



What Will it Take to Make Real Progress on Northern Food Security?

A FOOD BANKS CANADA REPORT • APRIL 2016

Summary

Northern Canadians face highly elevated levels of food insecurity. Particularly among First Nations, Métis and Inuit populations, a combination of low income, the high cost of store-bought foods, and decreased access to traditional foods has contributed to levels of food insecurity that are nothing short of a public health emergency.

The recent report *Aboriginal Food Security in Northern Canada: An Assessment of the State of Knowledge*, published by the Council of Canadian Academies, presents clear and incontrovertible evidence of this unacceptable situation in northern communities. Whether one approaches the issue from a moral, pragmatic, or rights-based perspective, it is clear that more needs to be done to increase food security in northern Canada.

This paper provides a brief overview of the evidence, and presents a number of policy recommendations for federal, provincial and territorial governments. These recommendations extend from an understanding of poverty, decreasing access to traditional foods, and the high cost of store-bought foods as key causes of food insecurity, and include the following:

1. Expansion and coordination of information on the cost of food in the north;
2. Increasing our knowledge of the drivers of the high cost of food in the north;
3. Increasing support for the consumption of traditional foods;
4. Expanding and improving the Nutrition North Canada subsidy;
5. Replacing social assistance with a basic income administered through the tax system.

What Will It Take to Make Real Progress on Northern Food Security?

A 1 in 8 Canadian Families are Food Insecure

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations has defined “food security” as existing 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.”¹

In Canada, the absence of food security – “food insecurity” – is officially measured by Statistics Canada, which asks heads of households a series of 18 questions about their ability to afford enough food for themselves, their partners and children. In 2012, one in every eight Canadian households experienced food insecurity: that is, they worried that they would run out of food and not be able to afford more, and/or they couldn’t afford a balanced diet, and/or they went without eating because there wasn’t enough food in the house and they couldn’t afford more.

To put it more simply: 1 in 8 Canadian households struggle to put enough food on the table at some point each year.²

Underneath the abstract academic concept of “food insecurity” is a disturbing reality. In 2012:

- 310,000 Canadian adults experienced periods when they didn’t have food to eat because they couldn’t afford to buy any. Picture a fridge with some old ketchup and mayonnaise, and cupboards that are bare of anything but plates and bowls.³

- 200,000 Canadian adults actually lost weight because they couldn’t afford to buy enough food.
- 190,000 households were unable to feed their children a balanced meal because they didn’t have money to purchase enough food. In other words, parents bought as much cheap and filling food as they could, and crossed their fingers that it would last until the next paycheque came in.
- 18,000 households were forced to reduce the size of their children’s meals because they didn’t have enough food.⁴

Not everyone in Canada has the same likelihood of experiencing food insecurity. If your primary source of income is employment, you face about a one in ten chance of experiencing it in a given year. If you are part of a female-led lone-parent family, you face a one in four chance. If you identify as Inuit, Métis or First Nations, your risk increases again. If you are on social assistance, your risk rises to seven in ten – 70% of households in receipt of social assistance are food insecure.⁵ In other words, **it is the households who rely most on the government who are most likely to not have enough food at home.**



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B Food Insecurity in Northern Canada

The territory of Nunavut has the highest level of food insecurity of any province or territory in Canada. In 2012, nearly half of all Nunavut households reported being food insecure; three in every five Nunavut children live in food insecure families. One in five Nunavut households report being in a state of severe food insecurity, with adults and/or children reducing their food intake or skipping meals entirely on a regular basis.⁶

Looking across the north, food insecurity is experienced by 17% of households in Yukon, and in 20% of households in the Northwest Territories – well above the Canadian average of 13%. Inuit people across the Northwest Territories, Nunavut, Nunavik (northern Quebec) and

Nunatsiavut (northern Labrador) experience very high levels of food insecurity.⁷ The same can be said of Dene Nation communities in the Northwest Territories, and of First Nations and Métis communities across Northern Canada – as the Expert Panel on the State of Knowledge of Food Security in Northern Canada has clearly shown.⁸

While we should be cautious of studies that apply southern concepts to northern cultures,⁹ a diverse body of research makes it clear that **far too many northerners are struggling to put enough food on the table, with particularly elevated levels of food insecurity among indigenous populations.**¹⁰



C Indigenous Populations and Food Insecurity in the North

Canada's northern Inuit, Métis and First Nations peoples are living through an unprecedented, destabilizing transition from a subsistence economy to a mixed subsistence/market economy. A central aspect of this transition is decreasing consumption of traditional foods and increasing reliance on market foods, due to factors that include:

- The transition from nomadism to community settlement, in many cases located away from optimal traditional food harvesting areas;¹¹
- The effects of the residential school tragedy, including the loss of community knowledge of traditional practices;
- A decline in the number of people who have traditional knowledge relevant to hunting and surviving on the land;
- Changes in animal behaviour and availability due to climate change and other factors;
- Partial obsolescence of traditional knowledge re: harvesting country food in an environment altered by climate change;
- High costs related to hunting and trapping;
- Decreased appetites for a traditional diet among a quickly growing youth population.¹²

With specific respect to store-bought foods in remote northern communities, households face very high prices and a limited selection of food types. Many households have limited knowledge about which foods are healthy, as well as limited food preparation skills.¹⁴

These diverse and serious issues are bound up with the problem of widespread and persistent low income. For example:

- A recent research paper estimates that 44% of Canadian Inuit have low incomes – a rate three times higher than that experienced in southern Canada.
- In Nunavut, the unemployment rate among Inuit stands at 17%; labour force participation among the Inuit of Nunavut is very low, at 54%.¹⁵
- Two out of every five Nunavummiut are on social assistance,¹⁶ which provides about \$21,000 annually for a couple with two children.¹⁷ The Revised Northern Food Basket for a family of four alone costs nearly \$23,000 annually.¹⁸
- In the 16 Dene Nation communities in the Northwest Territories, nearly half of households have incomes below \$30,000 (compared to the median Canadian family income of \$69,860)¹⁹; between 2008 and 2010 more than 90% of Dene households said they skipped meals, cut the size of their meals, or ate less than they felt they should because they couldn't afford enough food.²⁰
- In general, First Nations, Métis and Inuit people in Canada have much lower earnings and income compared to the general population.²¹

While food banks and other charitable programs provide important help to people experiencing poverty and food insecurity, the help they provide is limited and regionally variable. Further, there is a strong stigma connected to the act of asking for charitable food assistance; few people would prefer to access a food bank versus buying food at a grocery store.

The regional variability of the charitable approach to food security is perhaps most pronounced in northern Canada. Food banks are the creations of communities, and they depend on community support – food and financial donations from individuals, community groups and businesses – to survive. In smaller, remote communities, these resources can often be very difficult to come by.

It is telling that food banks are a growing phenomenon in the North, with organizations having formed in

communities as diverse as Sanikiluaq (NU), Ulukhaktok (NWT), Tuktoyaktuk (NWT) and Inuvik (NWT), among many others.²² These charitable organizations operate alongside traditional *ad hoc* food sharing networks within extended households, which remain an important element in northern access to food.²³ However, the confluence of factors outlined above appear to be chipping away at these practices²⁴ – practices that, even where they continue in strength, exist within a climate of widespread food insecurity.

D Recommendations to Increase Food Security in the North

With so many intersecting factors involved, it is easy to get overwhelmed by the sheer scope of northern food insecurity. Rapidly changing demographics, specifics of location and culture, the intricacies of engagement between north and south, the past and present role of the state, and the involvement of multiple representative agencies make any examination of the issue extraordinarily complex (in Nunavut alone there are seven major governance bodies, not including municipal governments²⁵).

At the same time, the issue can be quite simple. For example – **if it is roughly twice as costly to live in the north as in the south, why are social assistance rates about the same in most northern versus southern regions?**

Food Banks Canada has been grappling with these issues for several years, and has focused its efforts in three areas:

- Understanding the scope of food insecurity in the north, as well as the varieties of experience of food insecurity among the diverse and unique peoples of the north;
- Engaging with northern residents, including those working to address food insecurity through short and long-term approaches;
- Providing policy expertise with the understanding that southern organizations must play a supportive role; leadership and change must come from the north.

The following recommendations to federal, provincial and territorial governments build on these efforts, and provide Food Banks Canada's perspective on changes that we believe would increase food security in the territories and northern provincial regions of Canada.

1. Expand and Coordinate Information on the Cost of Food in the North



The information that is currently available on the cost of food in the north is limited and not comparable across jurisdictions. For example, the federal Department of Indigenous and Northern Affairs collects information on the Revised

Northern Food Basket; the Government of Nunavut

collects information on its own basket of goods, which does not correspond to specific household needs (e.g. the cost of food for a family of four for one week); several provinces collect information based on Health Canada's Nutritious Food Basket; Statistics Canada collects information for the Consumer Price Index, but excludes most northern communities.

In our companion paper, *Is Nutrition North Canada on Shifting Ground?*, we show that food prices vary

significantly across regions and communities in the north, and for many communities there is simply no data available.

To fully understand northern food costs, we recommend that federal, provincial and territorial governments increase and coordinate the collection of information on the cost of food:

- in northern communities that are eligible for Nutrition North Canada, as well as in those that are not eligible;

- from all major retailers participating in Nutrition North Canada;
- for all major foods consumed by northerners, rather than only those in the Revised Northern Food Basket (RNFB);
- via third-party groups, to complement retailer-supplied price data;
- in formats that correspond to actual eating patterns of northern households (as in the RNFB);
- via methods that are comparable across jurisdictions.

2. Increase our Knowledge of the Drivers of the High Cost of Food in the North



In our paper, *Is Nutrition North Canada on Shifting Ground?*, we make the case that the debate around northern food costs has been overly focused on the role of northern retailers, and has failed to consider other variables, such

as those presented in a recent report published by Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada.²⁶

In order to effectively address high food costs in the north, we must first understand the complete range of factors that influence those costs. To this end, we recommend that the federal government engage in or support multivariate studies of the variables that

contribute to food costs, with a particular focus on transportation and energy in the northern context. The recent AANDC report is a good start that can serve as a basis for future efforts.

Further, if Nutrition North Canada is understood – as we understand it – as one program within a broader approach to reducing the cost of food in the north, the federal government has a responsibility to research and address cost factors that fall partially or completely outside the purview of the program. This would include responsibility for the cost of food in communities not eligible for Nutrition North Canada (i.e. those that have year-round road access), and responsibility for the cost of foods that are not eligible for subsidies through the program (e.g. most non-perishable foods).

3. Increase Support for the Consumption of Traditional Foods



As many commentators have recommended, there is room for federal, provincial and territorial governments to redouble their efforts to support and expand community knowledge of traditional foods in a changing climate. This includes:

- programs that increase access to the tools required for hunting and trapping on the land;
- support for research and programs relevant to climate change adaptation;
- investment in idiosyncratic community-based and community-designed initiatives that do not fit into existing funding streams;
- start-up assistance to communities that wish to (a) apply for government funds, and (b) evaluate the success of funded initiatives.

4. Replace Social Assistance With a Basic Income Administered Through the Tax System



It has been clear for many years that welfare is a broken system. **Social assistance offers a level of support that is plainly inadequate to meet the needs of our most vulnerable citizens, and 70% of households on**

social assistance are food insecure.²⁷ Individuals and families must be at the brink of destitution to qualify for the program, and it can be very difficult to climb out

of poverty once one is in the system. Benefit levels are unreasonably low,²⁸ the administrative bureaucracy is extremely difficult to navigate, and stigmatization of those in need is widespread.²⁹

It is time for provincial and territorial governments to consider replacing the current system of last-resort income assistance with a basic income that is tied to the true cost of living in various regions of Canada. At the very least, social assistance must be increased to address regional variability in the cost of living.

5. Expand and Improve the Nutrition North Canada Subsidy



The Nutrition North Canada transportation subsidy is an imperfect but useful program that could do more to reduce the cost of food in eligible communities. To improve the subsidy, we recommend the following:

a. Determine community eligibility for Nutrition North Canada based on need rather than past use of the Food Mail program. This would entail the addition of several dozen communities not currently participating in the program, implementation of the full subsidy in communities that currently receive only the partial subsidy, and a budgetary increase to support these changes.

b. For market food to become truly affordable in the remote north, the federal government needs to set targets for the cost of food in Nutrition North-eligible communities, as well as in communities that are not eligible for the program. While Nutrition North Canada is meant to “provide Northerners in isolated communities with improved access to perishable nutritious food,”³⁰ the program has no actual food cost targets. While the subsidy seems to have been successful in moderating increases in the retail price of certain foods, it has not been successful in actually making food affordable.

c. The program can be improved by subsidizing types of food rather than forms of transportation – for example by subsidizing food sent by sea in addition to that sent by air. This would, among other things, increase equity of the program for communities that are poorly served by air (as has been noted by the Nunavut Food Security Coalition.³¹) This implies an expansion of the program to cover at least some non-perishable foods.

d. When Nutrition North Canada was designed, it was assumed that northern retailers would build new warehouse space in order to ship and store large quantities of non-perishable goods (which are no longer eligible for the subsidy); further, that the price of these goods would decrease as the cost of shipping decreased in relation to this expanded space.³²

We recommend that the federal government assess whether northern retailers have indeed added widespread storage capacity for non-perishable goods, and whether this has had an impact on the price of these goods. If storage capacity has not been added and/or prices have not moderated, this would signal the failure of a major program assumption, i.e. that only perishable foods need to be subsidized to reduce their cost, and that no support is needed to reduce the price of non-perishable items.

e. The program will benefit from more responsiveness to northern input on which items are subsidized; for example, northerners have recommended that flour, cooking oils, and other baking staples be subsidized at the higher subsidy level. It has been suggested, for example, that “the Nutrition North Canada subsidy structure is biased towards purchasing ready-made bread products rather than purchasing the ingredients to bake from scratch.”³³

f. Finally, the Nutrition North Canada Advisory Board would contribute to the evolution of the program by hosting more public meetings and releasing update reports on an annual basis.

There are of course other important policy areas not covered here that require attention in the north: the adequacy, affordability, and suitability of housing; access to medical and mental health services and supports (including addictions services); adequate funding of on-reserve primary and secondary education; access to adult education and training; investment in home-grown economic development at the regional and community level. Outside the major cities, northern jurisdictions struggle with each of these issues.

The above recommendations focus on a few specific and targeted changes that will increase household income and access to food, and decrease the cost of store-bought foods. They are a response to the current state of federal, provincial and territorial programs that, while well-meaning, fall far short of ensuring northerners are food secure. **Whether one views the problem of food insecurity in northern Canada from a moral perspective, a rights perspective, or a pragmatic perspective, it is clear that much more needs to be done.**

Endnotes

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The author would like to acknowledge the work of Gérard Duhaime, John Ford, Chris Furgal, Harriet Kuhnlein, George Wenzel and others, which has informed Food Banks Canada's understanding of northern food issues, and which is used broadly as evidence throughout the Council of Canadian Academies' report.
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About Food Banks Canada

Food Banks Canada is the only national charitable organization dedicated to helping Canadians who are hungry. We support a network of 10 Provincial Associations and more than 500 food banks. Together, our network assists close to 850,000 Canadians who turn to food banks each month. Our work is focused on three core areas: raising food and funds; delivering programs and services; and influencing policy through research, awareness raising, and advocacy.

**Our vision:
a Canada
where no
one goes
hungry.**

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ISBN: 978-0-9921091-6-5



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