

When Cupboards Are Bare

Food Insecurity and Public Health

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Food security is an issue that is deeply intertwined with the economic well-being of families. It is a serious social, economic and public health concern, felt not only by the estimated 3.9 million Canadians who live in households that reported experiencing some level of food insecurity in 2011, but also by the communities in which they live.¹ When families face obstacles in securing the quantity and quality of meals they need to thrive, it becomes all the harder for them to be healthy and live productive, happy lives.

When the Canadian Medical Association recently consulted Canadians about public health issues in a series of town hall meetings, food insecurity was identified as one of the main social determinants of health.² Without a stable and healthy food supply, people are more likely to develop a range of health issues, such as heart disease, diabetes, stress and even food allergies.³

Since the beginning of the 2008 economic recession, families have increasingly depended on food banks and other community supports for essential support securing the quantity and quality of food they need. The number of people who accessed food banks across the country in March 2013 was 23% higher than in 2008, and half were families with children.⁴

Food banks and community supports were never intended to be permanent solutions to food insecurity. Many organizations providing food to families are feeling the pressure resulting from the economic downturn. Faced with increased demand, some food banks have had to reduce the assistance they provide – a reality with serious consequences for the health and well-being of Canadian families.

While there are multiple contributing factors to food insecurity, including geographic isolation, food literacy and transportation issues, economic insecurity is at the heart of the matter. Families can't eat when they don't have the power to buy. People who face disproportionately high levels of poverty, such as

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lone-parent mothers and Aboriginal people, therefore also experience higher levels of food insecurity.

Food bank users typically live with limited financial resources, living in poverty and experiencing social inequality.⁵ This is reflected in patterns of food bank use: half of households who accessed food banks in March 2013 relied on social assistance as their primary source of income.⁶

Whether it begins with improving the health or increasing the wealth of Canadians, access to the quality and quantity of food we need is essential for living well and reaching our full potential.

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¹ Valerie Tarasuk, Andy Mitchell and Naomi Dachner, *Household Food Insecurity in Canada*, 2011 (2013), accessed October 27, 2013, <http://bit.ly/17HKPAE>.

² Canadian Medical Association, "Health Care in Canada: What Makes Us Sick?" *Canadian Medical Association Town Hall Report* (July 2013), accessed September 19, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1e8IAGS>.

³ Juha Mikkonen and Dennis Raphael, *Social Determinants of Health: The Canadian Facts* (2010), accessed October 10, 2013, <http://bit.ly/bqrUw6>.

⁴ Food Banks Canada, *Hunger Count 2013* (November 2013), accessed November 5, 2013, <http://bit.ly/cGClaz>.

⁵ Linda Gionet and Shirin Roshanafshar, "Select Health Indicators of First Nations People Living Off Reserve, Métis and Inuit," *Health at a Glance*, Statistics Canada catalogue no. 82-624-X (January 2013), accessed October 10, 2013, <http://bit.ly/X8jVYN>.

⁶ Food Banks Canada.