

Experts sound alarm on 'food insecurity' in Canada

By Heidi Westfield, Postmedia Content Works



Workers unload a food box at Toronto's Daily Bread Food Bank. PHOTO COURTESY OF DAILY BREAD FOOD BANK

Lineups at food banks are not new, but the economic downturn has made them even more pronounced. The number of new people using the Calgary Food Bank has grown significantly in the past year.

“The demand is increasing,” James McAra said. “This is the worst I have seen. It tells me the story of what is happening in Calgary.”

Edmonton Journal: <http://edmontonjournal.com/news/national/experts-sound-alarm-on-food-insecurity-in-canada>

McAra began working at the Calgary Food Bank 15 years ago, as “chief cook and bottle washer.” Today, he is the president and CEO, overseeing more than 60 staff members and hundreds of volunteers. They served 3 million meals and snacks to the hungry last year alone. More than 40 per cent of their clients are children.

While the situation in Calgary is aggravated by the plunge in oil prices, researchers say millions of Canadians find it a challenge to put food on the table. They have collected data that suggests what is called “food insecurity” is a serious issue affecting households all across the country.

The term is used differently for countries in the developing world, where food shortages are common, and for the developed world, where food insecurity is often connected to income. In Canada, food insecurity is defined by experts as “inadequate or insecure access to food because of financial constraints.”

“By our best estimate, there are more than 4 million Canadians currently living in situations where they are struggling to afford the food that they need,” said Dr. Valerie Tarasuk, a University of Toronto professor and a principal author of a series of reports on Household Food Insecurity in Canada. “It is a very serious problem, and if we don’t pay attention to it, it just festers.”

Tarasuk works with Proof, an interdisciplinary, cross-jurisdictional research team. Using data from the Canadian Community Health Survey, the group compiled a comprehensive look at the state of food insecurity in Canada.

Food insecurity can vary from mild to severe, and encompasses a range of experiences. It includes anything from running out of food before there is more money to buy more, to the inability to afford a balanced diet. In more severe cases, food insecurity is defined as going hungry, missing meals, or not eating for a whole day because of a lack of money to buy food.

The most recent available national measure, from the year 2011-2012, suggests a widespread problem that shows few signs of easing.

The northern territories of Canada face the most daunting levels of food insecurity. For Tarasuk, the data that stands out the most is from Nunavut, where they estimate that almost half the households are food insecure. “It is a situation that is disastrous,” Tarasuk said. “It is a distinct problem that merits immediate attention.”

The problem is not limited to the north. Alberta, British Columbia, Quebec, and Ontario account for the largest share — 85 per cent of food-insecure individuals. It is also a persistent issue in the Maritimes.

The rising cost of produce, meat, and other foods affects their affordability. The low Canadian dollar doesn’t help when it comes to groceries imported from the United States. Still, according to Tarasuk, those variables simply exacerbate an already troubling situation. She believes food insecurity in Canada is closely tied to a lack of income security.

“Food is not the only struggle they have,” Tarasuk said. “Invariably, there are a whole lot of things they cannot afford. They can be behind in their rent, for example, and likely have inappropriate housing.”


At the Daily Bread Food Bank in Toronto, executive director Gail Nyberg believes food insecurity can happen to anyone who experiences a job loss or family breakdown. She also points to low salaries and welfare allowances. In Toronto, where rents are high, a single person could easily spend his/her welfare cheque on housing alone, leaving little room to buy groceries.

“We have lots of food in Canada,” Nyberg said. “There is no shortage of food. There is a shortage of income to buy it.”

Nyberg believes it is time to open a national conversation, and look at changing some of the rules around government assistance. It is also something Tarasuk at Proof would like to see. She is a proponent of a basic support at the federal level to give all Canadians a minimum income. Her research has found that since 2005, the problem has grown across most of the country. She says that is unlikely to change, unless new measures are brought in to address the root causes of the problem.

Maple Leaf Foods is raising awareness for the critical need to address food insecurity nationally, regionally and locally in Canada. To join the conversation and recognize the people in your community who are trying to solve it by nourishing the potential of others with good food, follow the #FeeditForward hashtag on social media and visit [mapleleaf.com](http://www.mapleleaf.com). To learn about Maple Leaf’s Food Security Commitment, visit <http://www.mapleleafsustainability.com>

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PROMOTED BY 

HUNGRY IN CANADA

4 MILLION
CANADIANS EXPERIENCE SOME LEVEL OF FOOD INSECURITY
1.1 MILLION OF THOSE ARE CHILDREN

“In Canada **FOOD INSECURITY** is defined by experts as **inadequate or insecure access to food** because of financial constraints.”

Many Canadians take food for granted. They ask “What’s for dinner?”—not whether there is anything to eat. Yet for millions of others, eating properly is not such a simple matter.

IN FACT, ALMOST **1 IN 8** households in Canada goes without the **quantity and variety** of food they need to eat nutritious meals. In some regions and communities, the rate of food insecurity is even higher.

FOOD INSECURITY AFFECTS:

- 13%** OF ALL HOUSEHOLDS NATIONALLY
- 16%** OF CHILDREN UNDER 18
- 28.2%** OF ABORIGINAL CANADIAN HOUSEHOLDS

336,700 NUMBER OF HOUSEHOLDS IN SEVERE FOOD INSECURITY – THEY MISS MEALS, EAT LESS, OR GO DAYS WITHOUT FOOD.

Map of Canada showing food insecurity rates by province/territory:

- YUKON: 17.1%
- NORTHWEST TERRITORIES: 20.4%
- NUNAVUT: 45.2%
- NEWFOUNDLAND & LABRADOR: 13.4%
- PEI: 16.2%
- NOVA SCOTIA: 17.5%
- NEW BRUNSWICK: 15.6%
- QUEBEC: 13.5%
- ONTARIO: 11.7%
- SASKATCHEWAN: 12.5%
- MANITOBA: 12.1%
- ALBERTA: 11.5%
- BC: 12.7%

* INCLUDING MORE THAN 40% OF THE TERRITORY'S CHILDREN

- 9.2%** OF CANADIANS WORRY THAT FOOD WILL RUN OUT
- 7.9%** CANNOT AFFORD BALANCED MEALS

- 852,137** NUMBER OF FOOD BANK USERS IN MARCH 2015
- \$31B** ESTIMATED VALUE OF FOOD CANADIANS WASTE EVERY YEAR

HIGHER RATES OF HUNGER CORRELATE WITH HIGHER RATES OF:

- ASTHMA
- HEART DISEASE
- DEPRESSION
- DIABETES

Hunger in Canada is a real problem, but people across the country are working to solve it. To support their efforts, Maple Leaf Foods is encouraging all Canadians to #FeedItForward, which is a national program that recognizes Canadians who improve people's lives and make their communities better with good food. Ten nominees will be selected to receive a \$10,000 donation to their charitable causes, and one nominee – along with the person who nominated them – will receive a year's worth of free Maple Leaf groceries. For more information, or to submit a nomination, visit www.mapleleaf.com/feed-it-forward-donation.

Sources: PROOF, Statistics Canada, Food Banks Canada, Value Chain Management International Inc.