

Addressing Food Insecurity through a Basic Income Guarantee

Food insecurity is an escalating, health-threatening, income-rooted problem that must be addressed with income-based solutions. In 2017-18, Statistics Canada's Canadian Community Health Survey showed that 4.4 million people in Canada, more than any previous national estimate, were food insecure.ⁱ The COVID-19 pandemic has led to broad changes in employment, caregiving, health, education, consumer practices, and social connection that have all drastically affected incomes and, in turn, food insecurity. By the beginning of May, 2020, Statistics Canada found that the rate of food insecurity overall had grown significantly from 10.5% to 14.6% of Canadians and that households with children under 18 experienced a much higher rate (19.2%) than households with no children (12.2%).ⁱⁱ The Government of Canada, with its quick and widespread implementation of the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), likely prevented many more Canadians from going without adequate food, but the sharp rise in food insecurity, on top of unacceptably high pre-pandemic rates, suggests that the existing income security safety net is inadequate.

The organizations and individuals listed below call on the Government of Canada to take the opportunity offered by the pandemic to re-structure the income security system and implement a permanent Basic Income Guarantee that ensures that everyone can afford the healthy food needed to live an active life, and that is available to all who live in poverty.

Food insecurity, “the inadequate or insecure access to food because of financial constraints” (p. 3), is a serious problem linked to poor physical and mental health, premature death, and general material deprivation.ⁱⁱⁱ It particularly affects households with low incomes, lone-parent families, households who rent their housing, and those who identify as Indigenous or Black.^{iv} Low income is a major predictor of food insecurity. As Valerie Tarasuk, principal investigator at PROOF, states:

Severe food insecurity is almost non-existent among higher income households, but the prevalence rises sharply as adjusted household income falls below \$30,000^v

Food insecurity's effects on health are unmistakable. It incurs steep costs to: physical, mental, and social health - and consequently, the healthcare system.^{vi} Being severely food insecure shortens people's lives by 9 years and costs the

healthcare system more than *twice* as much as being food secure.^{vii}

Up to now, solutions to food insecurity and the low income that produces it have been sought in:

Employment: A singular focus on paid and recognized employment ignores the many other forms of unpaid and invisible work, such as caring labour, required for society to function.

Moreover, jobs alone are no guaranteed solution to poverty and food insecurity, especially with the rise of precarious labour and the gig economy.

Most households (65%) who were food insecure in 2017-18 were relying on wages.^{viii} To address food insecurity, jobs must be stable, and wages must be sufficient. Although critics of Basic Income argue that it is a disincentive to employment, there is no evidence to support this claim.^{ix}

Emergency food programs: Food banks' decades-long role as Canada's dominant response to food

insecurity has intensified with added demands from the pandemic and pandemic food funding from the federal government. However, very few food insecure households, only about one fifth, access food banks.^x Food banks are unable to provide—with consistency and dignity—the quantity, quality, variety, and choice of food that households require; moreover, they cannot improve people’s food security status. Only income can ensure the choice and dignity that people require. Food insecure people require sufficient income to be able to prioritize their needs, not only food but also rent, utilities, medication, and a myriad of others.

Social Assistance: Programs like Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program scrutinize and humiliate people, keeping them trapped far below the poverty line, and unable to maintain healthy diets. In 2017-2018, 60% of households relying on social assistance were also food insecure^{xi} Even after taking into account education, housing tenure, and other demographic characteristics, households reliant on social assistance in Canada are 5.18 times more likely than others to be severely food insecure.^{xii}

CERB and other new government initiatives: New government programs offered through the tax system for specific populations bring relief to many in a discreet and dignified manner, but they also exclude many who need the support, especially those who were already vulnerable. In addition, their temporary nature does not allow people to plan for their futures.

A Basic Income Guarantee (BIG)

Currently the Guaranteed Income Supplement for seniors acts as a form of Basic Income which has been shown to lower rates of food insecurity. In fact, the probability of food insecurity drops by half for unattached adults on income assistance once they reach 65, the age to qualify for Old Age Security and the Guaranteed Income Supplement.^{xiii} In addition, participants from the

Ontario Basic Income Pilot Project reported a drastic reduction in food insecurity and positive dietary outcomes as a result of receiving a basic income.^{xiv xv} This evidence, and other research, illustrates that a Basic Income Guarantee is an effective policy instrument to reduce food insecurity.^{xvi} BIG is a regular payment, made to people who need it, distributed through the tax system. It provides enough money so that people can meet their basic needs regardless of their employment status.

Principles that we recommend for a Basic Income Guarantee

Income tested: available to anyone below a certain income.

Not means tested: no eligibility criteria except income level. No expectations for how the money will be spent.

Complementary: may replace other income support programs but does not replace other vital social programs like housing, childcare, education, and mental health supports. It does not replace the need for increases in minimum wage, pay equity, other employment standards, or pharmacare.

Sufficient: designed so that everyone in Canada has at least enough income to cover their basic needs and to help ensure the health and dignity that comes with this.

Indigenous self-determination: the development and implementation of a BIG must respect the autonomy of Indigenous peoples and their determination of whether it is delivered in their communities and, if so, how it will be implemented.

Just as universal healthcare is there when people need it, a Basic Income Guarantee (BIG) could be there to ensure that no one lacks the ability to pay for essentials like food.

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- ⁱⁱⁱ Tarasuk V. & Mitchell, A. (2020). Household food insecurity in Canada, 2017-18. Toronto: Research to identify policy options to reduce food insecurity (PROOF). <https://proof.utoronto.ca/>
- ^{iv} Tarasuk V. & Mitchell, A. (2020). Household food insecurity in Canada, 2017-18. Toronto: Research to identify policy options to reduce food insecurity (PROOF). <https://proof.utoronto.ca/>
- ^v Tarasuk, V. (2017). Implications of a basic income guarantee for household food insecurity. <https://proof.utoronto.ca/resources/proof-annual-reports/implications-of-a-basic-income-guarantee-for-household-food-insecurity/>
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- ^x Tarasuk, V., Fafard St-Germain, A. & Loopstra, R. (2019). The relationship between food banks and food insecurity: Insights from Canada. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-019-00092-w>
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