A SNAPSHOT OF FAMILIES AND FOOD IN CANADA

SEPTEMBER 2017

NATHAN BATTAMS

Statistical Snapshots
The Vanier Institute of the Family is a national, independent, charitable organization dedicated to understanding the diversity and complexity of families and the reality of family life in Canada. The Institute offers access to a range of publications, research initiatives, presentations and social media content to enhance the national understanding of how families interact with, have an impact on and are affected by social, economic, environmental and cultural forces.

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How to cite this document:

Food is at the heart of family life. A biological necessity for our survival and well-being, food is also much more than that. What we choose to eat is often more than just a matter of personal preferences and whims; in many instances, what we eat reflects our cultural, community and family identities. Sometimes, our choices are made for us based on the availability and accessibility of food.

Regardless of the context, families adapt and react to ensure that dietary needs are being met. Some families have many opportunities to eat together, and these family meals provide a setting where family dynamics and relationships often “play out,” whether it’s in the delegation of cooking roles, discussing an upcoming family vacation or arguing over who has to do the dishes. Sometimes families – particularly those with busy schedules or high mobility – opt to eat meals “on the go.”

Much can be learned about modern families and their ever-evolving social, economic, cultural and environmental contexts by examining the relationships between families and food.

**Family meals can have a positive impact on family relationships**

“As an everyday ritual, the family meal can be seen as a symbol of shared family life. It organizes the family, regularly bringing family members together and contributing to their physical, mental and social well-being. It provides a rhythm and predictable structure to the day, which can be psychologically reassuring... With all the work involved, the provision of a family meal is a symbolic demonstration of the care of the meal provider. It may veer more toward love or toward duty, but it always shows commitment to the family group.”


More than 6 in 10 Canadians (62%) surveyed in 2017 said they **eat dinner as a family** at least five times a week.1

Among children and youth in Canada surveyed in 2013–2014, **younger age groups** were more likely to report that they eat meals with family.

Among 11-year-olds, 6 in 10 said they eat evening meals with one or both parents daily (63% of girls, 59% of boys).2

6 in 10

Among **15-year-olds**, more than 4 in 10 said they eat evening meals with one or both parents daily (41% of girls, 45% of boys).3

Research has also shown that **family meals are associated with a variety of beneficial outcomes for youth**, including (but not limited to) positive emotional well-being, prosocial behaviour and life satisfaction,4 and that they can even reduce the risk of substance use.5

Many families are breaking “traditional” eating patterns to facilitate work-life balance

As a growing share of family members are in the paid labour market7 and, with nearly 3 in 10 providing care to family and friends,8 many people across Canada are breaking “traditional” eating patterns as they adapt to manage and integrate their multiple responsibilities at home, at work and in their community. This is particularly true for younger generations – a highly mobile group that is more likely to report eating “on the go” than their older counterparts.

More than one-quarter (26%) of Canadians surveyed in 2017 agree with the statement “My work-life balance does not permit me to prepare and/or eat my meals at home,” with this share decreasing with age.9,10

Generation Z (born 1996 and later)
Generation X (born 1965–1976)
Baby Boomers (born 1946–1964)

While a lot of our meals are now “ready-to-eat” and/or being eaten “on the go,” 42% of surveyed Canadians agree that “As I don’t have time during the week, I make an effort to cook a good meal on the weekend.”11
Many Canadians are eating alone and “on the go”

Data from a 2017 study conducted by researchers from Dalhousie University12 provides a modern snapshot of some of the eating patterns of Canadians:

**Breakfast**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>74%</td>
<td>Three-quarters (74%) of surveyed Canadians reported that they eat breakfast every day, while more than one-quarter (26%) said they do not.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18%</td>
<td>Nearly 1 in 5 surveyed Canadians (18%) said they eat breakfast at work or “on the go.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30%</td>
<td>30% of surveyed Canadians said that they mostly eat breakfast with family and friends, while 67% said they mostly eat alone.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Lunch**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>87%</td>
<td>87% of surveyed Canadians reported that they eat lunch every day, while 13% said they do not.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39%</td>
<td>39% of surveyed Canadians reported that they eat lunch at their desk, 25% said that they always eat their lunch at a common cafeteria or lounge and 37% said they eat lunch at home.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Dinner**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17%</td>
<td>17% of surveyed Canadians reported that they mostly eat lunch with family and friends, while 25% mostly said they eat with colleagues and 58% said they mostly eat alone.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Families adapt and react with the resources available to them to ensure that dietary needs are being met.

Research has shown that the increase in food being consumed outside the family home coupled with the decline in time spent on food-related activities can contribute to a “de-skilling” with regard to food and nutrition.14

Canada’s “food landscape” has an impact on family nutrition

Many factors contribute to the composition of family diets, including (but not limited to) family finances, the availability of food, changes in work and family life and the impact of advertising and marketing.15 Families adapt and react with the resources available to them to ensure that dietary needs are being met.

The Canada Food Guide recommends 4 to 6 servings of fruits and vegetables per day for children under age 14, and 7 to 10 servings per day for older age groups.16

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>32%</td>
<td>Nearly one-third (32%) of Canadians surveyed in 2015 reported that they consume fruits and vegetables 5 or more times per day (38% of women, 25% of men).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$4.39 billion

According to a 2017 study, more than three-quarters of Canadians aren’t meeting Canada Food Guide recommendations for fruit and vegetable consumption, with a resulting estimated economic burden to society of is $4.39 billion per year.18
Over the past half-century, Canada’s “food landscape” has been transformed by the rise of processed and ultra-processed foods (e.g. frozen foods, ready-to-eat meals, packaged snacks, etc.). These products offer long shelf lives and high profits for food producers, as well as convenience for consumers, but are also known to be less nutritious, and ultra-processed foods have been found to contribute to obesity and chronic disease in Canada and abroad.19

Between 1953 and 2011, there was a significant shift in what kinds of foods families reported buying:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1953</th>
<th>2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>53%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The share of food budgets spent on unprocessed and minimally processed foods fell from 53% to 41%.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1953</th>
<th>2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>37%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The share of food budgets spent on processed and ultra-processed foods increased from 37% to 54%.

“Food literacy” and involvement with food-related activities can benefit families

Some health professionals and researchers have shown that “food literacy” - household attitudes, skills and knowledge about food - can have an impact on our well-being, as it is associated with increased diet quality.

The development of food skills such as meal planning and preparation is seen as an essential component of food literacy, and it can be particularly important for youth, since experiences with food in the family home have been found to have a positive impact on food skills.22

Many families reported that their children are involved with household food activities, such as choosing meals, grocery shopping, meal preparation or even cooking meals for themselves. Rates varied based on a variety of socio-demographic variables, as seen in the table below:

Children’s involvement in household food activities, Canada, 2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marital status</th>
<th>Choice of meals</th>
<th>Grocery shopping</th>
<th>Meal preparation</th>
<th>Cooking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common law</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginal status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigrant</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OVERALL</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Food security has a significant impact on family well-being

Food security/insecurity is an issue that is deeply intertwined with the health and economic well-being of families. When families face obstacles in securing the quantity and quality of food they need to thrive, it becomes all the harder for them to be healthy and live productive, happy lives.

Food insecurity has been identified as a social determinant of health in Canada, one that is intertwined with the main determinant: socioeconomic status. Research has found that food insecurity can have wide-ranging negative health impacts, including (but not limited to) contributing to the development of heart disease, diabetes, stress and food allergies, lower educational outcomes, family stress, depression and a variety of chronic conditions.

A 2012 study from Statistics Canada suggests that parents in food-insecure households often “protect” their youngsters from food insecurity by reducing the variety and quantity of their own meals so their children can eat better, which accounted for their significantly higher rate of food insecurity (8.2% compared with 4.9%).

According to a 2016 study, some households are more likely than others to experience food insecurity, including (but not limited to):

- **Households with children** under age 18 (15.6% versus a 10.4% food insecurity rate for households without children)
- **Lone-parent families headed by women** (33.5%)
- **Households in Nunavut** (60%)
- **People living in rented households** (24.5%)
- **Households with an income below the Low Income Measure** (29.2%)

Some individuals are more likely than others to experience food insecurity:

- Food insecurity rates were higher than the national average in 2014 (12%) for people with an Aboriginal identity (26%) and for Black people (29%).
- Nearly 1 in 8 people (13%) helped by food banks in Canada in March 2016 were immigrants and refugees.
- More than half (52%) of Inuit living in Inuit Nunangat aged 25 and over lived in food-insecure households in 2012.

Nearly one-third (32%) of these Inuit reported that they ate less than they should because they could not afford to buy food.

More than one-quarter (27%) of these Inuit reported experiencing hunger because they could not afford enough food.

Among Inuit living in Inuit Nunangat, women, those raising children, the unemployed, those living in crowded housing and those reporting weaker extended family ties were more likely to report experiencing food insecurity.
Half of surveyed Canadians said rising food costs are “one of the most important” issues facing the country today.

One 2017 study found that the widespread *malnutrition experienced by Indigenous children in Canada’s residential school system* has had (and continues to have) a *multi-generational impact*.

Prolonged undernutrition, the authors found, contributed to higher rates of obesity and chronic disease among residential school survivors, and infants born to mothers with these conditions were *more likely* to develop insulin resistance and diabetes themselves. Furthermore, they found that developmental consequences of hunger can even affect adult *grandchildren*.41

One of the main factors contributing to these higher levels of food insecurity is the *cost of food* (relative to family income), which is higher in Northern regions due to a variety of factors, including transportation, the cost of maintaining stores in remote communities, food spoilage and inventory costs.42

Estimates from the Revised Northern Food Basket in 2015 indicated that it costs between $328 and $488 per week to provide a healthy diet to a family of four in an *isolated Inuit community*, compared with $209 in a southern city centre such as Ottawa.

However, the impact of the cost of food isn’t restricted to Northern and remote communities, as *food prices have increased significantly across the country* in recent years.

In 2015, households across Canada spent an average $8,600 on food, an increase of 9.9% since 2010.43

More than one-quarter (29%) of household food expenditures went toward *restaurant meals*, up from 27% in 2010.

While half (54%) of Canadians surveyed in 2017 said they find groceries easy to afford, 57% said it’s *become more difficult to afford* to feed their households over the past year.44

52% of families *with children* said they find it easy to afford groceries, compared with 42% for those *without children*.

4 in 10 of those who said it’s become more difficult to afford groceries said they’ve been *choosing less healthy options* in the aisle to manage the rising prices.45

Half (53%) of surveyed Canadians said rising food costs are “one of the most important” issues facing the country today.46

One other factor that can impact family food and well-being is the *availability of healthy and affordable food* in their community. Many people across Canada live in neighbourhoods that have inadequate geographic access to sources of nutritious foods (e.g. grocery stores) — areas that are often referred to as “food deserts.”47

Research from Canada suggests that food availability is poorer in rural and remote areas48 and in neighbourhoods of low socioeconomic status.49, 50, 51 This is significant for the well-being of families because food deserts can contribute to social disparities in diet and diet-related health outcomes (e.g. cardiovascular disease, diabetes, obesity, etc.).52

Research from Canada suggests that food availability is poorer in rural and remote areas and in neighbourhoods of low socioeconomic status.
Many families access food banks to ensure an adequate diet for family members

**Though food banks and community supports were never intended to be permanent solutions to food insecurity, they have played an important role in ensuring access to food for diverse families across Canada.**

More than 863,000 people across Canada accessed food banks in March 2016 alone – up 1.3% from the same period in 2015, and 28% higher than in 2008.53

8 out of 10 provinces reported an increase in food bank use between March 2015 and March 2016.

**Families of all income types** accessed food banks in 2016,55 including (but not limited to) those generating family income through:

- Employment 15%
- Social assistance 45%
- Disability-related income supports 18%
- Pension 8%

40% of households who accessed food banks in March 2016 were families with children.

36% of individuals accessing food banks in March 2016 were under age 18, even though this age group accounted for only 16.6% of the total population in Canada.

**Seniors**, who accounted for 16.9% of Canada’s population in 2016,54 represented 5.3% of people who accessed food banks in March 2016 (slightly higher in rural areas, at 6%).

This Statistical Snapshot publication is dedicated to **David Northcott**, CM, OM, retired Executive Director of Winnipeg Harvest Food Bank and a founder of both the Canadian Association of Food Banks and the Manitoba Association of Food Banks. David recently completed his second full term on the Vanier Institute Board of Directors, where his enthusiasm, dedication to family well-being and generous heart has had an impact on the entire Vanier Institute team.

David has earned significant recognition for work on hunger and family well-being, including being named a member of the Order of Manitoba in 2000 and receiving the Queen’s Canada 125 Medal for Community Service, the Order of Canada and the University of Manitoba’s Distinguished Service Award.

The Vanier Institute team, our Board of Directors and many people who study, serve and support families across Canada are honoured to have worked with this distinguished and devoted family man. **Thank you, David!**

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3 Ibid.


7 In 2014, 69% of couples in Canada with children under 16 were dual-earner couples, up from 36% in 1976. In more than half (51%) of these couples, both parents were working full-time, up from 24% in 1976. To learn more about the evolving working patterns of parents in Canada, see A Snapshot of Women, Work and Family in Canada (link: http://bit.ly/2vJvmax) and A Snapshot of Men, Work and Family Relationships in Canada (link: http://bit.ly/2isSAXs).


10 As of 2017, the age groups for these categories are 18 to 21 for Generation Z, 22 to 40 for Millennials, 41 to 52 for Generation X and 53 to 71 for Baby Boomers.


12 Ibid.


16 For more information, visit the website for the Canada Food Guide (link: http://bit.ly/2wGzQm).


19 Jean-Claude Moubouar et al., 2014.

20 This study defines “minimal processing” as food production that does not add or introduce any substance, and usually subtracts parts of the food, without significantly changing its nature and/or use. Examples of such processes include cleaning, peeling, portioning, drying, pasteurization and vacuum packing.


22 Slater and Mudryj, 2016.


26 According to Statistics Canada, “Food security is commonly understood to exist in a household when all people, at all times, have access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food for an active and healthy life. Conversely, food insecurity occurs when food quality and/or quantity are compromised, typically associated with limited financial resources.” Link: http://bit.ly/2is29dy.


28 Ibid.


31 Note that this study included data from participating jurisdictions only, which included Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, the Northwest Territories and Nunavut.


33 Ibid.


35 Tarasuk, Mitchell and Dachner, 2016.

36 Data from the 2012 Aboriginal Peoples Survey (APS) found that people with an Aboriginal identity were 2.5 times more likely to report food insecurity than their non-Aboriginal counterparts (20% and 8%, respectively). Link: http://bit.ly/2wCvEld.

37 Tarasuk, Mitchell and Dachner, 2016.


39 From Statistics Canada: “Inuit Nunangat is the homeland of Inuit of Canada. It includes the communities located in the four Inuit regions: Nunatsiavut (Northern coastal Labrador), Nunavik (Northern Quebec), the territory of Nunavut and the Inuvialuit region of the Northwest Territories. These regions collectively encompass the area traditionally occupied by Inuit in Canada.” Link: http://bit.ly/2zPza0q.


44 Angus Reid Institute, Rising Food Prices: Canadians – Regardless of Income Level – Say It’s Getting Harder to Feed Their Families (April 4, 2016). Link: http://bit.ly/2wGnQ4L.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.


49 Larsen Gilliland, 2008.


53 Food Banks Canada, 2016.


55 Food Banks Canada, 2016.

56 Current or recent. Includes income from a paycheque or from Employment Insurance (EI).
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To learn more about families and family experiences in Canada, see our other *Statistical Snapshots* publications. This series brings together research and data from a variety of sources, providing readers with brief statistical analyses of families and family experiences in Canada. Beyond “just the facts,” *Statistical Snapshots* publications explore modern families and the social, economic, cultural and environmental contexts that shape family life in a simple and visually engaging format. This publication is designed for educators, students, journalists, social service professionals and anyone interested in understanding modern families and family experiences in Canada.

### A Snapshot of Grandparents in Canada
Canada’s grandparents are a diverse and evolving group, many of whom contribute greatly to family functioning and well-being in their roles as mentors, nurturers, caregivers, child care providers, historians, spiritual guides and “holders of the family narrative.” This edition of the Vanier Institute’s *Statistical Snapshots* series provides statistical analyses of grandparents in Canada and their evolving social and economic contexts.

### A Snapshot of Workplace Mental Health in Canada
Mental health conditions can have a significant impact on individuals, but they can also “trick up” to have a detrimental effect on families, workplaces, communities, the economy and society at large. This edition of the Vanier Institute’s *Statistical Snapshots* series explores mental health, families and work – three key parts of our lives that intersect and interact in complex ways that affect our well-being.

### A Snapshot of Military and Veteran Families in Canada
Canada’s military and Veteran families are diverse, resilient and strong, and they are a great source of pride for the country. They engage with – and play important roles in – their workplaces, communities and the country at large. This edition of the Vanier Institute’s *Statistical Snapshots* series provides information and insights about military and Veteran families in Canada.

### A Snapshot of Family Caregiving and Work in Canada
At some point in our lives, there is a high likelihood that each of us will provide care to someone we know – and receive care ourselves. Family members are typically the first to step up to provide, manage and sometimes pay for this care. This edition of the Vanier Institute’s *Statistical Snapshots* series highlights some of the family realities and trends that shape the “landscape of care” across the country.

### A Snapshot of Women, Work and Family in Canada
Over many generations, women in Canada have had diverse employment experiences that continue to evolve and change. This publication is a companion piece to the Vanier Institute’s *Fifty Years of Women, Work and Family in Canada* timeline, providing visually engaging data about the diverse work and family experiences of women across Canada.

### A Snapshot of Population Aging and Intergenerational Relationships in Canada
Canada’s population is aging rapidly, with a higher share of seniors than ever before. Using new statistics from the 2016 Census, this edition of the Vanier Institute’s *Statistical Snapshots* series explores the evolving demographic landscape across the country through a family lens.