

There's a Food Security Crisis in Canada and It's Worse Than You Think

By Rebecca Tucker



(Photo: via Flickr user vancouver foodbank)

In late November, Food Banks Canada released its 2015 HungerCount report, the annual study that calls itself a “comprehensive report on hunger.” This year’s report, which looks at usage statistics at more than 4,000 food banks across the country, showed an increase from 2014, with more than 800,000 people using food banks per month, and an estimated 1.7 million individuals expected to use the service over the year.

HungerCount is probably the most widely disseminated, frequently cited data produced in Canada in regards to the issue of hunger and food security in the country. Its numbers are high, and they should be jarring.

But those numbers are misleading. It's more likely that the number of Canadians living in food insecure situations—meaning they sit somewhere on the spectrum from concerned about being able to afford good food or completely unable to do so—is four to five times higher than the number of Canadians who use food banks per month, or around 4 million people. And that margin of discrepancy, between how many people in Canada are actually food insecure (more than 10 percent) and how many people use food banks, is the difference between a problem and a crisis. Since more people are aware of the numbers on food bank usage than the stats concerning food insecurity in general, it's a crisis that's being ignored.

“When you look at these reports, they give you the impression that they're stats on the problem. They're not,” **Valerie Tarasuk**, a researcher based out of the University of Toronto, told VICE.

“It's service utilization. If we were trying to look at the health of Canadians, would we look at the number of ambulances that drive by?” The issue, in other words, is right in the name: Food Banks Canada isn't actually counting the number of Canadians who are going hungry.

Tarasuk works with an organization called PROOF, which has since 2011 issued an annual Report on Household Food Insecurity in Canada, with funding from the Canadian Institute of Health Research. The reports use data from the Statistics Canada Canadian Community Health Survey to chart food insecurity across the country, but their final tally includes households that report marginal food insecurity. In addition, PROOF's researchers count children under the age of 12, while Statistics Canada does not. The result is a table of statistics that varies drastically from the numbers being put forward by Stats Can or, indeed, HungerCount. In 2011, for instance, PROOF reported 3.9 million Canadians living in food insecure situations, including 1.1 million children. Statistics Canada only reported 1.1 million Canadians total (including a devastating 36.7 percent of households in Nunavut). HungerCount reported food bank usage by more than 850,000 Canadians per month.

But for all the effort PROOF puts into its reports, it seems no one is seeing them: “I actually have a full time job that isn't about promoting that number,” Tarasuk said, “but nobody has a full time job whose job is promoting that number.”

In fairness to Food Banks Canada, its aim with HungerCount is to identify poverty reduction strategies and policy interventions to reduce food insecurity—which is also Tarasuk's goal with PROOF. Regardless, there is a lack of concrete data on the issue: In the United States, food insecurity is monitored and reported by the US Department of Agriculture, but in Canada, the Household Food Security Survey Module on Statistics Canada's annual Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS) is less than comprehensive. Our numbers simply don't exist.

According to Dr. Evan Fraser, the Canada Research Chair in Global Food Security, the dearth of information pertaining to food insecurity in Canada isn't specific to the issue. "Canada, relative to the US, does not have the investment in publicly available data," he told VICE. "So what you're observing here is something you'd find in all sorts of different areas. The USDA does a magnificent job; you get way more information."

Fraser, a University of Guelph professor and the author of the 2010 book *Empires of Food*, does cite HungerCount as a decent reflection of the rise of food insecurity in Canada, but also points to a 2012 report issued by Olivier De Schutter, the United Nations' special rapporteur to food. In that report, De Schutter also bemoaned Canada's lack of data collection on the issue of food insecurity, writing that "Canada would benefit from a national right to food strategy.... First, in order to effectively combat hunger, food insecurity, and malnutrition, it is necessary to have a comprehensive understanding of who is hungry, food insecure, and malnourished. The Special Rapporteur is concerned that changes in the current budget will make the collection and analysis of data more complicated, particularly by changes to data collection through the elimination of the requirement for individuals to complete the long-form census."

Indeed, in 2013, British Columbia, Manitoba, Newfoundland, and Labrador and the Yukon chose not to include the measurement of food insecurity for their populations in that year's Canadian Community Health Survey. However, the newly elected federal Liberal government has promised to reinstate the long-form census by 2016, which Fraser said is helpful. He explained that the new government is a positive outcome, too, in terms of the potential for policy interventions aimed at reducing hunger making it through the House of Commons. But on that front, he said that focusing strictly on interventions pertaining to income and housing would only be focusing on part of the problem.

"One of the root causes of food insecurity in Canada is that there are some people in Canada who are unable to afford a healthy diet," he said. "Within that, there's the cost of the healthy diet, and there's the inequity. In both regards we need policy interventions."

Fraser points to the fact that Canada only grows 11 percent of its supply of fruits and vegetables, while the rest is imported, meaning the costs of the fruits and vegetables we buy at home is dictated by foreign currencies (and, given the weak Canadian dollar, that means they're simply too high). Canada's food manufacturing industry has lost 24,000 jobs since 2008. Add to that the lack of a guaranteed livable income, the skyrocketing price of housing in many urban areas, and the increased cost of transit and transportation and it's no longer any surprise that 61 percent of households that qualify as food insecure are waged or salaried—not your stereotypical food bank demographic, but rather, working Canadians.

Additionally, those living in moderately food insecure situations in Ontario had medical costs that were 95 percent higher than those in food-secure households (compared to 32 percent higher in marginally food insecure households and 75 percent higher in severely food insecure households), according to a study published by Tarasuk in the August *Canadian Medical Association Journal*. Two months earlier,

she also published a study that suggested that food insecurity is a greater indicator of poor nutrition in Canadians than it is in our neighbors to the south.

“If you’re one of the have-nots,” Fraser said, “everything else has risen in price to the point that food is squeezed to the margin.” And now, given the aforementioned, being a have-not doesn’t necessarily mean living below the poverty line.

So when we talk about food insecurity, we aren’t just talking about hunger: We’re talking about agriculture, economics, poverty, and costs to our healthcare system. But that’s if we’re talking about it at all. All signs, both Tarasuk and Fraser agree, point to Canada’s national food insecurity as an underreported, nuanced crisis reaching its tipping point. Tarasuk, who has been monitoring food insecurity in Canada for 30 years, said the issue has “never been worse.”

Fraser is more hopeful. He admits frustration at Canada’s lack of a national food policy but, using climate change as an analogy, suggests that we are capable of shifting gears on widely misunderstood issues in a relatively short time. “Most of us, most of the time are aware of climate change. We’re making progress on that file, which I would say 20 years ago was unexamined,” he said.

“Now, I would say our food system is one of the great unexamined aspects of modern society. Developing the ways and means to equitably and sustainably feed the world’s population is—along with climate change and the rise of religious fanaticism—my guess is that these are the great issues the 21st century will be remembered for.”