



SPOTLIGHT ON

FOOD SECURITY

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Young people in Nova Scotia understand and value having access to healthy food options, yet too many are living with food insecurity. Disparities and inequities, influenced by race and socioeconomic status, are significant contributors to this challenge, which requires urgent action.

WHY WE NEED TO FOCUS OUR ATTENTION ON FOOD SECURITY

The right to healthy, nutritious food is a fundamental right for all children.¹ Indeed, this right is enshrined in various articles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and ending hunger in all its forms is a United Nations Sustainable Development Goal.²

Research shows that children and youth who experience food insecurity are at a substantially

greater risk of poorer mental and physical health outcomes.³⁻⁵ Yet in Nova Scotia and across Canada, too many children continue to live in food-insecure households. In fact, households across the country with children under 18 years of age routinely have higher food insecurity than those without children.⁶

Data from a Nova Scotian study conducted in 2011 found that school children experiencing moderate to severe food insecurity reported



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more mood problems and a lower health-related quality of life than children from food-secure households.⁷ Mood problems were common even among children from households classified as only marginally food insecure.

In another Nova Scotian study children with type 1 diabetes mellitus who were living with families facing food insecurity had higher rates of hospitalization, where their family's food insecurity was the factor that independently predicted whether they would be hospitalized or not.⁸ This demonstrates how the presence of food insecurity can worsen the challenges created by existing health conditions.

Qualitative research about infant food-insecurity in Nova Scotia has also shown that when parents live with food insecurity, infant children may also experience food insecurity and sub-optimal feeding practices.⁹ One reason is that when a parent lacks access to sufficient, healthy food while breastfeeding, they may have poorer nutritional status, which could lead to breastfeeding being stopped early. Another reason is that food insecure families with infants can also have difficulty affording breast milk alternatives (formula). This is concerning as researchers have shown that the first 1,000 days, from conception to two years, is the most critical time for optimizing growth and development through the life course.¹⁰

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exists when all people—at all times—have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to meet their needs.

Conversely, food insecurity occurs when members of a household have inadequate or insecure access to food due to economic or other constraints. The degree to which this occurs is further defined as marginal, moderate, or severe food insecurity.



MONITORING AND ANALYSIS IN CANADA

Canada has regularly monitored the prevalence of rising food insecurity at the population level through the *Household Food Security Survey Module*, which was administered in the *Canadian Community Health Survey* and more recently through Statistics Canada's *Canadian Income Survey*.¹¹ The *Household Food Security Survey Module* captures marginal, moderate, and severe food insecurity: from worrying about the ability to afford food to restricting the quality and quantity of food purchased, and, ultimately, to skipping meals in response to economic compromises.¹¹

The *Household Food Security Survey Module* measures a family's capacity to afford food. This is an important way to assess the complex state of how food fits into the constraints of a household's economic stability, financial assets, and budget.¹¹ The module also helps enhance understanding of how food insecurity can predict adverse mental and physical health and how food insecurity changes as a result of policy interventions.¹¹

Based on the *Household Food Security Survey Module* in 2017-2018, 12.7 percent of households in Canada experienced some level of food insecurity in the previous 12 months, including more than 1.2 million children under the age of 18.¹² The proportion of children under 18 living in households experiencing food insecurity (17.3 percent), was higher than any prior national estimate.¹²

FOOD INSECURITY IN NOVA SCOTIAN CHILDREN

Based on the 2017-2018 *Household Food Security Survey Module*, 19.5 percent of Nova Scotian children—nearly one in five—resided in a food-insecure household, higher than the national average.¹²

Household food insecurity is a highly sensitive measure of material deprivation, a serious indicator of social inequity, and a predictor of child and youth health and well-being. The number of children and youth in Nova Scotia facing food insecurity, is therefore, a grave concern.





FACTORS AFFECTING FOOD SECURITY

Food insecurity is driven by multiple exacerbating factors and can also compound existing vulnerabilities faced by families. The following four important health and social considerations demonstrate this and why food-insecurity risk among households and children is a serious problem.

1. Access to social assistance: The greatest risk factor for household food insecurity in Canada is social assistance.¹² In Nova Scotia, 80.1 percent of households receiving social assistance—a vast majority—reported food insecurity in 2017/2018; this is the third highest among all provinces and territories, exceeded only by Nunavut and Prince Edward Island, and far greater than the other two Atlantic provinces.¹² Those receiving income assistance in New Brunswick reported the lowest food-insecurity rate in Canada (54.9 percent). Newfoundland and Labrador is also well below the Nova Scotia rate (65 percent).¹²

This is deeply troubling. It indicates that current social assistance programs are insufficient to prevent food insecurity. It has been well documented that social assistance levels in Nova Scotia are substantially lower

than in other jurisdictions, and moreover, they have not increased routinely over time with inflation and other changing economic conditions.^{16,17} There is ample evidence that comprehensive improvements to social assistance that integrate features such as indexing to inflation, a poverty-reduction strategy, and targeted benefits (e.g., seniors' pensions and the Canada child benefit) can have demonstrable effects on reducing food insecurity.¹³

2. Poverty: Households living in poverty are more likely to be food insecure.¹² Given the number of children and youth in Nova Scotia living in poverty, it is no surprise that an unacceptable number of Nova Scotian children are also experiencing food insecurity. Too many children lack access to sufficient nutritious food for their optimal growth and development.

The *2019 Nova Scotia Quality of Life Survey* reinforces this stark reality. For example, between one in five and one in three parents reported that they ate less at least once a month because there was not enough food or money for food.¹⁴ Between one in five and one in four reported being unable to purchase affordable nutritious foods at least once a month.¹⁴



- 3. Type of employment:** Having a job does not prevent food insecurity. Employment factors that drive food-insecurity risk include the uncertainty of work (temporary or gig work), seasonal work, low wages, or wages that do not increase with the cost of living.¹⁵ These factors all represent concerns for too many Nova Scotians.¹⁶
- 4. Type of housing:** Lack of affordable housing in Nova Scotia is a further compounding stressor on families and a risk factor for food insecurity. Renters are more vulnerable to food insecurity than those who own a home.¹⁷ According to data from Food Banks Canada, the high cost of housing is consistently a factor in increasing food bank use. In Nova Scotia, 69.2 percent of food bank clients live in market-rent housing, a figure that has been steadily increasing.¹⁸ This reflects a growing concern provincially around a lack of affordable housing for residents. In 2017-18, for example, Halifax had the second-highest prevalence of food insecurity in Canada (16.3 percent) among census metropolitan areas (CMAs).¹²

IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Early research by Statistics Canada indicates that food insecurity has risen significantly across Canada because of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁹ The study found that Canadian households with children were more likely to report food insecurity (19.2 percent) compared to households with no children (12.2 percent).¹⁹

With baseline food-insecurity rates already above the national average, the impact of the pandemic is likely to be considerable for Nova Scotian children and families.

COMMUNITY RESPONSE

Despite the compelling evidence that Nova Scotia has long had a high prevalence of, and critical risk factors for food insecurity among children, dedicated policy responses to increase economic security for families have been few and far between. In their absence, food-based programs including food charities have arisen as a stopgap.





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Food banks, in existence in Canada since the 1980s, were introduced as a temporary measure to support people impacted by economic recession.¹⁵ However, food banks have since become institutionalized as a form of social assistance despite being funded predominantly through community donations.^{15,20} The use of food banks is continuing to increase nationally.

Food bank figures capture only a fraction of those who are food insecure. Although there is some food bank usage data for Nova Scotia, it is not suitable for monitoring the status of food insecurity at a population level. An analysis of Statistics Canada data from the early months of the pandemic showed that just 7.4 percent of food-insecure households made use of charity to access food in the 30 days prior.²¹ Furthermore, research has demonstrated that food banks and other community organizations cannot adequately respond to the range of food needs of different families, such as those with infants.²²

Globally, school food programs play an important role in mitigating some of the adverse effects of food insecurity among school-aged children and youth.²³ The estimated return on investment for school food programs globally is \$3 to \$10 USD, making this a viable social policy option.²³ In 2019, the Canadian government announced

its intention to work towards a national school food program.²⁴ A lack of such a program has meant that access to nutritious foods in schools is patchy across Canada.²⁵

According to Nourish Nova Scotia, 95 percent of schools in Nova Scotia report having a school breakfast program, and participation is trending upwards. Unfortunately, research has shown that the quality of food available in schools is variable and not always in adherence with the provincial school food and nutrition policy.²⁶ The proportion of students accessing school breakfast programs who live in food insecure households in Nova Scotia is not known.

Survey data that reflect the responses of youth provide a small glimpse into the experience of hunger and food access for older children and youth in Nova Scotia. Responses from the *2018-2019 Student Success Survey* indicate that 35 percent of school-aged children and youth struggled to pay attention in class because of hunger.²⁷ The survey also found that roughly 15 percent of students did not or were not planning to eat lunch on the day of the survey.²⁷ Of these, 26 percent did not have anything to eat, and 20 percent said they could not afford to buy lunch.²⁷ Concerningly, almost one in five students in grades 6 to 10 who responded to the *Health Behaviours in School-aged Children*



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survey in Nova Scotia also reported going to school or bed hungry sometimes because there is not enough food at home.²⁸

While these data are self-reported and provide only a snapshot of one point in time, they suggest a troubling number of students do not have access to adequate nutritious food in schools. Furthermore, it is apparent that there is a lack of

robust provincial data on food insecurity. Much of the evidence on food insecurity in Nova Scotia relies on indirect measures of risk. Although newer efforts by Statistics Canada to measure food insecurity hold promise, it will be important to monitor food-insecurity rates among children and youth in Nova Scotia and implement policy responses that support a food-secure future for all children and youth in the province.

THE BOTTOM LINE

- **Food insecurity remains a significant and growing problem for Nova Scotia, and Nova Scotian families with children suffer disproportionately from food insecurity.**
- **The root cause of food insecurity is poverty. Food banks, introduced as a temporary measure, are in greater demand than ever but are not the solution to this complex problem.**
- **A key solution to food insecurity is poverty reduction. Passing legislation that ensures current and future governments in Nova Scotia must have a plan to reduce poverty is an important step for creating ongoing accountability for change.**
- **A clearer picture and fuller understanding of food insecurity among children and youth in Nova Scotia is essential.**

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