

We're Hungry!
The Truth About Food Security in North America

Prepared for the Toronto Community Health Centres'
Food Security Network

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Food security means different things to different people. For some it means the ability to access safe and healthy foods. For others it means having the money to purchase the foods they need or foods they like and want to eat. Sometimes, food security is about growing and producing healthy foods in a way that protects and supports the land, sea, and the food producers (Food For Thought Online, 2005). Conversely, food insecurity occurs when an individual does not have access to the foods they enjoy or the foods they need in order to be healthy. Food insecurity also means feeling anxiety about not having enough food, or being uncertain where the next meal is coming from. In addition, food insecurity involves having concerns about the safety of available foods, and being concerned about not having sufficient and safe foods for future generations (Food For Thought Online, 2005).

The Toronto Community Health Centres' Food Security Network identifies food security as encompassing three central factors:

- Food and health (food related illness and maintenance of good health)
- Food and access (poverty, culturally appropriate, etc.)
- Food and sustainability (environment, agriculture, etc.) (TCHCFSN, 2007).

Below is a discussion of food security with respect to health, access and sustainability, and its lasting impact on individuals, families and communities.

In Toronto, the rate of food insecurity is 10 – 14% (Toronto Public Health Online, 2007). This rate reflects the percentage of food insecurity across North America; thus indicating that millions of people are living in hunger. The effects of such rampant food insecurity are intrinsically linked to the social determinants of health.

The social determinants of health are the economic and social conditions that affect the health status of individuals, families and communities (Raphael, 2004). In

effect, the social determinants determine whether an individual becomes ill or remains healthy. Furthermore, the “social determinants of health also determine the extent to which a person possesses the physical, social, and personal resources to identify and achieve personal aspirations, satisfy needs and cope with the environment” (Raphael, 2004: 1). In like manner, the social determinants are also about the quality and quantity of a variety of resources that society makes available to its members, including: conditions of childhood, income, housing, employment and working conditions, health and social services and food security (Raphael, 2004: 1).

Many research initiatives have uncovered the association between food insecurity and adverse health outcomes for individuals. In *Nutrition and Health Outcomes Associated with Food Insecurity and Hunger*, Olsen (1999) explored the effect of hunger on women of childbearing age in the United States. Using random sampling, this study interviewed 193 women, aged 20 – 29, and conducted a risk assessment with respect to poor diet and malnutrition. The results revealed that household food insecurity was correlated with a higher body mass index (BMI), thus indicating that food deprivation can result in overeating among women (Olsen, 1999: 521S).

In like manner, a study conducted by Cook (2003) titled *Food Insecurity is Associated with Adverse Health Outcomes Among Human Infants and Toddlers* examined the effect of food insecurity on the health status of children aged 36 months and younger. The caregivers of 11,539 children were interviewed in hospital clinics and Emergency Departments across the United States. The outcome measures of this study included the child’s health status, hospitalization history, whether the child was

admitted to the hospital on the day of the visit to the clinic/Emergency Department, and a composite growth-risk variable. In this sample, the results indicated that 21.4% of households were food insecure, and 6.8% of households were suffering from hunger. Furthermore, when compared to food-secure children, food-insecure children were twice as likely to have a fair or poor health status, and three times as likely to be hospitalized since birth (Cook, 1999: 1432).

In Canada, a study conducted by Vozoris and Tarasuk (2002), *Household Food Insufficiency Is Associated with Poorer Health*, examined the relationship between food insufficiency and physical, mental and social health. Based on the results of the 1996/1997 National Health Survey, Vozoris and Tarasuk estimated that 1.1 million people were found to be living in food-insufficient households. Moreover, food-insufficient individuals had significantly higher rates of poor or fair health, including, “having poor functional health, restricted activity and multiple chronic conditions, of suffering from major depression and distress, and of having poor social support. Individuals in food-insufficient households were also more likely to report heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure and food allergies. Men in food-insufficient households were more likely to be overweight” (Vozoris & Tarasuk, 2002: 120).

Along the same lines, a correlation has been uncovered between food insecurity and HIV-positive individuals in British Columbia. In *Food Insecurity and Hunger Are Prevalent Among HIV-Positive Individuals in British Columbia, Canada*, Normén conducted a cross-sectional study in the BC HIV/AIDS drug treatment program, a province-wide source of free-of-charge antiretroviral medications. 1,213 male and female program participants completed a questionnaire focusing on personal

information, health, and clinical status. The results revealed that 27% of the participants were classified as food insecure without hunger, and 21% were classified as food insecure with hunger. In both categories of food insecurity, individuals were significantly more likely to be women, Aboriginal people, living with children, and to have less education, a history of recreational injection drug and/or alcohol abuse, and an unstable housing situation. Furthermore, among these HIV-positive individuals, the occurrence of food insecurity was nearly 5 times higher than in the general Canadian population (Normén, 2005: 820). Therefore, food insecurity has an undeniably powerful effect on the health status of the population, including women, men, children and individuals who are HIV-positive.

With regards to food and access, social conditions, such as income, housing, employment and working conditions, further contribute to the social determinants of health and the growing crisis of food insecurity in Canada. The Dieticians of Canada have identified four central elements that characterize the access to food security:

1. The features of food insecurity are different at the individual and household levels. At the household level, food insecurity is related to food supply management and acquisition. At the individual level, food insecurity is experienced as inappropriate and inadequate food consumption, including the physiological sensation of hunger.
2. Different levels of food insecurity exist. The least severe is characterized by anxiety about not having enough food, resulting in qualitative compromises in food selection and consumption. As resources become more depleted, individuals cut back in food quantity, until the most severe level of food insecurity is reached: absolute food deprivation, when individuals fail to eat because of lack of food.
3. Food-insecurity experiences differ among individuals within families. In particular, mothers compromise their own food quality and quantity to protect their children from hunger (although children's food quality may suffer).

4. Food insecurity is dynamic in nature. It may be chronic or transitory; it can be characterized by frequency, duration and periodicity (Dieticians of Canada, 2007).

Hence, the access to food security is bound to the socio-economic status of the individual, family and community.

Accordingly, in her research, Normén has uncovered several predictors of food insecurity and hunger. These predictors include unemployment and having an annual income less than or equal to \$10,000 CAD (Normén, 2005: 820). Since unemployment and having a low annual income are significant social issues, the populations that are affected by low socio-economic status must be closely examined. In Canada, Aboriginal people and people of colour born outside of the country are over-represented in the bottom 20% of income earners, and under-represented in the top 20% of income earners (CCSD, 2003). In 2001, the unemployment rate for racialized groups was 12.6%, compared to a general rate of 7% (Galabuzi, 2006: 91-123). The unemployment rate for Black youth stood at 21%, and the rate for Aboriginal youth stood at 22%. Accordingly, in 2001, the unemployment rate of immigrants in Toronto that had entered the country within the past five years was double the Toronto average. Moreover, a 2004 study of 829 immigrant engineers in Ontario found that 55% were unable to find jobs, and another 29% were working in other fields, not making full use of their skills and training (Toronto Community Foundation, 2005). In effect, racialized group members and immigrants living in Ontario are three times as likely to live in poverty, whether they are employed or not (Galabuzi, 2006: 91-123). Given these startling statistics regarding unemployment and poverty, it is arguable that the population that is

most affected by food insecurity in Canada are immigrants, Aboriginal people, people of colour and racialized minorities.

With respect to food and sustainability, consideration must be given to the environment. Unfortunately, the devastating effects of unsustainable food production and growing methods are become widespread in Canada. For instance, the fisheries in Nova Scotia have already collapsed due to over-fishing (Food For Thought Online, 2008). Other examples include:

- Decreased land available for growing foods
- Bacterial contamination of the water supply
- Increased use of non-renewable resources, like fuel to transport food
- Increased air pollution
- Loss of natural vegetation and topsoil, which will effect the number of plants the environment can support (Food For Thought Online, 2008).

Hence, it is necessary to ensure that environmental resources are being protected during the production and harvesting stages to maintain a continuous supply of nutritious foods to the present population as well as the future generations.

Along the same lines, buying local foods can have positive implications for sustaining the environment, the economy, the community and its individuals. Food For Thought Online declares that society will undoubtedly benefit if its members make a whole-hearted commitment to buying locally produced foods; they offer logical rationale for supporting local food producers:

- Local food reduces the amount of fuel used to transport food long distances
- It also reduces green house gases
- Clean local environments are created and supported by well-managed family farms
- Local food supports local farm families
- Selling directly to you means farmers can keep the full price of the food and earn a better living
- Local food keeps your money within your community
- Local food connects you with farmers and with food production

- Local food resists globalization and celebrates local diversity
- Local food ensures food for future generations
- Local food is fresher and tastes better
- Local food may also be safer as it uses less chemicals, additives, and preservatives
- Local food is better for you than food that is shipped long distances (Food For Thought Online, 2008).

Thus, the sustainability of the environment is a central determinant of food security.

Without a doubt, an unsustainable system of agriculture will continue to contribute to the depletion of the environment and increase the level of food insecurity.

The discussion now must focus on the solutions to the crisis of food insecurity in Canada. In response to the growing need for food security, Toronto Public Health emphasizes the importance of universality, stability, dignity, quantity and quality when creating a food secure community:

Who should get the food?

Everyone/ all people (UNIVERSALITY)

When?

At all times/ sustained access (STABILITY)

How?

Through normal food channels/ not from emergency food assistance programs (DIGNITY)

How much food?

Enough/ enough for a healthy active life (QUANTITY)

What kind of food?

Safe and nutritious (QUALITY)

Culturally appropriate (QUALITY)

Produced in environmentally sustainable ways that promote strong communities (QUALITY)

(Toronto Public Health Online, 2008).

Therefore, these key principles must be incorporated to ease the pain of food insecurity at the international, national, regional, community, household and individual level.

In Alberta, the provincial food security network, named Growing Food Security in Alberta (GFSA), is seeking ways to address the disparities that are at the root cause of food insecurity. By facilitating participatory community conversations and creating action plans, GFSA is building community capacity in rural Alberta. Their initiatives include:

- Building on or establishing intersectoral local rural networks, partnerships and coalitions that promote integrated action to address the social and economic determinants of health;
- Community asset mapping;
- Identification of and support for projects that improve access to healthy food for children and their families;
- Creating food security action plans that address the disparities that undermine food security (GFSA Online, 2008).

Similarly, in Ontario, the Toronto Environmental Alliance (TEA) has launched an initiative to combat the inaccessibility of ethnic foods. Through the *Greenbelt Food from Home* campaign, TEA aims to assist people from diverse ethnic groups to access their culturally specific foods in their own neighbourhoods in the Greater Toronto Area. In effect, “the guides that are being developed by TEA highlight farmers and Toronto retailers selling Greenbelt-grown produce that is meeting the needs of an increasing variety of cultures. The first two guides have identified points of sale of where local produce for Chinese and South Asian residents, two of Toronto’s largest cultural groups, can be found. The second series of guides will highlight the points of sale of Greenbelt grown food that meets the needs of the African and Caribbean communities” (TEA Online, 2008). This innovative campaign serves to benefit the retailers by creating an effective marketing opportunity, while simultaneously benefiting the immigrant population by providing fresh, local, environmentally friendly, ethnic foods.

Consequently, food insecurity is a devastating crisis affecting the lives of millions

of individuals and families across North America. Food insecurity is intrinsically linked to the social determinants of health, and the most vulnerable populations facing barriers to accessing healthy food are low-income families, individuals who are HIV-positive, Aboriginal people, immigrants, people of colour and racialized minorities. Food security also relies on the sustainability of the food-producing environment.

Although there are a variety of different strategies for addressing food insecurity, these solutions must be considered along a continuum from short-term strategies that address immediate needs, to long-term strategies that aim to build food security into the future (Food For Thought Online, 2008). The first step is to initiate short-term relief of food insecurity (e.g. food banks, soup kitchens, emergency food assistance programs, etc.), the second step is to move beyond emergency food assistance and focus on community development (community kitchens, education about food security, etc.), and the third step is to initiate structural changes into the food and agricultural system (e.g. changes in social policy and public programs, etc.) (Food For Thought Online, 2008). Through collective action, the pain of food insecurity can finally be erased from the lives of individuals, families and communities.

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