BACKGROUNDER:
POVERTY AND FOOD INSECURITY IN CANADA

According to some estimates, nearly one in seven Canadians lives in poverty.[1] Poverty has serious economic and social consequences, and current government attempts to address it have been ineffectual. Food insecurity, largely a result of poverty, affects 13 per cent of Canadian households to varying degrees[2], and has been linked to poor health outcomes. Food banks have proliferated as a way to respond to the problem; however, while they address emergency food needs, they have not reduced the incidence of hunger and food insecurity in Canada.

Poverty in Canada

Estimating the number of people living in poverty is challenging as there is no agreed-upon definition of what it means to be poor in Canada.[3] There are, however, several measures of income that serve as unofficial poverty measures, such as the Low Income Cut-Off (LICO), Low Income Measure (LIM), and the Market Basket Measure (MBM).[i] Statistics Canada used the LIM to report on low-income levels from the most recent census, reporting that in 2015, 14 per cent of Canadians were living in low-income households, the equivalent of 4.8 million people.[4,5] The LIM varies by household size: the low-income threshold is $22,133 for a person living alone and $44,266 for a family of four.[6]

The gap between rich and poor continues to widen[7] and is at an all-time high,[8] with the top one per cent of Canadian earners receiving almost one third of all income growth between 1997 and 2007.[9] In the last few decades incomes have stagnated and middle-class earnings have declined significantly contributing to proliferation of inequality in Canada.[10] Similarly, while incomes for the highest-earning 20 per cent of Canadians increased by 28.9 per cent between 1976 and 2010, those of the lowest 20 per cent dropped by 22.5 per cent.[11] This is worrisome not only for those who find themselves at the low end of this spectrum, but also for the rest of the population: recent IMF and OECD reports have shown that income inequality holds back economic growth.[12,13] Wealth inequality, too, is increasing: in 2012, the top 10 per

[i] For an explanation of income measures in Canada, see Aldridge, H. (2017). *How do we measure poverty?* Retrieved from Maytree website: https://maytree.com/wp-content/uploads/How_do_we_measure_poverty_May2017.pdf

cent of Canadians owned 47.9 per cent of the country's wealth, and the bottom 30 per cent owned less than one per cent.[14]

Estimates put the public and private costs of poverty in Canada between $72 and 85 billion, this cost is an accumulation of the economic burdens created by poverty.[15] These burdens include higher heath care costs, increased use of social services, and increased costs related to the justice system, among others. In addition, the social effects of poverty are widespread and deeply entrenched. Poverty leads to poor physical and mental health outcomes, higher crime rates, and developmental challenges in children,[16] as well as a lower sense of community belonging.[17] Although the benefits of a poverty reduction plan would be experienced gradually overtime, investing in pulling people out of poverty will benefit everyone in society and underlines the importance to implementing a plan now.[18]

Canadian federal, provincial and territorial governments' current attempts to narrow the gap between rich and poor are not working. As of March 2018, a single person on social assistance through Ontario Works receives $721 per month or $1,151 per month for a single person receiving Ontario Disability Support Program.[19] After accounting for inflation, these figures are significantly lower than social assistance rates were in the early 1990s.[20] Poverty in Canada is not only a social assistance problem but also a problem of low income. According to the most recent national statistics[ii], 29 per cent of households with incomes below the LIM are food insecure.[21] As household income decreases, the risk of severe food insecurity increases: 45 per cent of household with incomes below half of the LIM threshold are food insecure.[22] 70 per cent of people living in poverty in Canada are employed but aren't earning enough to afford basic necessities.[23]

While several provincial and territorial governments have adopted poverty reduction strategies, the government of Canada is only beginning to develop a national poverty reduction strategy. As of September 2017, the Government of Canada concluded its consultation with various Canadians in person and online as a first step in developing this strategy. The aims of this strategy are to address the causes and consequences of poverty such as income, housing, employment, health, early childhood education and care, and food security.[24]

Food insecurity in Canada

Most recent national statistics indicate that 1.7 million Canadian households struggle to obtain food security which amounts to one in eight households.[25] As the average Canadian household contains 2.5 people,[26] this estimate places the number of food insecure Canadians at around 4 million. Children are more likely to be affected by food insecurity, with one in six Canadian children under 18, or 1.15 million, living in food insecure homes.[27] The above figures are based on Statistics Canada data and do not include people living on First Nations reserves or people who are homeless.[28]

[ii] The PROOF food insecurity policy research team recommends using 2012 data to report nation-wide food insecurity statistics because 2012 is the latest year that food insecurity was measured across all provinces and territories. A new national estimate of food insecurity prevalence will not be available until data from the 2017-2018 CCHS cycle is released.

A person is food insecure when they are unable to consistently access sufficient, adequate food due to financial limitations. The severity of this can range from concerns arising from one's ability to afford food to skipping meals or going entire days without eating. Insufficient income is a key determinant of food insecurity. 70 per cent of households with household members receiving social assistance experienced some level of food insecurity.[29]

Reports from across Canada show that accessing nutritious food is a significant challenge for people living on low incomes.[30,31,32] The affordability of healthy food is evaluated using the Nutritious Food Basket method, which costs out the prices of roughly 60 basic food items.[33] The estimated cost of a Nutritious Food Basket varies across Canada. A Nova Scotia study found that minimum wage earners were consistently unable to meet their nutritional needs after paying for other essential monthly expenses.[34] Similarly, the cost of a nutritious food basket in Ottawa was $294 per month for a single person in 2017, which is inaccessible considering the average rental cost for a bachelor apartment is $812 per month and Ontario's monthly social assistance rate is $721.[35,36]

Food banks, originally intended as an emergency response, have proliferated and become in the mainstream the primary intervention to address hunger and food insecurity. In March 2016, 863,492 Canadians accessed a food bank—a 28 per cent increase from 2008.[37] It is estimated that each month in Canada, over 850,000 people obtain assistance from food banks.[38] Since 2008, food bank clients have doubled the amount of months they require assistance from food banks in Toronto; among food bank users in Toronto reliance has doubled from 12 months to 24.[39] However caution must be used in correlating the number of households who use food banks to point to the actual number of households who are food insecure in Canada. This is because not everyone who is food insecure uses a food bank due to multiple reasons including stigma. Food bank numbers represent the category of those who are the most severely food insecure and therefore underestimate the actual number of people who are food insecure including those who are moderately and marginally food insecure.[40]

Children, visible minorities, and First Nations people all experience higher levels of food insecurity than the rest of the Canadian population.[41] This is especially evident in the North: in Nunavut, the rate of household food insecurity is 45 per cent, and 62 per cent of Nunavummiut children live in food insecure households.[42] One in five households in Northern Canada are food insecure.[43] The costs of food in Northern Canada is significantly higher, with groceries for an average family cost more than $400 per week.[44]

Food insecurity is also a health issue. Correlations have been found between food insecurity and nutrient inadequacies in Canadian adults and adolescents.[45] People who are food insecure consume fewer servings of fruits, vegetables, and dairy products and have lower vitamin intakes. These dietary deficiencies lead to higher rates of diet-related illnesses such as heart disease, diabetes, and high blood pressure, as well as food allergies.[46] In Ontario, annual health care costs are 49 per cent higher for adults

living in moderately food insecure households and 121 per cent higher for adults living in severely food insecure households.[47] These findings suggest that addressing food insecurity could dramatically reduce health care costs and improve health. Malnutrition during childhood can also lead to long-term health effects: for example, a study of Inuit children found that moderate to severe food insecurity led to stunted growth and anemia.[48]

Community Food Centre Canada's theory of change

Recognizing that there is no adequate policy response to the chronic problem of food insecurity, Community Food Centres (CFCs) offer emergency food access programs, operating them to the highest standards of health and quality, and using the most accountable, transparent policies possible. While Community Food Centres Canada does not support the creation of new food banks, we sometimes partner with and work to transform and develop existing food banks into spaces where healthy, fresh, whole foods are offered in a dignified manner. CFCs also offer healthy community meals as a standard component of the program mix at each centre, which meet immediate needs and provide the opportunity for social connection and connection to other community resources.

CFCs also offer cooking and gardening programs, affordable produce markets, and other programs which promote healthy eating behaviours and build community connections. 77 per cent of CFC participants surveyed have made healthy changes to their diets because of their participation in CFC programs and 95 per cent of participants said they feel they belong to a community at their CFC.[49] Research shows that many diet-related illnesses and chronic conditions can be prevented or improved through changes in diet and lifestyle, and that people who feel more connected to their communities have lower rates of anxiety and depression, and higher rates of self-esteem.[50]

CFCs avoid the traditional signifiers of food banks and soup kitchens and strive to create a dignified and respectful environment. Knowing that people are more likely to get involved in places where they feel comfortable and valued, CFC gathering spaces are designed to be bright and welcoming. CFCs adopt professional service standards that are respectful, avoid intrusive questions and line-ups, distribute food fairly and consistently, and offer an access point to other supports, programs, and services.

People who arrive at a CFC often have many pressing needs that are not directly related to food. CFCs train peer advocates with lived experience of poverty and marginalization to help community members access necessary material supports in the wider community and provide them with important social supports. CFC peer advocates also place an emphasis on reducing stigma by working to provide a welcoming atmosphere and respectful and dignified service.

We know that people living on low incomes are most impacted by food issues such as food insecurity, diet-related illness, and an unsustainable food system. They are therefore an essential voice in the development of any real and lasting solutions. CFCs engage community members in civic engagement activities that connect them to the issues and empower them to make their voices heard. We look for ways to foreground community leaders in everything we do. CFCs also work to encourage leadership and input from participants via volunteer opportunities and training.

We never lose site of the role of government in solving the problems of food insecurity and poverty, diet-related illness, and our unsustainable food system at scale. While CFCs offer much-needed services, supports, and programs, only government policies addressing income security, housing, health, agriculture, and other underlying issues can affect widespread change.

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