



**Chronic Disease Prevention Alliance of Canada
Call to action on household food insecurity in Canada**

There is always a worry deep down... it's there all the time... Will I have enough money to buy what I feel like eating? Will there be enough food? ... I've been living on social security for 11 years ... Since I've been living with that kind of budget, everything has changed when it comes to food choices. – 55 year old woman, Quebec City, QC (1)

Household food insecurity, defined as inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints, is a serious public health issue in Canada that can no longer be ignored. Together as a group of health organizations, health charities and professional associations, **the Chronic Disease Prevention Alliance of Canada (CDPAC) is joining the call for federal action to address this pressing issue.**

The issue: Household food insecurity in Canada

Recent data from the [PROOF](#) research team indicates that 4.4 million Canadians, including over 1.2 million children, lived in food insecure households in 2017-2018 (2). This total number of Canadians experiencing household food insecurity is higher than any prior national estimate and is presumed to be on the rise due to unprecedented impacts from COVID-19 (2,3).

Across Canada, the percentage of households experiencing food insecurity in 2017-2018 ranged from 11.1% in Quebec and 15.3% in Nova Scotia among the provinces, to alarmingly high rates in the territories, with 57.0% of Nunavut households experiencing food insecurity (2). According to PROOF, this reported prevalence is likely an underestimate given that the Canadian Community Health Survey on which the data is based does not include key populations vulnerable to food insecurity, including on-reserve First Nations people and individuals experiencing homelessness (2).

My experience is that if you find yourself on the opposite end of the economic spectrum, it's really difficult to stay healthy, and eat organized, and eat well. –Food bank user from Greater Vancouver, BC (4)

At its root, household food insecurity is an income issue, closely tied to other markers of social and economic disadvantage (2). Characteristics associated with increased risk of food insecurity include low income, households with children under 18, lone parent families (particularly those headed by women), living in rented accommodations, households reliant on social assistance, employment insurance or workers' compensation, and identifying as Indigenous or black (2,5). In households with inadequate income to meet basic needs, the food budget is often the most discretionary and therefore the first to be redirected to pay for fixed costs, such as shelter, leaving insufficient funds to purchase a healthy diet for the family.

COVID-19 and many of the measures put in place to control the virus have resulted in significant economic and social impacts, such as job losses and the closures of schools and daycares, which are likely to increase rates of household food insecurity in Canada (3,6). The impact on employment alone has been unprecedented. According to Statistics Canada, employment fell by more than three million people in March and April 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 economic shutdown (7). While provinces are currently taking steps towards recovery, many of these measures and their resulting impacts are likely to have

disproportionate long-term consequences for individuals who experienced societal disadvantage prior to the pandemic (3,6,8).

Implications for public health and COVID-19

Household food insecurity has a profound impact on individual health, the burden of chronic disease in Canada and the health system (2). These factors, in turn, have implications for our country's capacity to respond to public health threats like COVID-19 now and in the future. Household food insecurity is linked with increased vulnerability to poor mental health and a range of chronic diseases and conditions, including heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, asthma and arthritis (9-12). Mobility impairments and chronic physical and mental health conditions, in turn, increase risk of food insecurity (9,13). Further, the experience of food insecurity is associated with negative health outcomes for young people, including poorer health status among children and depression among youth (14,15). Youth who experience repeated episodes of hunger may also be at greater risk for chronic conditions and asthma (14). Alarming, recent Canadian research has found that severely food insecure adults die, on average, nine years earlier than their food secure counterparts (16).

Household food insecurity is a potent determinant of health (5,17). Experiencing food insecurity puts individuals at risk for multiple comorbidities, increasing healthcare utilization and the complexity and cost of care required (18-20). As we learn more about COVID-19, it is also becoming clear that many of the same chronic diseases linked to household food insecurity, such as heart disease, hypertension and diabetes, increase an individual's risk for severe outcomes related to the coronavirus disease (21). These interconnections between infectious and chronic diseases must not be ignored.

Background and rationale

Half the food at the food bank is stuff I don't want. I feel bad being picky, but I would borrow money instead [of going to a food bank]. My children wouldn't eat the food, and the vegetables are not fit to feed an animal. The meats are disgusting and there is too much junk food. –Low-income family from Toronto, ON (22)

In Canada, a patchwork of charitable and community-based food initiatives, such as food banks, food hampers and meal programs, have emerged as a primary response to food insecurity (23-25). These programs may have a role to play in ensuring Canadians have access to food during times of crisis, such as the one we are currently experiencing; however, they are a short-term Band-Aid solution. Research suggests that such programs fail to reach most individuals experiencing food insecurity, often struggle to meet the demands of those who seek their help, and provide limited overall assistance to households in need (22,25,26). Further, programs that target individuals based on need have the potential for significant unintended consequences, such as the experience of stigma and a loss of agency over food choices (22,27), which may deepen existing inequities. Indeed, a growing body of research is making clear the essential role of federal and provincial income policy in addressing food insecurity by ensuring Canadians have enough money to meet basic needs (2,17,28-30).

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed significant gaps that exist in our response to food insecurity and social safety net more broadly. Previous Canadian governments have responded to past crises by strengthening the social safety net. The current Federal Government's COVID-19 economic response plan, including introduction of measures such as the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit, follows in this



legacy. Recognizing that people may come into hardship through no fault of their own and are deserving of financial support is part of what it means to be Canadian. We need to approach long-term efforts to address poverty and household food insecurity with the same level of compassion and political will.

Recommended actions

As the country moves forward with COVID-19 recovery, the federal government must address gaps in Canada's social safety net through enduring responses that meet basic needs and help safeguard against future threats to public health. **To help achieve this goal, CDPAC is calling on the federal government to:**

- Implement a basic income guarantee that ensures all people in Canada have enough money to meet basic needs as part of the COVID-19 recovery effort and as a long-term strategy to address poverty and household food insecurity (31).
 - Income security measures for Canadian children and seniors, such as the Canadian Child Benefit and Guaranteed Income Supplement, have contributed to improvements in household food insecurity (17,28,30,32). Building upon the successes of these targeted programs, a basic income guarantee would ensure that working-age Canadians have access to consistent and stable income to meet their needs in a dignified way (31). A basic income should not replace the current federal and provincial social safety net, but form a foundational piece of Canada's Poverty Reduction Strategy (33).
- Take decisive action to achieve goals and targets outlined in Canada's Poverty Reduction Strategy. Key activities to address household food insecurity include:
 - Immediate steps to address precarious employment and low wages, particularly among women.
 - Regular and consistent improvements to all income benefits and programs to ensure they cover actual costs of living.
 - Continue to meaningfully invest in affordable housing through the National Housing Strategy.
 - Improve access to quality, affordable childcare.
 - Action to address unique challenges facing Northern, rural and remote communities.
 - Regular monitoring of the prevalence and severity of household food insecurity, including through Canada's Official Poverty Dashboard.
 - Set targets for the reduction of food insecurity in Canada and evaluate the impact of federal policies and programs on both the prevalence and severity of household food insecurity in Canada.

In addition, CDPAC recognizes the role of food systems and the wider community in ensuring all people in Canada have access to safe, nutritious and culturally diverse food. **We encourage the federal government to:**

- Work in partnership with Indigenous communities to co-develop policies that promote adequate income, food sovereignty and food security.
- Build on Canada's Food Policy to provide an evidence-based discussion of food insecurity, laying a foundation for effective, inter-government policy responses and ensuring that national and local

programs implemented as part of the policy are informed by principles of equity, dignity, agency and cultural appropriateness.

- Develop policies and programs that increase access to and availability of healthy and sustainable food for all people in Canada, recognizing that such policies do not replace the need to ensure adequate incomes for all Canadians as income is a primary determinant of healthy eating.

Effective, long-term strategies to reduce household food insecurity and its roots are needed, now more than ever, to promote health and prevent chronic disease.

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