Household Food Insecurity in Canada: Time for Action!

McGill Conference on Global Food Security October 29, 2014

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Acknowledgement: This research is funded by a Canadian Institutes of Health Research programmatic grant in Health and Health Equity. This presentation draws on the work of PROOF http://nutritionalsciences.lamp.utoronto.ca/
Defining the problem

insecure or inadequate access to food due to financial constraints

- *popularly termed “hunger”*
Household Food Security Survey Module
(administered on the Canadian Community Health Survey since 2004)

18 questions, differentiating adults’ and children’s experiences over the last 12 months:

- Worry about not having enough food
- Reliance on low-cost foods
- Not being able to afford balanced meals
- Adults/children skip meals
- Adults/children cut size of meals
- Adults/children not having enough to eat
- Adults/children not eating for whole day

“because there wasn’t enough money to buy food?”
Household Food Insecurity in Canada 2007-2012

Marginal food insecurity

Moderate food insecurity

Severe food insecurity

Number of households (000s)

2007 2008 2011 2012
Household Food Insecurity in Canada 2007-2012

12.6% of households or 4 million people including 1.15 million children.
Household food insecurity, by province and Territory, 2012

- **Canada**: 12.6%
- **Newfoundland and Labrador**: 13.4%
- **Prince Edward Island**: 16.2%
- **Nova Scotia**: 17.5%
- **New Brunswick**: 15.6%
- **Quebec**: 13.5%
- **Ontario**: 11.7%
- **Manitoba**: 12.1%
- **Saskatchewan**: 12.5%
- **Alberta**: 11.5%
- **British Columbia**: 12.7%
- **Yukon**: 17.1%
- **Northwest Territories**: 20.4%
- **Nunavut**: 45.2%

Data Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS), 2012.
84% of the food insecure population is in our four largest provinces

Number of Food Insecure Households by Province and Territory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Number of Households</th>
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<tr>
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</tbody>
</table>

Food insecurity is inextricably linked to health

Average per capita health care costs\(^1\) over 12 months for Ontario residents, 12 yr and older, by household food security status, CCHS 2005, 2007-10

\[^1\]including emergency, physician services, inpatient, same day surgery, homecare services, and prescription drug costs

(J Cheng, work in progress)
The single best predictor of food insecurity is household income. Food insecurity captures material deprivation, which is the product of:

- income (size, security, stability)
- assets, savings
- access to credit
- shelter costs
- other expenses (food, medications, debt, etc)
The social policy underpinnings of food insecurity

62% are reliant on employment incomes
• low wages; short-term, part-time employment; single vs dual earner households
• inadequate income transfers to offset low earnings.

Seniors are protected
• 7% are food insecure (versus 11% of working households)
• guaranteed annual incomes, indexed to inflation.
• drug coverage, transit subsidies, ‘seniors days’, …
Prevalence of food insecurity among households whose main source of income was social assistance, by province/territory, 2012

Data Source: CCHS 2011-12

Note: PEI and Northwest Territories have been omitted because of the small size of the samples there. (Tarasuk, Mitchell & Dachner, *Household Food Insecurity in Canada, 2012*. 2014.)
Prevalence of food insecurity among households in Newfoundland and Labrador receiving social assistance, 2007-2012

- ↑ income support rates
- indexed rates to inflation
- ↑ earning exemptions
- ↑ health benefits
- ↑ low-income tax threshold
- ↑ affordable housing
- ↑ liquid asset limits

Loopstra, Dachner and Tarasuk, under review.
Despite promising effects of policy, charitable food assistance remains the primary response.

the fight against hunger is in the bag.
Other community-based food programs

• Community kitchens
• Community gardens
• Farmers’ markets
• ‘Good Food Boxes’
• Nutrition education and budgeting
• School meal programs
Effectiveness?

• Less than one-quarter of food insecure use food banks and participation is much lower for community kitchens and gardens. (McIntyre et al. Can J Public Health 2012; Loopstra & Tarasuk, Can Public Policy 2012; Can J Public Health 2013)

• Food needs among participants are not addressed, even in the short term. (Hamelin et al. Health Educ Res 2010; Loopstra & Tarasuk, Can Public Policy, 2012; Can J Public Health 2013 Loopstra & Tarasuk, J Nutr 2013; Kirkpatrick & Tarasuk, Can J Public Health 2009)

• Community based programs do not address the root causes of food insecurity.
Food insecurity is a serious public health problem that affects 4 million Canadians.

Who we are

PROOF is an international, interdisciplinary team of researchers who are committed to the reduction of household food insecurity, which is the inadequate or insecure access to adequate food due to financial constraints.

Our mandate

In 2011, the Government of Canada’s health research investment agency, Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) awarded 11 Programmatic Grants to Tackle Health and Health Equity in Canada. Our team was privileged to receive one of these grants to execute a five-year research program to identify viable and effective policy interventions to reduce household food insecurity in Canada.