the pandemic, that number increased by 39%, affecting 1 in 7 people.² While 12.7% of the general population experiences food insecurity,* it affects some far more than others. Systemic racism has led to unacceptably high rates in racialized communities: 17.1% of newcomers, 28.2% of Indigenous people, 28.9% of Black Canadians³ and up to 70% of Inuit adults are food insecure.⁴ Food insecurity also affects 17.3% of children and 33.1% of single mothers.⁵ Rates in Northern communities outstrip those anywhere else in the country, nearing 60% in Nunavut.⁶

Food insecurity is embedded in a web of issues associated with poverty. Food, however, is the first basic expense people cut when they are stretched⁷ and is therefore one of the best indicators of deprivation. Of the people we surveyed, 36% said they will cut food before other expenses like transportation (28%), medicine (15%), utilities (14%) or housing (7%). This

is likely because food is a more flexible expense. If rent, for example, is unpaid, it can lead to eviction.

IMPACT ON PHYSICAL HEALTH

Not surprisingly, food insecurity has negative impacts on people's physical health and leaves them more vulnerable to chronic conditions, such as heart disease, hypertension and diabetes.⁸ People who are food insecure have more difficulty accessing nutritious food and, as a result, eat fewer fruits and vegetables and have lower vitamin intakes.⁹

The health impact of food insecurity puts significant strain on our healthcare system. In Ontario, annual healthcare costs are 49% higher for adults living in moderately food insecure households and 121% higher for adults living in severely food insecure households.¹⁰ The problem is so dire that food-insecure adults are more likely to die prematurely, and severely food-insecure Canadians die a full 9 years earlier than those who are food secure.¹¹

* Note that this is a pre-COVID statistic.

IMPACT ON MENTAL HEALTH

Food insecurity also has a negative impact on mental health, leading to increased instances of depression, anxiety, mood disorders and suicidal ideation. Children who experience food insecurity are at risk of hyperactivity and inattention, and are more likely to experience mental-health challenges as adults. The mental-health impact of food insecurity also weighs heavily on our healthcare system: food-insecure Ontarians account for one-third of mental-health-related hospitalizations.¹²

Food insecurity can also cause social isolation,¹³ which, in turn, makes finding support more difficult. Research shows that low-income Canadians feel a lower sense of community belonging. People who live above the poverty line are more than twice as likely to feel included in their neighbourhood.¹⁴ Social isolation has deleterious health effects as well, leading to a number of chronic diseases and mental-health problems.¹⁵

Food insecurity is embedded in a web of issues associated with poverty.

36% of survey respondents said they will cut food before other expenses.

28% said they will cut transportation before other expenses.

14% said they will cut utilities before other expenses.

15% said they will cut medicine before other expenses.

7% said they will cut housing before other expenses.

FOOD IS NOT THE SOLUTION TO FOOD INSECURITY

Most people assume that the answer to food insecurity is to provide food to those who don't have it. But over the last 40 years, it has become clear that this complex problem cannot be solved by giving people food alone.

Food banks, which emerged in Canada as a stopgap measure during the recession of the 1980s, have proliferated but have failed to put a dent in the number of people who are food insecure. While they can provide a few days' worth of food to people in dire circumstances, they do little to address the reason people are in that situation in the first place. Research also shows that only 1 in 5 food-insecure Canadians uses food banks¹⁶ for a variety of reasons, including stigma, unhealthy food choices or inconvenient hours of operation. For those who do use food banks, food banks do little to meaningfully impact their level of food insecurity.¹⁷

Indeed, Canadians struggling to put food on their tables try a myriad of different

strategies before they turn to charity. People are more likely to seek financial assistance from loved ones (a strategy employed by 59.1% of food-insecure people); skip bill payments (47.7%); request assistance from welfare or community agencies (29.5%); and fail to pay their rent or mortgage (28%).¹⁸ Perhaps unsurprisingly, people are more likely to pursue more private forms of assistance, though these options tend to involve going into debt.

During COVID, food charity has received a huge infusion of funds to support the provision of emergency food aid for people living in poverty and those who lost their incomes overnight. While this has been a necessary response to an emergency situation, there are concerns that this could further entrench a system that will never sufficiently compensate for a lack of adequate incomes and social programs.

The idea of diverting food waste through charity and into low-income households is gaining ground as a "win-win" solution. It has, for example, received significant government support before and during

COVID, through tax benefits for corporations and farmers who donate excess food, and through a new program to support farmers and the food industry by funding charities to buy food they cannot sell. Because small food charities often have difficulty accommodating this excess food, these programs have led to attempts to increase their capacity, thereby fortifying a flawed response. Beyond this, food-waste diversion to charities creates a two-tiered food system, wherein people who have can choose and those who don't must live off society's waste.

So if giving people food hasn't solved the problem, what will? Substantial evidence gathered over the last 20 years by academics, researchers and people on the front lines shows clearly that increasing income is the solution to food insecurity. In most of Canada, people are not food insecure as a result of a physical lack of food, but an economic one. As the fifth-largest agricultural producer in the world,¹⁹ Canada produces and imports more than enough food to feed its population, yet 1 in 8 Canadians lacks the income to adequately access it.

FOOD INSECURITY

is experienced by 12.7% of
the Canadian population.

It affects...

17% of children

29% of Black Canadians

33% of single mothers

17% of newcomers

28% of Indigenous people

70% of Inuit adults





3

**STORIES &
IMPACTS**

Food insecurity makes people sick, breaks down relationships with family and friends, makes it harder to get a job and leaves a lasting mark on the lives of children.

KEY IMPACTS

The hundreds of people we surveyed across the country each had unique experiences of food insecurity. There were, however, numerous common themes, which are highlighted below.

**Compromised
physical health**

**Mental-health
issues**

**Barriers to
employment**

**Impeded
ability to
advance in life**

**Increased
social
isolation**

**Limited
cultural
participation**

**Family
relationships
and children**

3.1 FOOD INSECURITY COMPROMISES PHYSICAL HEALTH

“ *I have to skip meals. My health is very bad—I’ve had 8 heart attacks. I have to take 30 pills a day, and that’s hard to do without food. ”*

Of the people surveyed, 81% stated that food insecurity compromised their physical health.

Nearly two-thirds of these people explained that this was due to malnutrition—either a lack of food and/or an inability to access food that met their dietary needs. The other third connected their poor health to the stress and anxiety they experienced as a result of being food insecure.

Of those who discussed the specific ways in which their physical health was affected by food insecurity, 25% had trouble managing one or more chronic health conditions, such as diabetes or cardiovascular disease.* In addition to struggling to afford the specific foods that might help their condition, many respondents noted that they also couldn’t

take their prescription medication when they were out of food.

Another survey participant noted that because their medicine isn’t covered, “I have to take money out of my food budget. I often have to decide to fix my health issues or feed myself.”

These stories are consistent with research that shows that people who are moderately and severely food insecure are, respectively, 3.83 and 5.05 times more likely not to take the medications they are prescribed.²⁰

Many respondents noted a correlation between their food insecurity and a variety of health challenges, such as insomnia, headaches, eczema, hair loss and digestive

issues. Of those who elaborated on how their food insecurity had impacted their physical health, 8% expressed that it had led to the development of one or more illnesses, such as anemia.

“I have coronary artery disease and had bypass surgery. I’m supposed to eat specific foods, but that is not always possible due to money.”

Another common theme was feelings of fatigue and exhaustion due to lack of food.

“I don’t have any energy anymore. You don’t notice the slide until you’re down. And when you’re down, you try to get out, but you don’t have the energy. I used to eat when I wanted, but now I eat when I can.”

* As explained in the methods section (p. 56), this is likely an underrepresentation.



CAMERON BROWN

NELSON COMMUNITY FOOD CENTRE

There have been some low points for 57-year-old army veteran Cameron Brown over the last couple of decades. But a few years ago, when he had only one tooth left in his upper jaw and he was wasting away because he was unable to eat solid foods, and his body was covered in psoriasis, he went through an especially rough time.

“I couldn’t afford to eat well. I could barely pay the bills, keep a roof over my head,” he explains. “I couldn’t buy food that had any vitamins. It was all filler. Canned foods. My teeth just fell out.”

After struggling with addiction when he left the army, Cameron had pulled together a life in Nelson, B.C. After the lumber mill closed and jobs became scarce, he was priced out of the rental market and forced to live in a tent on the beach for a year. Eventually, he pieced together seasonal work, got

on disability supports and found an affordable apartment, but accessing healthy food remained a challenge.

“Everything starts with food,” he says. “Without it, your mental health, your physical health, it all goes. You give up.”

Things started looking up for Cameron when he got his psoriasis under control and was fitted with a set of upper dentures last year. These days, he’s the first person many people meet at the Nelson Community Food Centre, where he volunteers as a receptionist, and accesses community dining and food programs. He’s still dealing with a myriad of health issues, including arthritis and thyroid problems, but he’s eating well for the first time in a long time, and he feels it.

“My brain is working again,” he says. “I feel good. It makes me happy that I can make others happy.”

3.2

FOOD INSECURITY AFFECTS MENTAL HEALTH

“ *I feel undeserving. I feel secondary. [Not having access to food] lowers my self-esteem.*”

Seventy-nine percent of the people we surveyed told us that food insecurity had negatively affected their mental health.

They said it made them stressed, anxious and worried.* This stress was often the result of needing to ration food, fear of running out and/or not knowing if or how they would make it through the month. According to recent research, 40% of people who are food insecure struggle with anxiety and other mood disorders.²¹

Food insecurity can make people feel frustrated, aggressive, desperate or pessimistic. Survey participants often explained that this was the result of feeling overwhelmed because of their lack of access to good food. Many respondents said they had become depressed and felt hopeless. Finding themselves unable to provide for

themselves or their loved ones in the way they wanted, as well as an acute awareness of what they lacked, exacerbated these feelings. Some explained that they didn't think they could easily change their situation, and it made them feel hopeless.

“We're trying to not get depressed, but we're running low. My wife and I argue, and we only have one room to live in. [She] gets inconsolable when she doesn't eat.”

Survey participants who described themselves as depressed explained that this often led to feelings of worthlessness and inadequacy. Many noted the stigma associated with food insecurity and appeared to have internalized the notion that their food situation made them inferior or “less than” those who had access to food.

Some survey participants reported that not having access to food decreased their motivation and ability to concentrate. Several respondents added that thinking about a lack of food all the time made it difficult to focus their energy elsewhere. For others, food insecurity made it hard to sleep.

“[I] can't focus. I get kind of lethargic and don't think clearly. [I] can't concentrate because I'm worried and hungry and don't know where my next meal is going to come from.”

A few participants said the situation was so dire that they had contemplated suicide. This is also borne out in research that suggests suicidal ideation is significantly associated with moderate and severe food insecurity.²²

* As explained in the methods section (p. 56), this is likely an underrepresentation.



NICOLA MOORE

HAMILTON COMMUNITY FOOD CENTRE

Nicola Moore is the kind of person you want on your team. She's capable and motivated, fun and well organized. Not only that, she's mom to three kids under nine, a dynamo neo-soul singer/songwriter and hosts her own podcast about being a single parent. She is also, like 4.4 million other Canadians, food insecure.

"It's a huge stressor. I am constantly thinking about how I'm going to feed my children. It takes up so much headspace. It affects my sleep, my mood and my health. And I know that this can cause depression."

"Food is connected so much to health and well-being," she adds. "So when I can't afford my own well-being, when I suffer as a mom, guess who else is suffering?"

Nicola has found a renewed sense of purpose in her work as a peer advocate at the Hamilton Community Food Centre, helping others access the resources—maybe housing or mental-health programs—they need. She sees herself as a bridge between struggling people and the supports available to them. But when income from this part-time work ends up clawing back on Ontario Works payments, and the Canada Child Benefit doesn't get her family to the end of the month, it's hard to see her own way forward.

"I'm meal planning, watching sales and using free programs to assist with my food budget. I just think of the activities I could be doing with my family if I didn't have to spend all my time thinking about food."

3.3

FOOD INSECURITY CREATES BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT

“*When you haven’t eaten for days, you don’t feel motivated to get up and look for work. You’re just thinking about food.*”

Finding and maintaining paid work was made more difficult because of food insecurity for 57% of our survey respondents.

When asked to elaborate, half of these people noted that this was because of physical- and mental-health impacts they had experienced.* Some just didn’t have the energy to look for work, either because they hadn’t eaten or were preoccupied with where their next meal would come from. Other respondents explained that food insecurity had affected their motivation, self-esteem or confidence, making it difficult to find and secure a job.

“[Food insecurity] creates anxiety, and it erodes motivation to contribute.”

Nearly one-third of respondents explained that the time it took to meet their food needs and/or the general instability that comes with being food insecure interfered with their ability to find and keep work. For some, this meant countless hours searching and waiting for emergency food. For others, it meant trying to deal with episodes of hunger caused by unpredictable access to food.

“Without food, I don’t have the mental or physical energy to go out to find a job or maintain a job. It’s hard to do a good job when you’re hungry.”

Several respondents noted that they could not afford the costs associated with employment, such as transportation, child care and suitable clothing needed to meet dress codes. Accessing the training required to increase their employability was also out of reach for some. Paying for these expenses, they explained, would cut into their food budget, and eating had to come first.

“Going to work—how do you get there? Is there a dress code? Can you afford to buy what you need? Or do you buy food?”

* As explained in the methods section (p. 56), this is likely an underrepresentation.

3.4

FOOD INSECURITY IMPEDES PEOPLE'S ABILITY TO ADVANCE IN LIFE

“*Constantly worrying about food becomes your only worry, and you can't think about advancing in life. Hunger is all-consuming.*”

Food insecurity was also highlighted by 53% of our survey respondents as a barrier to finding meaning and purpose in their lives. The daily grind of not knowing how they would feed themselves or their families made it difficult to imagine or start to build another kind of life. Mental-health issues associated with lack of food access led to low self-esteem, questioning their self-worth and feeling negatively about their intelligence and prospects.

“I thought I was a smart person, but this is where I am.”

“One reason I couldn't finish school was because I was so sick, and I was so sick because of lack of food.”

“Consistently worrying about food puts a ceiling on what I can achieve. I spend so much time stressing that I don't have time for new things.”

Food insecurity also made some of our respondents feel that the choices available to them were limited. Nearly one-third explained that their food situation trapped them in survival mode.* They were so preoccupied with meeting their basic needs, they felt unable to aim higher.

“If you don't have enough to feed yourself, then there is no ladder to climb.”

* As explained in the methods section (p. 56), this is likely an underrepresentation.

3.5

FOOD INSECURITY INCREASES SOCIAL ISOLATION

“*How can one participate? Most activities cost money. If money is tight, food is first.*”

Engaging in social activities and community events is something many Canadians take for granted. But 58% of our survey respondents told us that food insecurity limited their ability to participate in such occasions. With no money for food, they explained, there certainly wasn't money for fun. Indeed, people living on low incomes are six times more likely to be socially isolated.²³

Some respondents explained that poor health related to food insecurity further compromised their ability and/or desire to interact with others. Most commonly, these were mental health issues, such as

depression, stress and anxiety, but for others, poor physical health prevented them from participating in social activities.

There were also survey participants who told us they were so preoccupied with trying to meet their basic food needs that they didn't have the time or energy to get involved in their community or connect with friends and neighbours.

“I don't have the energy to participate. I give all my food to my child. We don't have money to buy food while out, or even snacks, and that gives me social anxiety. I certainly can't host people for dinner.”

Survey participants also highlighted embarrassment or shame about their food situation as another reason for not participating.

For some, this lack of social engagement had a severe impact on their mental health.

“Someone will invite me somewhere, but I can't keep asking them for money. [Being alone] makes me really bored—and, at times, that makes me feel like ending everything.”

Some respondents told us they intentionally isolated themselves because they were ashamed of their food insecurity.

JOYCE BUDD

THE ALEX COMMUNITY FOOD CENTRE

When 69-year-old Joyce Budd moved back to Calgary 4 years ago, she had a good job and an affordable place to live. But when she was fired as a result of health problems, including diabetes and arthritis, she had to cash in her pension early and owed the government lots of money.

“It was really hard to afford healthy food,” she says. “I ate a lot of junk—which was bad for my diabetes and didn’t help my mood. I got very depressed and didn’t know what to do with myself. I didn’t reach out to the world. I just stayed on my couch and watched TV.”

Newly divorced, with few friends in Calgary and her children and grandchildren busy with their own lives, Joyce became isolated. She was so low, she couldn’t even cry. “Smiling was difficult, too,” she recalls. “I’m a fun-loving person. I like to laugh, but I’ve

seen pictures of myself from that time and I had to force a smile—it shows.”

When she had suicidal thoughts, Joyce knew she needed more help. A social worker set her up with programs and mental-health supports, and she discovered The Alex Community Food Centre. Her training working in hospital kitchens made it a perfect fit.

Since then, Joyce has participated in cooking programs and works as a peer advocate, supporting others to access some of the resources that helped her. Her latest contribution is the introduction of a monthly celebration with cake and a card for community members whose birthday falls in that month.

“I’m surprised by how many people come in and ask about it,” she laughs. “But it’s a chance to get to know one another. Lots of people haven’t celebrated in a long time.”



3.6

FOOD INSECURITY LIMITS CULTURAL PARTICIPATION

“Celebrating doesn’t exist anymore. I don’t remember the last time I celebrated a holiday. I have to make compromises.”

Many survey respondents spoke about the ways food insecurity created a barrier to participating in cultural events and holidays. Without money to contribute to meals and gift exchanges, 46% said they felt excluded from expressing, sharing or celebrating their culture.

“I can’t buy Christmas or birthday gifts for my grandkids, which hurts me. I don’t go to their celebrations because I feel bad.”

“My daughter’s birthday was hard. I had to borrow money just so she could see other kids and eat pasta.”

“It’s really unfair that I can’t afford to express my Indigenous culture.”

Many respondents explained that they cannot afford the specific foods and ingredients that are associated with their culture, home country or religious background.

“I want to make tamales and croquetas. I can’t afford to get to places that sell them or to make my [traditional] food. Today is All Saints’ Day and Día de los Muertos. I would like to make tamales to offer to the dead, but I can’t.”

“I don’t have access to the right ingredients. This makes me feel not proud about my culture.”

3.7

FOOD INSECURITY STRAINS FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS AND HURTS CHILDREN

“*I feel ashamed that I don't have food. I don't know how to tell family members that I don't have food or am experiencing depression as a result.*”

Another strong theme expressed by respondents was the powerful impact food insecurity had on relationships with family and friends. Sixty-four percent of people we surveyed told us their connection with loved ones had been affected by their lack of access to food.

Of those who elaborated, 60% explained that they would skip gatherings if they didn't have food to contribute or the financial means to participate.*

“A lot of our society is centred around food. ‘Let's go for lunch,’ ‘Let's grab

a coffee,’ ‘Let's have dinner.’ I have to explain that I don't have enough food or money to do that. Then they don't invite me over because I can't have them over.”

Survey participants noted that they didn't want to talk about their food insecurity with friends or family and, as a result, isolated themselves to avoid having to explain. Our respondents spoke often of the shame, embarrassment, anxiety or negative moods they experienced due to poor food access. People who did bring up food insecurity with their loved ones noted that it often

put a strain on the relationship. Asking for financial assistance from family, for example, would sometimes create tension. Additionally, judgement from family members could lead to arguments. In some cases, participants explained that just figuring out how to get everyone fed caused stress and strained relationships.

“It gets tense between my husband and me. I have to figure out how to feed even more mouths with a really limited budget, and it's hard.”

* As explained in the methods section (p. 56), this is likely an underrepresentation.

3.7

FOOD INSECURITY STRAINS FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS AND HURTS CHILDREN (continued)

Despite parents' efforts to protect them, children are also deeply affected by food insecurity. Of our respondents with children, 59% felt it had negatively affected their kids. The figures would likely be higher, but research shows that food-insecure parents, particularly mothers, will often skip meals or eat less so that their children can eat more.²⁴

Parents noted that their family's food insecurity affected both the quantity and quality of their children's diet. Often they had no food available to pack lunches for school, or the whole family had to skip dinner. Parents also spoke of a lack of variety, limited fresh foods and an over-reliance on processed and pre-packaged foods.

Our respondents reported stress, guilt, shame and anxiety over their inability to provide for their children in the way they wanted.

They said this had an emotional impact that reverberated through the entire family.

In other cases, parents said their children's health had been negatively affected. For example, they mentioned diabetes and anxiety, as well as behavioural issues, such as crankiness and difficulty concentrating, which impacted their child's education.

“My younger daughter, who was in pre-professional dance, used to eat as much as a large adult male. Now, without access to enough food and only unhealthy food, she does not have the stamina to continue dance.”

Many parents also noted that their children recognized their situation was different from those of their peers and felt feelings of shame, embarrassment or worry.

“If we go somewhere that serves food, my son will want a snack. I make sure he's fed

before, but he'll keep saying, 'I'm hungry, I'm hungry.' I get so embarrassed because I think people assume I'm not feeding him. We can't afford that food out though.”

While we did not interview children, research suggests they experience food insecurity differently from their parents.²⁵ Adults, for instance, often think they are doing a better job of concealing their lack of food from their children than they really are. Indeed, children report seeing their parents bargain hunting and looking to buy the cheapest food. Kids also employ their own strategies, such as eating less at meal time or asking their siblings not to snack.

Children have strong emotional reactions to food insecurity, which include anxiety, sadness and anger. This can be exacerbated in situations in which their parents are suffering from physical- or mental-health issues.



JUNIE OMAND-PENNER AND BRAD PENNER

NORWEST CO-OP COMMUNITY FOOD CENTRE

Packing lunch for picky kids is nobody's favourite morning activity. But for Junie Omand-Penner and Brad Penner, Winnipeg parents to two teenage girls, it's especially challenging. "The girls say so-and-so is having this special thing for lunch—like Japanese noodles or something—can we get it, too?" Brad explains. "We have to tell them, no, we can't afford it."

Living on disability and social assistance with Brad back at school working on his mature Grade 12 and Junie at Red River College studying community development, there's nothing in the family budget for extras. They watch for sales, use emergency food programs and frequent the NorWest Co-op Community Food Centre's fruit and veggie market, but it's stressful to juggle everyone's different needs.

"The girls have been bullied and have a lot of anxiety around food issues," Junie says. "Not having food causes stress in our relationship, too. Arguments. Should we borrow money? Where will we get food? There's a lot of negotiation."

It can be isolating, as well. Brad can't remember the last time they went to someone else's place for dinner or invited friends over to share a meal. Even sleepovers can be tricky, he says: "You worry that you can't provide what other kids' families might—like pizza or ingredients for making muffins."

Both Brad and Junie work hard to shield the girls from their worries. "They don't often show the burden they feel," Brad explains. "But I feel bad saying no. I try to teach them we have a small budget and we have to make sacrifices."

“[I] mostly just lack energy. It spirals into, ‘I can’t do anything’ and then, ‘I’m useless.’”

“I had to go to food banks, and that was so tough. It wrecked the quality of my children’s lives. It was awful. I was trying so hard after coming out of a difficult marriage. My daughter once said, ‘We’re just white trash, Mom. We’re eating from food banks.’”

“I sometimes have to miss shifts at work to access food. The food I access is worth more than the 1 to 2 hours of work.”

“I feel a lot of guilt and sadness to see my two teens who love to eat healthily now eating unhealthy foods.”

“I skip meals to stretch how long food lasts in my home. When food is stretched to its limit, so am I. I get tired, cranky and sore, and then I don’t sleep well. It starts to affect everything.”

“My sugars go up when I can’t eat, and then I worry because [when] I can’t eat, I have to skip my medications. It drives you to desperation. People don’t believe you when you say you haven’t eaten in 4 days, but I know it’s true.”

“I would sometime have \$3 when my kids would visit. We’d have to figure out how to get to the store and buy food on that money.”

“You downsize. You don’t set your sights too high. You don’t set too many goals because of disappointments.”

“[Food insecurity] wreaks havoc on your psyche. You can’t live how you want and can’t do what you want. It’s upsetting to not be able to care for yourself.”

“I can’t have the food that I want. It’s hard because I have to take what they give me [at food banks], but it’s often not healthy or enough.”

“Food is central to all our events, so if I don’t have food, we suffer. People won’t come over and kids don’t have a good time.”

“I’m not looking forward to Thanksgiving—you don’t want to be around people because they’ll ask how you’re doing, but I don’t want the pity look.”

“I didn’t feel a part of society. I felt very limited.”



4

**WHY IS THIS
HAPPENING?**

In a country as prosperous as Canada, the stories, quotes and data that emerged from this survey will likely seem shocking. So why is this happening? The answer, of course, is multifaceted but points to an economy and a social-safety net that must—and can—do more to help Canadians.

CRITICAL FACTORS

People experience food insecurity due to a confluence of factors that leave too many living on unacceptably low incomes, paying too much for basic needs and confronting structural inequality.

**Low wages
and precarious
work**

**Social-
assistance
rates are
too low**

**Rising cost
of living**

**Increase
in people
living alone**

**Systemic
racism and
colonialism**

**The cost
of food in
Northern
Canada**

4.1 LOW WAGES AND PRECARIOUS WORK

The labour market is changing, and low-wage and precarious work are becoming realities for more and more people in this country. While nearly two-thirds of food-insecure households earn most of their income through salaries or wages,²⁶ the kind of jobs that are available simply don't pay enough.

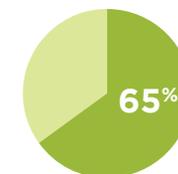
Full-time work is on the decline, and part-time and temporary work are replacing it. Part-time employees increased from 12.5% of the workforce in 1976 to 19.6% in 2016, and temporary employees increased from 8.6% in 1997 to 13.5% in 2016—a figure that puts Canada above the OECD average.²⁷ This is not a trend that is likely to be reversed any time soon: technology is rapidly changing the labour market, with the platform and gig economy* projected to grow globally by 33% a year.²⁸

Indeed, many of the sectors that have exhibited the most growth over the last decade—including retail, accommodation and food services—also provide the lowest-quality jobs in terms of wages, benefits, work environment and potential for career advancement.²⁹ Low-wage workers tend to have fewer benefits, such as pensions, health and dental coverage, as well as paid sick leave.³⁰ The most vulnerable sectors of our society, including women, youth, seniors, people without post-secondary education, newcomers and racialized people, are all more likely to be precariously employed.^{31, 32}

With a rapidly changing and increasingly precarious labour market, a strong social-safety net is essential. Unfortunately, many protections for workers, such as Employment Insurance, were designed with traditional, permanent, full-time jobs in mind and therefore leave people in less traditional

employment falling through the cracks.³³ Other countries with high living standards, such as Sweden and the Netherlands, offset high rates of temporary employment with strong social-safety nets,³⁴ which provide a buffer against precarious work.

65% of food-insecure people earn most of their income from wages or salaries.



Part-time employees in the workforce



Temporary employees in the workforce



* These terms refer to temporary or freelance work in which the worker is generally not considered an employee and in which workers and customers are usually connected through an online platform.

4.2

SOCIAL-ASSISTANCE RATES ARE TOO LOW

While most food-insecure Canadians are attached to the workforce, there is no group of people more likely to be food insecure than social-assistance recipients. Households depending on social assistance, in fact, are two to four times more likely to be food insecure than those relying on employment income.³⁵

According to the 2016 census, more than 1.3 million Canadians, or 4.6% of the population, are on social assistance, either welfare or disability support.³⁶ But there is no province or territory where these benefits come close to covering basic needs. As of the publishing of this report, a single person in Ontario receives \$733 per month on social assistance,³⁷ while the average rent and utilities for a one-bedroom apartment total \$943.³⁸ Taking into account social-assistance

rates and other government transfers (such as child benefits), welfare incomes for single adults in Canada fail to bring people above the government's own low-income measure. In New Brunswick, where the gap is widest, welfare recipients are short of the cutoff by \$16,928 a year. To make matters worse, in most provinces, social-assistance rates have not kept up with the cost of living,³⁹ effectively decreasing recipients' purchasing power year after year.

While this paper focuses on actions that can be taken by the federal government (social assistance is in the jurisdiction of provinces and territories), it would be remiss not to point out the obvious role low social-assistance rates play in trapping people in poverty.

Social assistance in Ontario/month

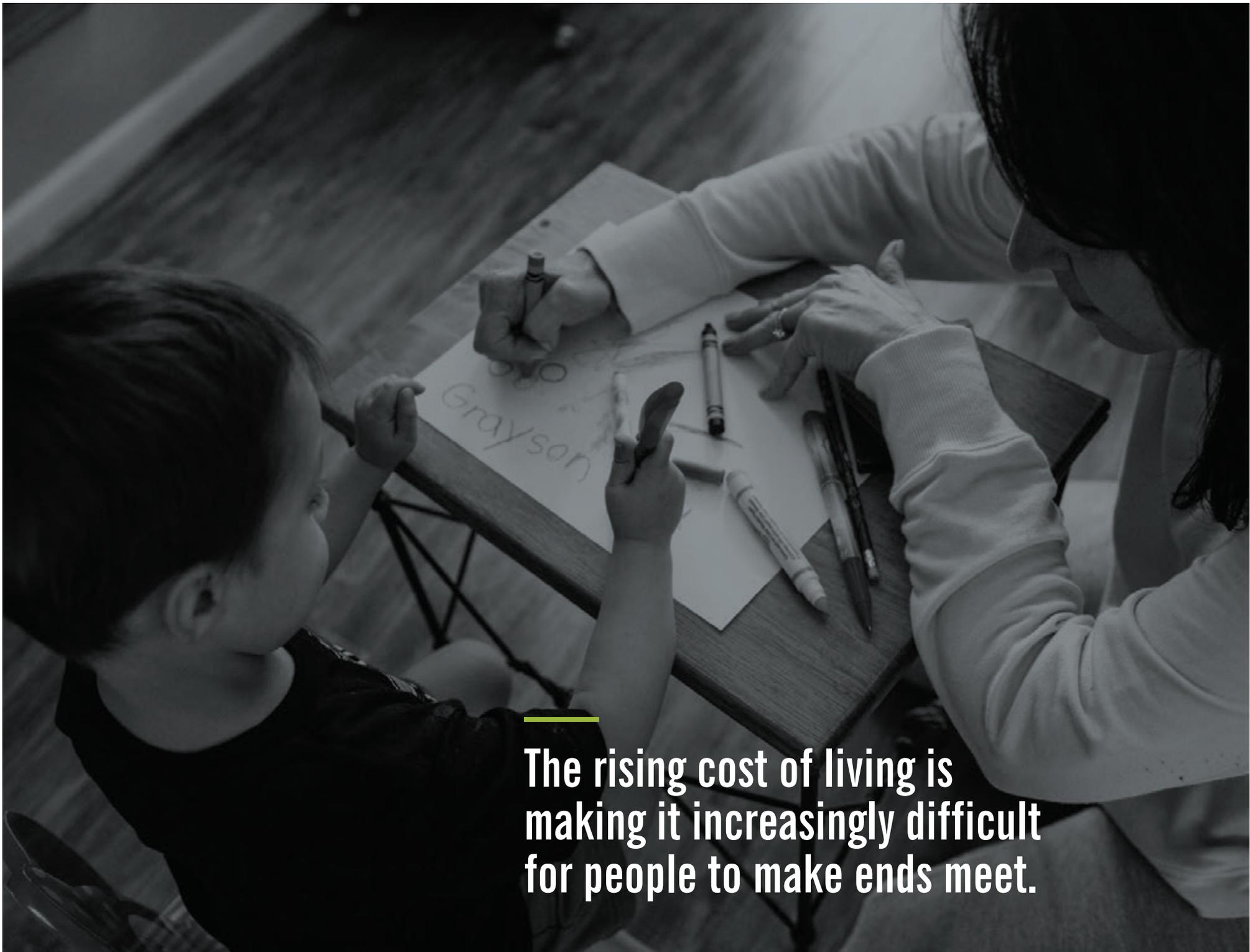
\$733

Average rent and utilities for a one-bedroom apartment in Ontario/month

\$943

Low-income threshold (after tax) for a single adult in Ontario/month

\$2,015



The rising cost of living is making it increasingly difficult for people to make ends meet.

4.3 RISING COST OF LIVING

While food insecurity is strongly correlated with low income, 30.3% of food-insecure Canadians actually have incomes over the low-income measure.⁴⁰ Though many people's incomes are considered adequate, the cost of housing, child care, prescription medication and other basic needs leaves them with too little money left for food.

Housing costs in Canada are increasingly unaffordable, especially in larger cities. In 2016, 1.6 million urban households, or 13.6%, were in core housing need.⁴¹ A household is considered in core housing need if it spends 30% or more of its gross income on housing. The problem is most dire for the lowest-income quintile, most of whom are paying well over 50% of their income on rent and utilities.⁴²

Child care is also a huge source of financial strain for many Canadian families. In

provinces without substantial child-care programs, the costs are astronomical—up to nearly \$22,000 per child per year in Toronto. To make matters worse, costs continue to rise as high as six times the rate of inflation.⁴³

The cost of prescription medications is also a financial strain, particularly for those who lack public or private coverage. One in five Canadians has trouble affording their prescriptions, and 3 million people simply do not take their prescribed medication because they can't afford it. Of those who do take medication, 1 million cut down on food and heat in order to pay the cost.⁴⁴

Food prices are also on the rise and are projected to increase by 2 to 4% in 2020, a \$487 annual increase for the average Canadian family. This will bring a household's food spending up to \$12,667 per year.⁴⁵



In 2016, 13.6% of urban households spent 30% or more of their gross income on housing.



Child care costs as much as \$22,000 per child per year in Toronto.



1 in 5 Canadians has trouble affording their prescriptions.



Food prices are projected to increase by 2 to 4% in 2020.

4.4 INCREASE IN PEOPLE LIVING ALONE

People living alone are now the most common household type in Canada, having overtaken couples with children. The number of people living alone has increased from 1.7 million people in 1981 to 4 million in 2016—from 9% to 14% of the population.^{46*} And poverty rates among this group have also risen. While poverty has decreased for all other household types, it has increased slightly for single adults.⁴⁷

As the cost of living rises, these people must shoulder household expenditures on their own. Not surprisingly, 41% of people living alone live in unaffordable housing, compared

with just 17% of those who live in households of two or more.⁴⁸ In addition, these people are increasingly relying on social assistance: from 2000 to 2011, the number of single adults on welfare in Ontario rose by 65%.⁴⁹

Food banks have also seen an increase in the number of single adults using their services. In fact, they represent nearly half of all food-bank users, despite making up just over one-quarter of the population.⁵⁰ Indeed, 43% of people who are food insecure in Canada are unattached adults, living alone or with others.⁵¹

Canadians living alone



41% of people living alone lived in unaffordable housing, compared with just 17% of those who lived in households of two or more.

* Note that the statistics for people living alone are different than those for single adults, who may live alone or with others.



More and more Canadians are living alone, having to shoulder household costs on their own.



Indigenous communities must be supported in rebuilding their traditional food systems and achieving food sovereignty.

4.5

SYSTEMIC RACISM AND COLONIALISM

As discussed above, many racialized Canadians face much higher food-insecurity rates than non-racialized people.

Food insecurity is highest among Black (28.9%) and Indigenous (28.2% off reserve) people, but is also unacceptably high among Arabs and West Asians (20.4%) and South Asians (15.2%), compared with non-racialized people (11.1%).⁵²

Even when accounting for income, education, household composition and whether a household owns or rents their home, Black Canadians are almost twice as likely to be food insecure as white Canadians.⁵³ For example, while home ownership is protective against food insecurity, Black homeowners have the same rate of food insecurity as white renters. This points to systemic racism as the determining factor.

There are also significant disparities between the income and wealth of non-racialized people and racialized and Indigenous people in Canada.* In 2015, racialized men earned 78 cents and racialized women earned 59 cents per dollar earned by non-racialized men (non-racialized women earned 67 cents).⁵⁴ Indigenous people made 75 cents for every dollar made by non-Indigenous people, and that number drops to 55 cents for Indigenous women.⁵⁵

Racialized Canadians are also less likely to have capital gains and investment income than non-racialized people, with the average amount of capital gains being 29% higher and of investment income being 47% higher for non-racialized people.⁵⁶

Again, this points to systemic racism. For example, non-racialized newcomers are more successful in the labour market than racialized newcomers, and this income inequality persists into second and third generations.⁵⁷

While Indigenous people are also subject to systemic racism, they face the additional challenge that food was used as a tool of colonialism. Indigenous food systems were disrupted by displacement and the decimation of traditional food sources, such as the buffalo in the Prairies.^{58, 59} Residential schools and the Sixties Scoop disrupted intergenerational knowledge transfer of traditional food ways.⁶⁰ In addition to closing the income and wealth gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians, Indigenous communities must be supported in rebuilding their traditional food systems and achieving food sovereignty.

* In this instance, the term “racialized” does not include Indigenous people; rather, it refers to people designated as “visible minorities” in the census.

4.6 THE COST OF FOOD IN NORTHERN CANADA

Food insecurity in Northern Canada is significantly more prevalent than in the rest of the country. In Nunavut, where rates are highest, food insecurity has ballooned from 33.1% of the population in 2010⁶¹ to 57% in 2018.⁶²

The reasons for this are multifaceted, and largely stem from colonialism and the displacement of Indigenous peoples. The astronomical cost of shipping food to Northern and remote communities is one of the central challenges. The cost of a nutritious food basket for a family of four in Toronto in 2015 was \$847; the same basket was \$1,909 in Attawapiskat in Northern Ontario.⁶³

The federal government program Nutrition North Canada is intended to subsidize

the cost of healthy food in the North. But according to the 2014 Auditor General's Report, there is little evidence the subsidy has been passed on from retailers to consumers.⁶⁴ Recent research shows the program has been unsuccessful in reducing food insecurity in Nunavut.⁶⁵

Increased funding to the program (to \$99 million per year),⁶⁶ as well as other improvements—notably the creation of a Harvesters Support Grant to decrease the costs associated with hunting and procurement of country foods⁶⁷—are positive, but much more action will be required to curb the growth of food insecurity in the North and support the redevelopment of local food systems.

Food insecurity in Nunavut



The cost of a nutritious food basket for a family of four in Toronto in 2015 was \$847; the same basket was \$1,909 in Attawapiskat in Northern Ontario.





NAPA CABBAGE

Packed On	Sell By	
MA 25, 18	MA 25, 18	
Net Wt/Ct	Unit Price	Total Price
2.318 kg	\$9.25/kg	\$21.44



2 0 0 4 5 5 2 1 3 8 9 9
NAPA CABBAGE

Packed On	Sell By	
MA 24, 18	MA 26, 18	
Net Wt/Ct	Unit Price	Total Price
1.502 kg	\$9.25/kg	\$13.89

The astronomical cost of shipping food to Northern and remote communities is one of the central challenges.

5



SOLUTIONS



While Canada is one of the wealthiest countries in the world, gaps in our social-safety net have left millions living with food insecurity.

PRIMARY RECOMMENDATIONS

Government programs and policies can prioritize action on food insecurity and close the gap between incomes and the cost of living.

Set targets and improve reporting

Setting targets to reduce food insecurity will ensure it's a higher priority. Reporting annually on progress and ensuring we have adequate race-based data can keep the government accountable and help them design effective policies.

Invest in income policies

Millions of Canadians are living below the poverty line. The federal government can boost income supports to ensure people can put good food on the table.

Invest in social programs

The cost of living is increasing, and too many Canadians are struggling to cover their basic needs. Social programs, such as child care, affordable housing and pharmacare, can help people make ends meet.

Ensure equitable progress

Racialized and Indigenous Canadians experience food insecurity at a much higher rate. Policies and programs must ensure progress on food insecurity is achieved equitably.

5.1 POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Government policy that increases incomes has been proven to reduce food insecurity. Along with social programs that can make basic necessities more affordable and frameworks to ensure equitable access, the federal government can make huge inroads by introducing progressive income policy.

Recently, the federal government has made some progress on this file. The Canada Child Benefit (CCB), a monthly payment that supports families with children under 18, provided recipients with an average of \$6,800 in the year after its 2016 implementation—around \$2,300 more than its antecedent. The results are impressive: research shows a 30% decrease in severe food insecurity among families with children.⁶⁸ The federal government has announced it will further increase the CCB by 15% for families with children under the age of 1.⁶⁹

We have also seen the positive impact of income from seniors' benefits—like Old Age Security, the Guaranteed Income Supplement and Canadian Pension Plan—on food insecurity. After the age of 65, Canadians' risk of food insecurity decreases by half as many people transition from low-wage, precarious employment to these government supports.⁷⁰

Despite the improvements for Canadian children and seniors, single adults, who comprise 43% of the food-insecure population, have largely been left behind. And Black, Indigenous and other racialized people continue to experience food insecurity at a much higher rate than non-racialized people.

The introduction of the Canada Emergency Response Benefit during COVID-19 has provided an important opportunity to experiment with providing an income floor for all Canadians that is nearly three times welfare rates in many provinces. This has led to a national conversation around the need for adequate supports for people living in poverty or facing unemployment.

The following recommendations are policies and programs the federal government could implement to decrease food insecurity in Canada. We have grouped them under four themes:

- 1) Setting targets and improving measurement of food insecurity;
- 2) Investing in income supports in order to create an adequate income floor;
- 3) Investing in social programs to improve affordability; and
- 4) Ensuring all progress is achieved equitably.

5.2

SET TARGETS AND IMPROVE REPORTING ON FOOD INSECURITY

SET FOOD INSECURITY REDUCTION TARGETS IN LINE WITH SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL 2

Canada has adopted the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a comprehensive plan for international action on some of the world's most intractable problems. United Nations member countries are meant to be working toward resolving these issues by 2030.

SDG 2, Zero Hunger, aims to “End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture.”⁷¹ In order to accomplish this, the federal government should tie this goal to the Poverty Reduction Strategy and set the target to reduce food insecurity* by half—from 12.7% of the population to 6.35%—by 2030. There must also be specific targets set for Indigenous, Black and other racialized populations to ensure equitable progress. The eventual goal must be eliminating food insecurity entirely.

REPORT ANNUALLY ON FOOD-INSECURITY RATES AND COLLECT BETTER RACE-BASED DATA

In order to create policies to reduce food insecurity, we need up-to-date national data on its prevalence and on the people it affects most. While Statistics Canada does publish some information, detailed reporting is left to academics, who must wait months for access to data.

Statistics Canada should release annual, comprehensive and timely reporting on food insecurity in Canada, as is standard in other countries like the United States.** It is vital that disaggregated data be released to ensure that we understand demographic disparities and monitor the equity in effectiveness of all interventions.

Also, while race-based data on food insecurity is collected, sample sizes are so small that it is difficult to get a detailed understanding of all of the factors that lead to the high levels of food insecurity among racialized and Indigenous Canadians.⁷² The federal government should explore oversampling certain groups for which sample sizes are too low in order to obtain sufficient data.

* It should be noted that setting a target to decrease food insecurity was mentioned as a potential responsibility of the Canadian Food Policy Advisory Council that is in the process of being created through *A Food Policy for Canada*.

** See www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/.

5.3

INVEST IN INCOME POLICIES FOR LOW-INCOME CANADIANS

INVEST IN INCOME SOLUTIONS TO FOOD INSECURITY, PARTICULARLY FOR SINGLE ADULTS

Work should be a pathway out of poverty. What we are seeing in Canada, however, is a rise in part-time and precarious employment, with minimum-wage employees making up 10.4% of the workforce in 2018, a steep increase from 5.2% in 1998.⁷³

Governments must help to close the gap between working incomes and the poverty line. While much of this responsibility lies in the jurisdiction of provinces and territories (i.e., minimum wages and social assistance), the federal government has some important levers at its disposal. They must also help those who cannot work due to disability.

REFORM EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE SO IT BETTER MEETS THE NEEDS OF LOW-INCOME CANADIANS

Employment Insurance (EI) is a vital program that provides support for people who are unemployed while they look for work or boost their skills. Unfortunately, low-wage workers do not have as much access to EI as their higher-wage counterparts. In 2017, only 68% of unemployed low-wage workers who had contributed to the program and had left their jobs for permitted reasons accessed benefits,⁷⁴ compared to the Canadian average of 84.3%.⁷⁵

The federal government has instituted temporary changes to EI to provide more assistance to people during the COVID pandemic, but permanent solutions are needed. Everyone who contributes to EI and is in need ought to get this support. The federal government should create an intermediary program that would support eligible people as soon as they lose their jobs or create a new stream specifically designed for low-wage earners and people in precarious employment. This would ensure low-income workers have more equal access to EI.

In addition to increasing access to EI, the federal government must ensure that the income it provides is sufficient to cover basic needs. The current 55% income replacement rate deepens poverty for low-wage workers. In order to ensure Canadians can continue to make ends meet while on EI, the benefit rates should be increased to 75%, and to 85% for low-wage workers.

5.3

INVEST IN INCOME POLICIES (continued)

CONVERT NON-REFUNDABLE TAX CREDITS INTO REFUNDABLE TAX CREDITS, WITH A PRIORITY ON THE DISABILITY TAX CREDIT

Tax credits are one of the most important tools at the federal government's disposal to decrease poverty and food insecurity. Canada has two kinds of tax credits: refundable and non-refundable. Refundable tax credits, like the Canada Child Benefit, can offer tax refunds for people with incomes below a certain threshold. As they put money straight into people's pockets, they are an important lever for decreasing poverty. Non-refundable tax credits, on the other hand, decrease the taxes people owe, which is useless to many low-income people, who pay little to no tax.

Converting certain non-refundable tax credits to refundable ones is a key area in which the federal government can support low-income Canadians. The Disability Tax Credit (DTC), for instance, is currently non-refundable. Around 2.7 million Canadians live with a severe or very severe disability.⁷⁶ People with severe disabilities are more likely to be unemployed,⁷⁷ and 30% live under the low-income measure.⁷⁸ For these people, the DTC is of little use. If it were converted into a refundable tax credit, however, it would provide these individuals with up to \$1,262.40 per year. For a single person on disability support living in Ontario, this would amount to a 9% increase in income.

CREATE A REFUNDABLE TAX CREDIT FOR WORKING-AGE ADULTS

As previously mentioned, the federal government offers supports for parents of children and for seniors that have been proven to lower rates of food insecurity among those groups. Federal supports available to adults aged 18 to 64 who don't have children, such as the GST/HST Credit (which helps people on low and modest incomes offset the sales tax they pay) and the Canada Workers Benefit (which provides support to low-income workers), are much less generous. This leaves many Canadians working in minimum-wage jobs or on social assistance unable to make ends meet.

The federal government should explore the creation of a more substantial refundable tax credit aimed at working-age adults that could decrease the higher levels of poverty and food insecurity for this population and that would set an income floor beneath which no Canadian could fall.

5.3

INVEST IN INCOME POLICIES (continued)

ENSURE LOW-INCOME CANADIANS, PARTICULARLY FIRST NATIONS LIVING ON RESERVE, HAVE BETTER ACCESS TO TAX-FILING SUPPORTS AND BENEFIT SERVICES

Tax credits and other government benefits are effective ways for the federal government to support low-income Canadians, but these benefits depend on people filing their income tax. People don't file their taxes for a variety of reasons, including low financial literacy, fear of making mistakes and mental-health barriers.⁷⁹ This is especially challenging for people with low incomes.⁸⁰

Vulnerable Canadians are not accessing an estimated \$1 billion in tax credits and benefits for which they are eligible.⁸¹ Approximately 5 to 10% of low-income households do not access the tax credits they are due. This is a significant problem, considering they can make up to 50% of a household's income.⁸²

Racialized and Indigenous communities experience significant administrative barriers to tax filing and are therefore more likely to miss out on government benefits. Communication about benefits does not necessarily reach these populations, and benefit applications can be exceedingly complicated. This has huge financial repercussions for these communities. For example, the federal government

estimates that 1 in 5 on-reserve families will miss out on the Canada Child Benefit,⁸³ which can provide up to \$6,639 per child.

The federal government has been working to increase tax-filing rates, but there is more to be done. There are a multitude of solutions to be explored, including simplifying and automating the tax-filing and benefit-application processes and promoting tax credits and benefits. They should also provide more support for the Community Volunteer Income Tax Program (CVITP) that supports community tax clinics and invest in one-on-one benefit navigation assistance to better help people access government benefits.⁸⁴

The government should also continue to reach out to Indigenous communities, begin outreach to racialized communities and work with partners to make sure these populations have access to the tax and benefit services they need. This should include exploring innovative tax-filing models outside of the CVITP, which doesn't work well—not only for many Indigenous communities, but also for other segments of the population like newcomers and the self-employed.⁸⁵

5.4

INVEST IN SOCIAL PROGRAMS TO IMPROVE AFFORDABILITY

ACCELERATE THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CANADA HOUSING BENEFIT AND INCREASE INVESTMENTS OVER TIME

All Canadians should have access to affordable housing. Indeed, the *National Housing Strategy Act*, signed into law in 2019, declares adequate housing a human right.

Announced as part of the National Housing Strategy, the Canada Housing Benefit (CHB) is a portable benefit (meaning it moves with you instead of being tied to a specific housing unit) that provides direct financial support to Canadians in core housing need. The CHB is a \$4-billion program with the eventual goal of supporting 300,000 Canadian households with an average of \$2,500 a year.⁸⁶

This support will be vital to recipient households. However, as the program is expected to roll out between 2020–2021 and 2027–2028, many Canadians will wait far too long for this support. The federal

government should accelerate the implementation of the CHB so that struggling Canadians get the help they need as soon as possible.

The CHB should also focus on people in severe housing need (those who spend 50% of their income or more on housing) and populations who are at highest risk of homelessness, such as Black populations in some urban centres. Once the structure is in place, the federal government should increase investments in order to close the gap between income and rent for as many Canadians as possible.

In addition to speeding up the introduction of the CHB, there must be investments in new affordable housing and retrofitting existing units, which are included in the National Housing Strategy.

5.4 INVEST IN SOCIAL PROGRAMS (continued)

OVER TIME, INCREASE FEDERAL EARLY LEARNING AND CHILD CARE FUNDING UNTIL THE INTERNATIONAL BENCHMARK IS MET

All Canadian families should be able to access quality child care without sacrificing their health and well-being. Currently, child-care costs across much of the country are exorbitant, leading families to make difficult choices and disincentivizing women returning to the workforce.

The international benchmark for child-care spending is 1% of GDP, but Canada only spent half of that in 2018.⁸⁷ The federal government is making some important investments in child care, but these should be expanded over time until the 1% benchmark is met.

Investments in child care pay for themselves. Around 150,000 women in Canada with high levels of education and a partner currently stay home to take care of their children. If these women were employed and paid taxes, the International Monetary Fund estimates GDP would increase by two percentage points, raising tax revenues by \$8 billion.⁸⁸

INSTITUTE A UNIVERSAL PUBLIC PHARMACARE PROGRAM

No Canadian should have to choose between paying for medicine or paying for food, yet around 20% of our fellow citizens lack drug coverage.⁸⁹

Universal pharmacare is a stated priority of the federal government. In his mandate letter, Prime Minister Trudeau instructed the Minister of Health to “continue to implement national universal pharmacare, including the establishment of the Canada Drug Agency, and implementing a national formulary and a rare disease drug strategy to help Canadian families save money on high-cost drugs.”⁹⁰ However, the timeline for implementation is unclear. In order to ensure Canadians can afford the medicine they need, the government should implement a universal pharmacare program as soon as possible.

5.5

ENSURE PROGRESS ON FOOD INSECURITY IS ACHIEVED EQUITABLY

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH NORTHERN LEADERSHIP, CONTINUE TO REFORM NUTRITION NORTH CANADA

Northern Canadians should have access to affordable nutritious food. As explained above, food insecurity in the North is a complex problem that requires a multifaceted approach tied to reconciliation efforts. As part of this, ongoing reforms to Nutrition North Canada (NNC) are necessary to lower the cost of food in Northern communities and strengthen local food systems.

While it is too early to tell how some of the changes made to NNC will affect people in the North, food-insecurity rates remain unacceptably high. The federal government should follow Inuit and Northern leadership, and continue to work with the Inuit-Crown Food Security working group and other Northerners to ensure NNC becomes more effective at providing affordable access to nutritious foods and supports the hunting and harvesting of traditional foods.

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP, CREATE AN INDIGENOUS FOOD SOVEREIGNTY FUND

Considering the unacceptably high rates of food insecurity affecting Indigenous people and the decimation of Indigenous food systems and knowledge, the federal government should create a fund to support Indigenous food sovereignty projects. Such projects could include hunting, fishing and gathering, Indigenous agriculture and intergenerational knowledge transfer of Indigenous food ways.

This fund must be created with and administered by Indigenous leadership.

5.5

ENSURE PROGRESS IS ACHIEVED EQUITABLY (continued)

CREATE A FUND TO DECREASE FOOD INSECURITY FOR BLACK CANADIANS

As previously mentioned, Black people have among the highest rates of food insecurity in Canada—and recent research points to systemic racism as one of the major causes. The federal government should create a fund to support projects and research dedicated to decreasing food insecurity for Black Canadians.

This fund should be run by an arms-length organization administered by community-based Black stakeholder groups.

APPLY A RACE EQUITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT TO ALL POVERTY AND FOOD-SECURITY INTERVENTIONS

Many well-meaning income policies and social programs inadvertently increase disparities. The federal government should apply a Race Equity Impact Assessment (REIA), in addition to Gender-based Analysis, to all poverty and food-security policies and interventions in order to ensure they work equitably and reach populations at highest risk of food insecurity.

REIAs are tools that can prevent institutional racism by systematically exploring the ways in which policies could affect racial groups.⁹¹ They are action-based in that they link analysis with mitigation strategies, implementation and monitoring.

6



CLOSING NOTES

METHODS
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
END NOTES

6.1 METHODS

Community Food Centres Canada conducts an Annual Program Survey at participating Community Food Centres in order to determine the demographics of community members, improve programs, assess our impact and chart our progress. In 2019, we added a section to the survey to better understand the ways in which food insecurity compromises community members' well-being. We also invited and trained partners in our Good Food Organizations to collect the data.

We began this year's survey design process by conducting 10 interviews and 2 focus groups with community members at the NorWest Co-op Community Food Centre in Winnipeg, Manitoba, and the Hamilton Community Food Centre in Hamilton, Ontario. These conversations allowed us to question assumptions that we may have held and go deeper into the common, but often

overlooked, impacts of food insecurity. As a result, we were able to develop a survey framework that addresses the core issues and concerns for the broader survey group. The input of these community members guided our approach and the content of the survey.

THE SURVEY

Drawing on a validated two-item food insecurity screening questionnaire,⁹² respondents were asked whether, in the last year, they had worried about running out of food or had run out of food and didn't have money to buy more. These two questions were asked to quickly determine whether or not the respondent was food insecure. Of the people surveyed, 561 screened positive for food insecurity. These respondents were then asked, through a series of closed-ended questions, whether their food situation had

affected their physical and/or mental health; their relationships with friends and family; their children's lives; and/or their ability to participate in social and/or community activities; find and maintain employment; express, share or celebrate their culture; and/or aim higher in life. Acknowledging that these close-ended questions alone could not adequately capture the distinct ways in which food insecurity affects one's life, respondents were invited—through open-ended questions—to elaborate on how specifically food insecurity was interfering with their well-being. Unless a respondent requested otherwise, the surveys were conducted as verbal interviews by trained staff and community members. Interviewers also identified people whose experiences spoke directly to the issues raised, and we followed up to collect more detailed stories, which are featured here and on our website.

6.1 METHODS (continued)

ANALYZING THE RESULTS

Responses to the closed-ended questions generated the primary percentages reported above (e.g., the percentage of respondents who indicated that food insecurity negatively impacts their physical health), whereas responses to the open-ended questions generated the secondary percentages included in this report (e.g., the percentage of participants who spoke to the correlation between food insecurity and their difficulty managing one or more chronic health conditions).

To generate the secondary percentages, the open-ended responses were analyzed using an inductive coding scheme. Where significant or revealing clustering was evident, percentages were calculated to demonstrate commonality in the shared experiences or explanations brought forward by respondents. Accordingly, these percentages may underreport the percentage of respondents for which each noted experience is true. Further, they should not be interpreted as mutually exclusive (e.g., respondents often mentioned more than one way in which their physical health was affected by food insecurity).

Given that the survey was voluntary, not all respondents answered every question. Percentages presented in this report are based on the number of people who responded to each question rather than the full sample.

6.2 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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6.2

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The Alex Community Food Centre
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NorWest Co-op Community Food Centre
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Regent Park Community Food Centre
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Hamilton Community Food Centre
(Hamilton, Ontario)

The Table Community Food Centre
(Perth, Ontario)

The Local Community Food Centre
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The North Grove Community Food Centre
(Dartmouth, Nova Scotia)

Natoaganeg Community Food Centre
(Eel Ground First Nation, New Brunswick)

Jewish Family Services
(Vancouver, British Columbia)

Family Services of Greater Vancouver
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Society of Saint Vincent de Paul
(Victoria, British Columbia)

Community Connections Society
(Revelstoke, British Columbia)

Interfaith Food Bank Society of Lethbridge
(Lethbridge, Alberta)

Sherbourne Health Centre Corporation
(Toronto, Ontario)

Mission Services Hamilton
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York Region Food Network (Aurora, Ontario)

Food for Life (Burlington, Ontario)

Loving Spoonful (Kingston, Ontario)

Family Ties Carrefour Famille New Carlisle
(New Carlisle, Quebec)

Chebucto Family Centre
(Halifax, Nova Scotia)

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6.3

END NOTES

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