

Why care about food insecurity?

Food insecurity is caused by, and has effects on, important areas of our lives—our families, children, environment, economy, communities and health.

We care because of our FAMILIES & CHILDREN

Food insecurity can be very stressful. Parents especially can be anxious about having enough food for their children and being able to give them good food so they grow up strong and healthy. Some parents even worry that their children might be taken from them if they cannot feed them enough good food.



Some families can become preoccupied with food—worrying all day about whether there is enough food for dinner and the next day. This kind of stress can be bad for our relationships and health. Feeling stressed and insecure can lead to depression, anger, diabetes, and high blood pressure. It can also make it harder for us to fight off infections like colds and flu.

Parents are right to be concerned about whether their children have enough good food. Poor nutrition in childhood can affect the development of both the body and mind. Not having enough good food can make it harder for children to do well at school and even stay in school. Poor nutrition in childhood has effects that can last a lifetime.

Voices *“The most difficult situation I’ve had to face is the realization that I cannot afford to feed my family the foods that I know they need. Not just the foods they need for every day meals, but also special foods for each of their individual developmental stages. At times I have become very depressed and angry with myself for having three children and not being able to properly maintain the type of life they so deserve. I’ve gone through stores with \$20 knowing that this is for two weeks... I would have never thought that I would be in such a predicament...”*

We care because of our COMMUNITIES

Food insecurity, poverty, inequality, and unemployment can harm our communities and lead to community breakdown.

In rural areas many people have been forced to leave their communities because they can no longer make a living as a farmer or fisher. In cities, food insecurity can lead to crime when people are driven to steal or sell drugs to avoid hunger or homelessness. Food insecurity can lead to us feeling that our neighborhood is not a safe, healthy or comfortable place to live.

Equity and social justice happen when people are treated fairly, when everyone in the community has the same opportunities in life, and when the community works together so everyone is secure. Equity and social justice are part of the web supporting healthy communities.

In a healthy community, people can earn a living and can get the food they need. A healthy community is a place where people feel connected to each other and feel they are a part of the community. Healthy communities are a result of supportive public policies that consider social and health impacts. These kinds of policies can improve the health of individuals and communities. The *Food for Thought* box below provides an example of healthy public policies.

Key Term

Community Food Security

“A situation in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes self-reliance and social justice”

Hamm and Bellows, 2003



At the Carlington Health and Community Centre in Ottawa/Carlton participants harvest strawberries for free or pay a reduced fee for harvesting a section of a pick-your-own strawberry farm late in the season. Participants are able to keep all they can use and share the remainder with family, friends and neighbours. Workshops on making preserves, freezing fresh produce and useful recipes were conducted at the Centre.

We care because of our ENVIRONMENT

The way we now produce and process food cannot support a sustainable food system—that is, a way of producing food that will last into the future and ensure that our children and our children’s children will have the food they need.

The methods currently used for growing and gathering food can affect the environment in many ways. For example, in some areas:

- There is a loss of natural vegetation.
- Some kinds of plants are being wiped out.
- Fish stocks are running out.
- The quality and amount of land available for growing food is declining.
- Topsoil—the living fertile part of the soil—is blowing and washing away.
- Pesticides and bacteria (for example, E. Coli) are contaminating our water supplies and adding toxins to the air we breathe.
- The traditional food sources of Aboriginal and Innu communities are being contaminated and many are even being wiped out.
- The oil and gas used to transport food long distances contributes to poorer air quality.

To ensure sustainable food systems, we need planning and policies that protect our land, water and resources. We can see the results of poor planning and policy very close to home—right here in Canada, over-production and unsustainable management have led to the collapse of the cod fisheries and other types of fish stocks are threatened.

Voices



“Growing the grain in my field, on my farm... [my chickens/turkeys] are locally grown and produced and I take it to the local market or local consumers within an hour of my farm... it’s way more sustainable for me and my farm and the consumer and the whole world in general, ‘cause it’s not diesel, diesel, diesel.”

Key Term

Sustainable food system

A way of producing and distributing food that protects the environment and ensures that our land, air and water will be able to continue producing food in the future.

Major-Briere and Chaudhuri, 2002

We care because of our ECONOMY

Canada has the most concentrated food economy of any Western Country — a very small number of powerful companies control most of the food economy.

This means that local economies suffer because small, community-based businesses—especially small farmers—are squeezed out by large-scale agri-businesses. The money we spend on food does not remain in our communities—in many cases the money doesn't even stay in Canada. Jobs are lost and when people have to travel farther outside their community to work there is less money for food.

The average income for a farm in Canada has fallen to levels not seen since the 1930s.

An example of the impact of these economic policies comes from Ontario. In spite of the productivity of the fertile fruit and vegetable farmlands in Southern Ontario, in 1994 the province spent \$1.9 billion dollars more on importing fruits and vegetables than it earned from exporting its own.



“They did a study in ‘66 in [our county] and a beef farmer could sell three beef, market-ready steers... at the auction and go buy a brand new pick-up truck... That was about 30 years ago, 40 years ago... [Today] you couldn’t even get power windows for that... it wouldn’t even make the down payment.”



Buying from local food systems means trying to buy directly from farmers at farm stands or markets, or eating at locally owned small-business restaurants rather than restaurant chains. Money spent in a local food system stays in the community longer and provides jobs to local people. Buying directly from farmers also means that the farmer earns more money, rather than having the money go to the middleman, like food processors and retailers.

The Toronto FoodShare Kitchen Incubator Program is a fully equipped kitchen that small businesses can rent to do cooking or catering and test out recipes or restaurant ideas. The incubator has helped over 20 local businesses get started and so far 11 have become successful local enterprises working from their own space. These businesses have created local jobs.

Toronto FoodShare

We care because of our HEALTH

A healthy environment, healthy economy and healthy community all contribute to our health as individuals and as a population.

All of these factors affect our ability to get the food we need, now and in the future. If these aspects of our lives are put at risk, so is our health.

Environmental, economic and social factors are all determinants of health. For example, income and social status is the most significant determinant of health — that is, the more money you have the healthier you will be. Income plays a major role in access to food and has a significant impact on food security.

Just as having enough money is good for your health, poverty and inequality are very bad for your health. Not having enough to eat and not having good quality, nutritious food can have short- and long-term effects on mental and physical health. For example, poor nutrition leads to chronic illnesses such as heart disease and diabetes.

Voices



“Most parents [living on low income]— their main goal is for their kids not to be hungry. You know, does it mean buying a bag of apples that they eat for a couple of days or the hot-dogs they eat for a week. And you’re gonna be a lot fuller eating a hotdog.”

Food for Thought

More money is spent on advertising for processed foods and junk foods than for nutritious foods or healthy choices. For example, in the US about \$1 million a year is spent to advertise the “5 to 10 a day” campaign encouraging the consumption of fruits and vegetables. In comparison, \$10 billion a year is spent on advertising processed and junk foods; McDonalds spends \$1 billion a year alone! Children are exposed to much of this advertising. About 80% of food commercials aired on Saturday morning kids’ TV shows are for foods of low nutritional value, such as high sugar cereals and candy.

Adapted from: Media Awareness Network, www.media-awareness.ca

The Determinants of Health

are a set of factors that act together to influence the health of individuals and communities. In this workbook, we approach food security from a determinants of health perspective. This means that we recognize that food insecurity has a profound impact on health because it is so closely connected to other aspects of our lives. We also recognize that we can have an impact on food security by developing healthy public policies that affect any of these determinants.

The Public Health Agency of Canada identifies 12 determinants of health: Income and Social Status, Social Support Networks, Education, Employment/Working Conditions, Social Environments, Physical Environments, Personal Health Practices and Coping Skills, Healthy Child Development, Biology and Genetic Endowment, Health Services, Gender, and Culture.

To understand how each of these determinants can influence our health it helps to look at an example. Read through the following example about Amber. After each point the determinants of health that are at the root of each of these issues affecting her are indicated in brackets. Only when we recognize how complex and interrelated the determinants of health are can we begin to understand how to address the root causes of food insecurity.

Amber's Story

Amber's co-worker had to drive her to the hospital because she passed out at work this afternoon. But why did she pass out?

Because she has been skipping meals. (personal health practices and coping skills)

But why does she skip meals?

Because she doesn't have much food in her house. (social and physical environments)

Why doesn't she get more food to eat?

Because she only has \$30 left until her next paycheck and she doesn't have a way to get to the grocery store, which is pretty far from her house. (income and social status, physical environments)

But why is the grocery store so far away?

There used to be grocery store a few minutes walk from Amber's house but it closed down a few months ago after a big all-in-one supermarket opened up a few miles away. (physical environments)

But why doesn't she have more money for food or transportation?

Because she's a single parent and she only works part-time. (employment/working conditions, gender)

But why doesn't she work more hours?

Because she can't find affordable childcare for the whole day. (social environments, employment/working conditions)

Why doesn't she have a family member or friend help her out with childcare?

Because she hasn't lived in the city for long and doesn't know many people, her family all live in a smaller rural community outside the city. (social support networks)

But why did she move to the city?

Because there are not many jobs in her home community, the fish plant closed down and many of the shops are closing too. (social environments, employment/working conditions, physical environments)

But why did the fish plant close.....?