



REPORT FOR ACTION

Food in Toronto: Affordability, Accessibility, and Insecurity

Date: October 16, 2019

To: Board of Health

From: Medical Officer of Health

Wards: All

SUMMARY

Consistent monitoring of food affordability and food insecurity is necessary to assess the health of the population, to evaluate policy change, and to develop evidence-based recommendations for public health interventions. Based on this year's assessment, Toronto Public Health is reporting that the cost of nutritious food in Toronto has risen 7.6 percent between 2018 and 2019, the largest year-over-year increase in a decade. Ongoing surveillance will determine if there is evidence of a trend and what changes, if any, should be made to current programs and policies, particularly those targeting food insecurity.

Household food insecurity is defined as inadequate access to food due to financial constraints. Healthy eating can be particularly challenging for individuals and families experiencing food insecurity. Initiatives that target income insufficiency have been shown to reduce household food insecurity, suggesting that efforts should be made to ensure income support programs and policies accurately account for basic living expenses, including the cost of healthy eating.

When revising Canada's Food Guide, Health Canada made significant changes to its format that make it easier to follow. However, the changes create challenges related to calculating the cost of healthy eating. This report recommends adjustments the federal government can make to ensure important population health data continues to be collected and analyzed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Medical Officer of Health recommends that:

1. City Council request the Government of Canada to:
 - a. update the list of foods included in the National Nutritious Food Basket to reflect

the recommendations from the 2019 Canada's Food Guide;

- b. develop a national food costing protocol to standardize the annual monitoring of food affordability by provincial/territorial and local governments; and
- c. mandate the annual measurement of food insecurity using the Household Food Security Survey Module.

2. The Board of Health restate its support for the passing of provincial Bill 60, *An Act to amend the Ministry of Community and Social Services Act to establish the Social Assistance Research Commission*.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

There is no financial impact resulting from the adoption of the recommendations in this report.

DECISION HISTORY

On October 30, 2017, the Board of Health reiterated its request to the Ministry of Community and Social Services to increase social assistance rates to a level that supports basic needs, including household food security, and also reiterated its support for a living wage.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2017.HL22.4>

On September 23, 2019 the Board of Health requested the Medical Officer of Health to report back on the accessibility and affordability of nutritious food, and the state of food insecurity, in Toronto. The Board of Health also urged the provincial government to pass provincial Bill 60, *An Act to amend the Ministry of Community and Social Services Act to establish the Social Assistance Research Commission* to establish a mechanism to account for the cost of healthy eating when social assistance rates are revised.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2019.HL9.3>

COMMENTS

In 2019, the Government of Canada released the new Canada's Food Guide and Canada's Dietary Guidelines. These documents diverge from the traditional format of food groups, serving sizes, and recommended daily intakes. Instead, there is a focus on proportion—how much to have of any one kind of food in relation to others. This new approach is meant to make the Guide more useful to average Canadians, who have struggled in the past to meet minimum requirements and follow prescriptive directions.¹ Those requirements and directions, however, are the inputs upon which food costing and affordability models are based. The revamp of Canada's Food Guide requires that

the tools health professionals use to gauge food affordability be updated to reflect the principles of the new Food Guide.

At the same time that these practical challenges were developing, in 2019, Toronto Public Health, as well as other Ontario Health Units² detected a significant rise in the cost of nutritious food. At 7.6 percent, it was the largest year-over-year increase in a decade (see Appendix A).

Food categories with the largest cost increase this year include fish (20.3 percent), dark green vegetables (17.3 percent), orange vegetables and fruit (12.2 percent), and other vegetables and fruit (15.2 percent). Smaller increases were seen among milk and milk alternatives (5.76 percent), whole grain products (3.4 percent), non-whole grain products (1.3 percent), and meat, poultry and legumes (1.7 percent). Specific causes of price fluctuations can be difficult to determine, however inflation, weather-related events in Canada and globally (most recently due to climate change), and the cost of fuel are understood to have significant impacts.^{3,4} The resulting 7.6 percent increase, coupled with a 28.6 percent increase since 2009 illustrates the importance of continued monitoring.

Affordability and Accessibility are Important to Monitor

Food affordability shapes eating patterns. It is core to the concepts of accessibility and security, which refer to individuals and households having adequate resources and opportunities to obtain appropriate food.⁵ When individuals are food insecure, their health suffers.^{6,7,8}

Toronto has a strong food system that provides a variety of safe, diverse, and nutritious foods,⁹ yet many residents face barriers to eating well. Lack of retail access to healthy food within their neighbourhoods, insufficient food skills and/or appropriate cooking equipment, and lack of time to dedicate to meal preparation can all make eating in a healthy way challenging. The inability to pay for nutritious food will compound these problems. Food insecurity results when income is insufficient and worsened when affordable, nutritious food is not consistently available or accessible.^{10,11}

Food Insecurity

While high food prices add to the challenges of eating well, food is just one of the many basic expenses for which low-income households struggle to pay.⁷ The reality is that food is often treated as a flexible expenditure, sacrificed to pay for other necessities such as shelter, child care, and utilities.^{12,13} Purchasing behaviours may also fluctuate with circumstances, resulting in reduced nutritional quality, variety, and quantity.¹⁴

Individuals and families reliant on social assistance in Ontario are highly vulnerable; research has shown that 64 percent of these households experience food insecurity.¹¹ The high proportion suggests that social assistance rates are too low to meet basic needs. This is supported in Appendix C, which presents the Nutritious Food Basket

findings in relation to income and basic household expenses. It is estimated that single individuals participating in Ontario Works or the Ontario Disability Support Program would be in debt \$571 and \$305, respectively, each month in order to pay for their most basic expenses.

Food insecurity is a significant public health concern. It is associated with an increased risk of chronic diseases, depression, mood and anxiety disorders, as well as mortality.^{8,15,16,17,18} In 2017, almost one in five (18.5 percent) Toronto households experienced marginal, moderate, or severe food insecurity, which is significantly higher than the provincial average of 14.1 percent (Ontario, excluding Toronto).¹⁹

Responses to Food Insecurity

Municipal Government

At the local level, through collaboration across City divisions, *Toronto's Poverty Reduction Strategy* includes recommendations and actions related to housing, jobs, food access, transit which together can make a positive impact on food insecurity. Additionally, Toronto Public Health is committed to monitoring food affordability and to raising awareness of the social determinants of health (e.g., housing, education, food) along with policy changes needed to reduce food insecurity (see Appendix D). However, this is a complex issue that cannot be adequately or sustainably addressed solely at the local level.

Provincial Government

A number of changes were announced by the Ontario government in 2018 that impact the province's lowest income residents, including changes to social assistance, cancellation of the Ontario Basic Income Pilot, and a hold on the increase to minimum wage. That same year, Bill 60, *An Act to amend the Ministry of Community and Social Services Act to establish the Social Assistance Research Commission* was proposed to the Legislative Assembly of Ontario. It would see a group formed to study the current cost of living in the province and make recommendations regarding social assistance rates.

Federal Government

Opportunity for All: Canada's First Poverty Reduction Strategy was developed by the Government of Canada with the goal of cutting poverty rates in half by 2030. Based on Canada's Official Poverty Line, the initial goal of reducing poverty by 20 percent by year 2020 has already been exceeded.²⁰ This is likely the result of a number of new programs that helped boost incomes for families, seniors, and low-income workers through the Canada Child Benefit and investments in early learning and child care, the Guaranteed Income Supplement, and the Canada's Workers Benefit, respectively.²¹ While this strategy provides evidence that income support programs help to reduce the incidence of poverty in Canada, gaps remain for some sociodemographic groups.

Non-governmental Organizations

Food banks are perhaps the most recognizable response to food insecurity. This model of food charity was implemented in the 1980's as a stopgap measure to support those experiencing hunger. They were meant to provide short-term relief. But food banks are now relied upon as the main "solution" to address household food insecurity. This, despite the fact that they are limited in the variety of foods they can offer, provide only modest support, and fewer than 25 percent of those who experience food insecurity actually access them.²² Again, there is no indication that a charitable model has or will be able to significantly reduce food insecurity on its own.²³

Communities

Many community-based initiatives aim to support those who are food insecure. Community gardens and cooking programs benefit their participants by improving physical access to food, building food skills, and reducing social isolation.

Consistent and Coordinated Actions

Monitoring food affordability and insecurity is not federally mandated. Local health units routinely collect and report the annual cost of the Nutritious Food Basket in their areas, but the results are challenging to compare. And while the Household Food Security Survey Module (HFSSM) is part of the Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS), unfortunately it is not always a compulsory module. The decision to collect this data is up to individual provinces and territories and in 2015-16, Ontario chose to not collect HFSSM data.

Accurate data provides critical insights. It enables consistent, good quality decision-making across all City divisions. This report recommends that City Council appeal directly to the federal government, to establish national mandates, standards, and protocols for monitoring food affordability and food insecurity on an annual basis.

Many community and government initiatives have tried to address poverty and the barriers to healthy eating. Experts now believe that the most effective solution to reduce food insecurity is an income response.²⁴ Given the recent changes to income support programs in Ontario, this report also recommends the continued support for Bill 60, and continued advocacy for a social assistance rates that account for local costs of living, including the cost of nutritious food.

The above recommendations seek to ensure accurate reporting of uniform, nationwide indicators of food affordability and food insecurity. This would facilitate detailed analysis of trends and evaluation of the impact of income-related and other social policy changes, including any adjustments to social assistance rates made by the Ontario government.²

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SIGNATURE

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ATTACHMENTS

Appendix A: The Nutritious Food Basket Costing Tool in Toronto (2009-2019)
Appendix B: Weekly Cost of the Nutritious Food Basket in Toronto (May 2019)
Appendix C: Nutritious Food Basket Scenarios (2019 estimates)
Appendix D: Food Insecurity in Toronto Infographic (2019)

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