



## FOOD INSECURITY BACKGROUNDER



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Food  
Secure  
Canada  
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pour une alimentation  
durable



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CANADA  
good food is just the beginning



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Maple Leaf Centre for Action on Food Security

# FOOD INSECURITY: KEY FACTS

- According to national data, household food insecurity affected over 4 million Canadians in 2012 (CCHS)
- Data from 2017 shows that it affected 13.8% of Canadians among the provinces, and in the territories, affected up to 52.3% of those living in Nunavut<sup>14</sup>
- Levels of household food insecurity are highest in the North, Ontario, Newfoundland and Labrador, but nowhere in the country do rates fall below 12%<sup>14</sup>
- Food insecure individuals are less healthy than their food secure counterparts, and severe food insecurity is particularly detrimental to health
- Households reliant on social assistance are at high risk of food insecurity, but most (60%) food insecure households in Canada are reliant on incomes from employment
- Food insecurity affects vulnerable populations in Canada: food insecurity is more prevalent in households with more children under 18 and affects single mothers 6x as much as households with two parents<sup>1</sup>
- Food insecurity hits certain demographics especially hard: the rate of food insecurity is 3.7X higher among Inuit, 2.7X higher among First Nations living off-reserve, and 2.2X higher among Métis<sup>2</sup>
- On post-secondary education campuses, food insecurity affects nearly 2 in 5 students (39%)<sup>3</sup>



## FOOD INSECURITY:

According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)<sup>4</sup>:

*Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life." (World Food Summit, 1996)*

While this is an overarching goal, this backgrounder focuses on household food insecurity, which is "the inadequate access to food due to financial constraints" (PROOF, 2016).

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<sup>1</sup> PROOF & FSC. (2015). *National Food Policy Briefing Note*.

<sup>2</sup> Public Health Agency of Canada. (2018). *Inequalities in Food Insecurity in Canada*

<sup>3</sup> Meal Exchange. (n.d.). *Food insecurity amongst post-secondary students in Canada*.

<sup>4</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization. (2006). *Food security policy brief*.

## Who is affected by food insecurity in Canada?

Everyone in Canada should have both physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food. Yet four million Canadians, including 1.15 million children, are food insecure and struggle to put food on the table<sup>5</sup>. That's equal to one in eight households and one in six children living in food insecurity.

Especially troubling is that there are specific groups who experience much higher levels of food insecurity. Among First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples, food insecurity is much higher than the average population, resulting from colonial policies and practices and leading to ongoing challenges faced by many Indigenous peoples<sup>6</sup>. In addition to this, lack of control over traditional lands and waters, as well as climate change threaten the traditional and country foods that are integral to many Indigenous people's diets. Canadians who identify as black also experience similar levels of food insecurity as Indigenous peoples<sup>7</sup>. Overall, many of Canada's demographics who are already facing significant sometimes systematic disadvantages, are more likely to have difficulty having enough to eat.



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<sup>5</sup> Tarasuk, V, Mitchell, A, Dachner, N. (2014). Household food insecurity in Canada.

<sup>6</sup> Public Health Agency of Canada. (2018). Inequalities in Food Insecurity in Canada.

<sup>7</sup> Tarasuk, V, Mitchell, A, Dachner, N. (2016) Household food insecurity in Canada, 2014.

## The health impacts of food security

Food insecurity takes a substantial toll on physical and mental health, engendering significant costs to the health care system. People who are food insecure are more likely to have poor health: they are more vulnerable to chronic conditions<sup>8</sup> and struggle with mental health issues<sup>9</sup>. Children affected by food insecurity are affected for the rest of their lives, leaving them at greater risk for conditions like asthma and depression. Healthcare costs for individuals living with food insecurity has been shown to increase with the severity of food insecurity. Among the barriers they face, many are unable to afford prescription medications, further compounding health problems. In Ontario, healthcare costs were 121% higher for adults living with severe food insecurity, even after adjusting for social determinants of health such as education and income<sup>10</sup>.



<sup>8</sup> Vozoris, N. T., & Tarasuk, V. S. (2003). Household food insufficiency is associated with poorer health.

<sup>9</sup> PROOF. (2016). Children in Food Insecure Households.

<sup>10</sup> Tarasuk, V., Cheng, J., de Oliveira, C., Dachner, N., Gundersen, C., & Kurdyak, P. (2015). Association between household food insecurity and annual health care costs.

## What is the current approach on a federal level?

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In a country as prosperous as Canada, eradicating food insecurity is an ethical obligation. Ensuring access to affordable high quality, nutritious food is important, but this requires more than attention to food prices and the geographic dispersion of food retail outlets. For households, the primary determinant of food affordability is purchasing power, which is a function of the adequacy and stability of their incomes and associated purchasing power<sup>11</sup>. While the causes and experiences of food insecurity are complex, the overwhelming factor is poverty, and policy solutions must therefore address income levels.

Recognizing this link between poverty and food insecurity, the federal government released their Poverty Reduction Strategy in 2018<sup>12</sup>. The Strategy introduced the Market Basket Measure as the first measure of Canada's Official Poverty Line, which is the cost of a basket of goods and services used by Canadian families. Because costs vary across the country, this measure is defined for 50 communities across Canada. In addition, the Strategy named food insecurity as one of the key indicators to track progress on poverty, expressing the intent to see how food insecurity data can be collected more regularly for all provinces and territories.

Effective, evidence-based policy responses are possible, but national leadership is needed to spearhead further action<sup>13</sup>. In addition to working towards food security for all of Canada, a food sovereignty approach should be kept in mind in policy development. According to La Via Campesina, "Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems.



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## Policy issues and options

1. In accordance with the Sustainable Development Goals, set the target to eliminate food insecurity by 2030. Targets are important as they commit the government to meeting a specific goal by a specific time, and to keep the government accountable.
2. Increase the value of existing refundable tax credits for low-income Canadians:
  - Increase the *Canada Child Benefit (CCB)* for low-income families: The CCB helps families pay for the cost of raising children by providing tax-free payments, thereby also alleviating childhood poverty. The benefit of up to \$6,639 per child under 6 and \$5,602 per child between 6 and 17 is allocated on a sliding scale according to household income. Any increase should be targeted to families living below the poverty line, helping parents to make ends meet.
  - Increase the *Canada Workers Benefit (CWB)*: The CWB (formerly the Working Income Tax Benefit) is a tax benefit for low-income workers. The CWB provides up to \$1,355 to single individuals without children and up to \$2,335 for families. Increasing the CWB would help low-income workers make ends meet.
3. Make all tax credits refundable: Because refundable tax credits like the CCB and CWB provide a tax refund that goes directly into people's pockets, they are one of the best tools the federal government has to decrease poverty. However, most tax credits are non-refundable and provide tax breaks for higher income earners rather than a refund, and therefore many low-income earners would never have access to them. For example, the Disability Tax Credit, meant to support people with severe and prolonged disabilities, provides higher income earners with a tax break but does not help low-income people with disabilities.
4. Instituting basic income pilots across Canada: Basic income is a program that would replace social assistance (welfare and disability) and provide a minimum amount of money to anyone who fell below a certain level. The federal government can partner with provinces to test out whether this is a program that would work well in Canada. In addition to tackling poverty and fostering basic human dignity, basic income pilot projects have shown remarkable health and educational improvements.

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<sup>11</sup> PROOF & FSC. (2015). *National Food Policy Briefing Note*.

<sup>12</sup> Employment and Social Development Canada. (2018). *Opportunity for All - Canada's First Poverty Reduction Strategy*.

<sup>13</sup> PROOF & FSC. (2015). *National Food Policy Briefing Note*.

<sup>14</sup> PROOF. (2019). *Household food insecurity in Canada, 2017*.

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## Discussion questions for candidates

- More than 4 million Canadians are food insecure. If elected, what would you do to ensure all Canadians can access healthy, culturally appropriate food?
- Given the link between poverty and food insecurity, what is your party's perspective and approach to poverty reduction, including tax reform and a guaranteed annual income?
- Is your party in favour of ensuring that food insecurity is measured annually by all provinces and territories?
- First Nations people experience food insecurity at rates 2.5 times the national average. Hunger in our northern communities is among the highest level in any Indigenous population in the western world. How would your party address this issue while supporting Indigenous food sovereignty?





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## Further Reading

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