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The Case for Basic Income for Food Security

2020

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**THE CASE
FOR BASIC
INCOME
SERIES**

Basic income for food security

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SUMMARY

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 (Tarasuk & Mitchell, 2020). By the beginning of May 2020, Statistics Canada (2020) 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%) when compared to households with no children (12.2%). 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 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.

ABOUT BASIC INCOME

Basic income means different things to different people. The Case for Basic Income series defines basic income as an income-tested and targeted unconditional cash transfer from governments to individuals to enable everyone in Canada to meet their basic needs, participate in society, and live in dignity, regardless of work status.

Some Case project teams make more detailed recommendations about the principles to guide the design of a basic income program in Canada.

ABOUT THE CASE FOR BI SERIES

The Case for Basic Income series explores the impacts of a basic income program for various communities and policy areas across Canada. Each Case has been developed collaboratively by subject matter experts and basic income advocates to consider the distinct issues and concerns between the Case topic and income insecurity - and the difference that basic income might make.

Every Case is unique in both function and form and is guided by its authors and contributors.

The case for basic income for food security

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 (Tarasuk & Mitchell, 2020). 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%) when compared to households with no children (12.2%; Statistics Canada, 2020) 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.

What is food insecurity?

Food insecurity, or "the inadequate or insecure access to food because of financial constraints" (Tarasuk & Mitchell, 2020, p. 3), is a serious problem linked to poor physical and mental

health, premature death, and general material deprivation. It particularly affects households with low incomes, lone-parent families, households who rent their housing, and those who identify as Indigenous or Black (Tarasuk & Mitchell, 2020). Low income is a major predictor of food insecurity. As Valerie Tarasuk (2017), 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".

Food insecurity's effects on health are unmistakable. It incurs steep costs to: physical, mental, and social health - and consequently, the healthcare system (PROOF Canada, 2016). 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 (Men et al., 2020).

Existing responses

Up to now, solutions to food insecurity and low income have been sought via:

- **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

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- precarious labour and the gig economy. Most households (65%) who were food insecure in 2017-18 were relying on wages (Tarasuk & Mitchell, 2020). 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.
 - **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 (Tarasuk et al., 2020). 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 (Tarasuk & Mitchell, 2020). 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 (Tarasuk et al., 2019).
 - **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.

Basic Income

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 (Tarasuk, 2017). 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 basic income (Basic Income Canada Network, 2019; Ferdosi et al., 2020). This evidence, and other research, illustrates that basic income is an effective policy instrument to reduce food insecurity (Tarasuk, 2017). Basic income is a regular payment, made to people who need it, distributed through the tax system. It should provide enough money so that people can meet their basic needs regardless of their employment status.

Principles that we recommend for basic income

- **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 basic income 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, basic income could be there to ensure that no one lacks the ability to pay for essentials like food.

SEE ALSO:

- This article (2020) by Mary Anne Martin and Michael Classens: "[Holiday food drives: Tossing a can of beans into a donation bin is hardly enough](#)"
- The Ontario Dietitians in Public Health [position statement on responses to food insecurity](#).

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