



Healthy Weights
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Food Insecurity

Fact Sheet No. 3

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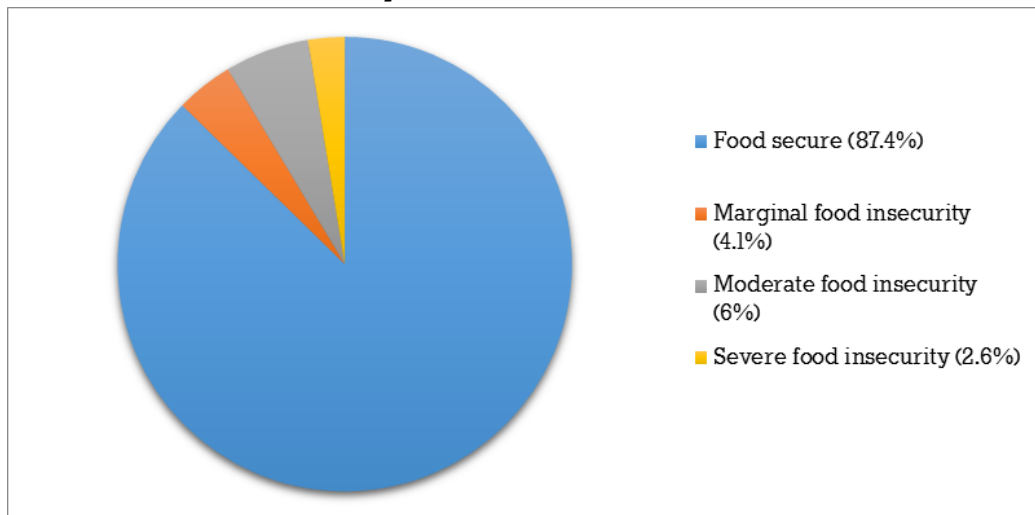
Introduction

Lack of food security, or food insecurity, is becoming a national public health issue. In Canada, 12.6% or 1.7 million households experienced some level of food insecurity in 2012¹. Food security can range from secure to severely insecure and can influence the physical and mental health of children and adults living in these households².

This factsheet was developed to inform service providers about food insecurity, current rates, risk factors, health implications and vulnerable groups such as the Aboriginal population. For example off-reserve Aboriginal households reported experienced food insecurity at a rate that is more than double that of all Canadian households¹.

Figure 1: Household Food Insecurity, Canada 2012

(adapted from Tarasuk et al. 2014)



Definitions

Food security exists when “all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life”³.

Food insecurity is the converse of food security. It is an outcome of inadequate or uncertain access to an acceptable amount and quality of healthy food⁴. It refers to the immediate inability to secure an adequate diet, as well as the risk of being unable to do so in the future.

¹ Tarasuk, V., Mitchell, A. & Dachner, N. (2014). Household food insecurity in Canada, 2012. Toronto: Research to identify policy options to reduce food insecurity (PROOF). Retrieved from, <http://nutritionalsciences.lamp.utoronto.ca/>

² McIntyre, L, et al. (2012). Depression and suicide ideation in late adolescence and early adulthood are an outcome of child hunger. Journal of Affective Disorders. Retrieved from, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2012.11.029>

³ United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization. (1996). Rome Declaration on World Food Security, World Food Summit Plan of Action, paragraph 1. Retrieved from, <http://www.fao.org/docrep/003/w3613e00.htm>

⁴ Tarasuk, V. (2009). Health implications of food insecurity. In D.Raphael (Ed.), Social Determinants of Health: Canadian Perspectives (2 ed.). Toronto, ON: Canadian Scholars' Press Inc.



Household food insecurity can be categorized into three levels:

- i. **Marginally food insecure:** some concern or problem of food access over the past 12 months⁵;
- ii. **Moderately food insecure:** compromises in the quality and/or quantity of food consumed among adults and/or children⁶; and
- iii. **Severely food insecure:** extensive compromises, including reduced food intake among adults and/or children because of a lack of money for food⁵

Food sovereignty is broadly defined as “the right of nations and people to control their own food systems, including their own markets, production modes, food cultures and environments”⁷. Food security is more closely aligned with health and resources, whereas food sovereignty is more linked with issues focused on culture and rights⁸.

Risk Factors

Some of the key risk factors associated with household food insecurity include:

- Source and level of a household’s income¹. Low-income households may lack the financial means to obtain a balanced diet that includes healthy and fresh foods. Households that rely on social assistance have higher rates of food insecurity⁹;
- Geographic location or environment, as remote, rural or isolated environments can limit access to food or food choices and result in higher food prices¹⁰;
- At-risk populations, including Aboriginal peoples, lone-parent families, women and children, immigrants, and the elderly¹⁰;
- Consumers’ food literacy – the skills, knowledge, and behaviour of how to choose and prepare nutritious food⁹. If household shoppers lack the knowledge of what constitutes a healthy diet, they may not choose foods that meet their nutrition and dietary needs.

Rates in Aboriginal Populations

High rates of poverty in the Aboriginal populations contribute to the challenge of being able to afford and access sufficient safe and nutritious food¹¹. In 2011 according to the Canadian Community Health Survey, off-reserve Aboriginal households reported experienced food insecurity at a rate that is more than double that of all Canadian households (27% versus 11.5% in Canada overall)¹.

Aboriginal populations living in remote or northern regions face high transportation and food costs¹⁰. The Canadian Inuit Health Survey (2007-2008) represents the most comprehensive assessment to date of

⁵ Coleman-Jensen, A.J. (2010). U.S. food insecurity status: toward a refined definition. *Social Indicators Research*, 95, 215-230.

⁶ Health Canada. (2012). Determining food security status. Retrieved from <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/surveill/nutrition/commun/insecurit/status-situation-eng.php>

⁷ Wiebe, N. & Wipf, K. (2011). Nurturing food sovereignty in Canada. In A. Desmarais, N. Wiebe & H. Wittman (Eds.), *Food Sovereignty in Canada*.

⁸ Wittman, H., Desmarais, A. & Wiebe, N. (2010). The origins of food sovereignty. In H. Wittman, A. Desmarais & N. Wiebe (Eds.), *Food Sovereignty: Reconnecting Food, Nature, and Community*. Black Point, NS & Winnipeg, MB: Fernwood Publishing.

⁹ Gorton, D., Bullen, C.R. & Mhurchu, C.N. (2010). Environmental influences on food security in high-income countries. *Nutrition Reviews*, 68, no.1, 1-29.

¹⁰ The Conference Board of Canada. (2013). Enough for all: Household food security in Canada. Retrieved from <http://www.conferenceboard.ca/cfic/research/2013/enoughforall.aspx>

¹¹ Power, E. (2008). Conceptualizing food security for Aboriginal people in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, 99, no.2, 95-97.



food insecurity among the Inuit in the Canadian Arctic¹². It identified 62.6% of the surveyed, or 1,901 Inuit households as food insecure, with 27.2% severely food insecure¹³.

From 2008 to 2010, over 21,000 individuals in 216 First Nations communities across Canada responded to the First Nations Regional Health Survey. Based on survey results, 52.4% of First Nations households were categorized as moderate or severely food insecure, leading to the conclusion that “First Nations households in First Nations communities are considerably more food-insecure - and more severely food insecure - than the general Canadian population”¹⁴.

Health Implications of Food Insecurity

According to research those who experience food insecurity are at increased risk for several serious health issues. Food insecurity has been found to lead to negative psychosocial problems in children and increased risk for depression, social anxiety and suicide in adolescents¹⁵. Studies also show that those who experience food insecurity tend to have a less varied diet, lower intake of fruit and vegetables, micronutrient deficiencies and malnutrition⁹. This means they are more likely to consume processed foods and ingesting higher levels of sodium, trans fat, and sugar, which can cause chronic health problems such as obesity, diabetes, heart disease¹⁶.

Solutions to Improve Food Security

In Ontario there are public programs that operate across multiple government sectors to address food insecurity. These initiatives range from funding support for school-based feeding programs for children and youth, to support for community-based approaches that provide emergency relief, and collective gardens and kitchens with an education component¹⁰.

Governments and regional organizations have also collaborated to fund Harvester Support programs to provide northern Aboriginal communities with financial assistance in the form of hunting equipment to help Aboriginal populations acquire more traditional foods that are high in nutrients¹⁰. Other community programs include food rescue and food recovery initiatives that redistribute food that would have otherwise gone to waste. Edible food is gathered from, or donated by, producers, wholesalers, grocery stores, restaurants and hotels and then redistributed for free to people in need through food banks¹⁰.

¹² Egeland, G. (2011). IPY Inuit Health Survey speaks to need to address inadequate housing, food insecurity and nutrition transition. *International Journal of Circumpolar Health*, 70(5), 373-383.

¹³ Huet, C., Rosol, R. & Egeland, G. (2012). The prevalence of food insecurity is high and the diet quality poor in Inuit communities. *Journal of Nutrition*, 142(3), 541-547.

¹⁴ First Nations Information Governance Centre (FNIGC). (2012). *First Nations Regional Health Survey 2008/10: National Reports on Adults, Youth and Children Living in First Nations Communities*. Ottawa, ON: FNIGC.

¹⁵ Zamecnik, L. (2008). Canadian women and children hit hard by the impacts of food insecurity: Part 1. *Esurio: Journal of Hunger and Poverty*, 1, no.1.

¹⁶ Cummins, S. & Macintyre, S. (2006). Food environments and obesity – Neighbourhood or Nation? *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 35, no.1, 100-104.