



REPORT FOR ACTION

Food Insecurity in Toronto

Date: October 16, 2017

To: Board of Health

From: Medical Officer of Health

Wards: All

SUMMARY

A nutritious diet is essential to achieve and maintain good health. All individuals and families should have access to affordable, sufficient, safe, nutritious and culturally-appropriate food; however, one in eight households in Toronto experiences food insecurity.ⁱ This report provides an overview of food insecurity in Toronto and also provides an update on the results of the annual Nutritious Food Basket (NFB) survey, which tracks the affordability of healthy foods for individuals and families. In 2017, the estimated weekly cost of the NFB for a reference family of four in Toronto is \$197.55 (\$855.39 per month). This represents a slight decrease of 0.4% from 2016. Despite this year's result, the cost of the NFB has increased by 20.3% since 2009.

The state of poverty, employment, food bank usage, and the cost of living show that more needs to be done to improve food security. Low wages and inadequate social assistance rates, combined with high costs of housing, child care and other basic necessities, are substantial obstacles to accessing healthy food. This results in negative health outcomes and is, therefore, a serious public health issue.

Several government initiatives which aim to address income disparity have recently been announced. These programs are important because they increase the amount of money available to purchase food after paying for basic expenses. However, deep-rooted problems, such as poverty, cannot be addressed in isolation or by one service partner. Rather, a cross-governmental, co-ordinated and collaborative approach is required to ensure transformational and sustainable change that will lead to improved health and the reduction of health inequities in the City of Toronto.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Medical Officer of Health recommends that:

1. The Board of Health reiterate its request to the Ministry of Community and Social Services to increase social assistance rates to a level that supports household food security.

2. The Board of Health forward this report to the City of Toronto's general managers of Employment and Social Services; Shelter, Support and Housing Administration; Children's Services; Affordable Housing Office; Economic Development and Culture; Social Development, Finance and Administration; Urban HEART @ Toronto; Ontario Ministers of Health and Long-Term Care, Finance, Housing (Minister responsible for the Poverty Reduction Strategy), Community and Social Services, and Children & Youth Services; Chief Medical Officer of Health of Ontario; Public Health Ontario; the Association of Local Public Health Agencies; the Ontario Public Health Association; the Association of Ontario Health Centres; the Ontario Society of Nutrition Professionals in Public Health; Dietitians of Canada; the federal Minister of Health; and the five Local Health Integration Networks (LHINs) in the Greater Toronto area.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

There are no direct financial implications associated with this report.

DECISION HISTORY

The Toronto Board of Health has a long history of monitoring and addressing health inequities, including, at its meeting on April 27, 2015, endorsement of a living wage for Toronto to increase income security and reduce health inequities:

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2015.HL3.2>

Toronto Public Health has reported to the Board of Health on the Nutritious Food Basket survey findings annually since 1999. Until the current year, all boards of health in Ontario have been mandated by the Ontario Public Health Standards to monitor food affordability using a standardized tool, based on the Nutritious Food Basket Protocol, 2014 and the Population Health Assessment and Surveillance Protocol, 2016. Results are submitted to the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care by July 1 each year.^{ii,iii}

The most recent report was presented to the Board of Health at its September 30, 2016 meeting: <http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2016.HL14.3>, at which time, the Board requested the Ministry of Community and Social Services to increase social assistance rates to a level that supports household food security based on annual results from the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care's Nutritious Food Basket survey. The Board also requested the Ontario government to prioritize development and implementation of a basic income guarantee pilot to help reduce poverty and improve income security.

COMMENTS

The Nutritious Food Basket (NFB) is a survey tool used to estimate the minimum cost of a healthy diet. Public health units across Ontario use the NFB to annually monitor the affordability of healthy foods in their regions by collecting food prices from local grocery stores. The tool, developed by Health Canada for various levels of government to use in monitoring food affordability, includes 67 food items that reflect a healthy eating pattern based on dietary advice (e.g., Canada's Food Guide), as well as food consumption data (e.g., 2004 Canadian Community Health Survey - Nutrition).

The NFB tool assumes the time and skill to find, purchase and prepare the least expensive options. It does not include processed convenience foods, snack foods, infant food, special dietary foods or specific ethno-cultural foods, and does not include non-food items (laundry detergent, soap, toilet paper, etc.) that tend to be purchased when buying groceries. The NFB is not intended as a budgeting tool. Its strength lies in the ability to track changes in the cost of food over time. The NFB findings are best viewed in relation to income and basic household expenses as this helps to determine the food insecurity risk in vulnerable populations (Attachment 1).

Cost of the Nutritious Food Basket declined slightly

In 2017, the estimated cost of the NFB for a reference family of four in Toronto is \$197.55 per week, or \$855.39 per month (Attachment 2). This represents a slight decrease of 0.4% from 2016. Despite this year's result, the cost of the NFB has increased by 20.3% since 2009.

Food insecurity is closely linked to negative health outcomes

How one experiences food insecurity varies and may range from individuals living with fear of running out of food and/or choosing less healthy and inexpensive foods, to missing meals and experiencing hunger. In Toronto, one in eight households experiences food insecurity (12.6%).^{iv} We also know that 60.9% of Ontario households on social assistance are food insecure, yet 62.2% of food insecure households have employment.^v At a national level, food insecurity is most prevalent in households with children, especially those headed by single mothers.^{vi}

While high food prices contribute to food insecurity at a household level, food costs are only one of many basic expenses that low-income households struggle to pay for.^{vii} The reality for many is that the food budget is treated as a flexible expense and is often sacrificed to pay for other necessities such as shelter, child care, and utilities, leaving little or no money to pay for food.^{viii,ix} Households may also change their purchasing behaviours, resulting in reduced nutritional quality, variety, and quantity of foods.^x

Food insecurity is a public health issue as it is very closely linked to negative health outcomes for specific populations. The Unequal City 2015 report showed that Toronto residents with low incomes have poorer health status compared to higher income groups, on numerous measures.^{xi} These include poor mental and physical health, greater risk of chronic diseases (e.g., heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, etc.)^{xii,xiii} and nutrient inadequacies.^{xiv,xv} Children in food insecure households may also experience long-term health impacts.^{xvi,xvii} Furthermore, food insecurity puts a financial strain on the Ontario health care system, as health care costs for those most food insecure are up to 121% higher than for those who are food secure.^{xviii}

More needs to be done to reduce food insecurity in Toronto

Out of 41 countries, Canada ranks 37th, 32nd, and 29th in global goals for no hunger, no poverty, and good health and well-being, respectively.^{xix} The socio-economic trends with respect to poverty, employment, food bank usage, and the cost of living, as described below, show that more needs to be done to reduce food insecurity in Toronto.

Low-income and Poverty: In Toronto, one in five adults and more than one in four children live in poverty, representing 543,390 people.^{xx} The prevalence of low-income in the City (20.2%) is higher than in Canada (14.2%), Ontario (14.4%) and the rest of the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (11.9%).^{xxi}

Unemployment: The City's unemployment rate at 7.5% is higher than the provincial and national averages.^{xxii} Full-time, well-paying jobs are being replaced by temporary, part-time and contract positions which are characterized by low wages, lower security and limited or no benefits.^{xxiii}

Food Bank Usage: The Daily Bread Food Bank report, *Who's Hungry* (2017), states that the demand for food banks in Toronto is 24% higher today than it was at the time of the 2008 recession. In addition to this, demographic factors of individuals accessing food banks have also changed. First, the demand for food banks has drastically increased in the inner suburbs (i.e., Etobicoke, North York, and especially Scarborough). Food banks are also seeing more clients over the age of 45 years, more clients with disabilities and more clients with higher levels of education.^{xxiv, xxv} Interestingly, there is a reduction in newcomers accessing emergency food services, and it is hypothesized that this may be due to the increased cost of living which now makes Toronto an unfavourable city to arrive, transition and settle.^{xxvi, xxvii} Research also indicates that less than 25% of those who experience food insecurity actually access food banks.^{xxviii}

Cost of Living: The cost of living in the city has risen steadily. Between 2010 and 2015, there have been increases in public transit (36%), child care (30%), and rent (13%).^{xxix} As housing becomes increasingly unaffordable in Toronto, it presents a serious public health concern due to the connections between housing and health, and the significant cost that inadequate housing puts on the health care system.^{xxx} Affordable housing in the city is lacking, with rent costs rising faster than existing social assistance payments and minimum wage rates.^{xxxi} Working full-time hours at a minimum wage no longer guarantees workers the ability to afford basic expenses, including food. This is evident in the high proportion of food insecure households that have employment.^{xxxii, xxxiii}

Those on social assistance find it most challenging to afford a place to live in Toronto.^{xxxiv} While rent-geared-to-income housing can help relieve financial pressures for households, the demand for it is much higher than the supply, with over 95,000 Toronto households on a waiting list in 2015.^{xxxv} Furthermore, the aging stock of social housing requiring billions of dollars in repairs means that tenants could be living in unsafe and unhealthy conditions, and many units will be forced to close.^{xxxvi}

Traditional responses to food insecurity do not address the root cause, poverty

Food security exists when "all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life".^{xxxvii} Food insecurity is not simply the opposite of food security, but rather refers to the inadequate or insecure access to food as a result of financial constraints.^{xxxviii} Many community food initiatives, such as community gardens and cooking programs, have successfully been implemented across Toronto. While

these programs support improved food access through physical means and skill development, they are often falsely identified as programs addressing food insecurity. These programs serve the diverse needs of their communities by improving access to food and are needed, but they do not address the root cause of food insecurity, that being poverty. There is no indication that a charitable model has or will be able to significantly reduce food insecurity,^{xxxix} nor is there research to suggest that food insecurity can be improved with greater retail access or improved budgeting or cooking skills.^{xl} An income response, however, can be an effective solution.

Several initiatives have been announced to support those living on low-income

Those living on social assistance are the most at risk of having inadequate funds to pay for food. Single individuals reliant on Ontario Works (OW) and Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) are particularly vulnerable. For example, after paying for rent and food, a single adult male age 31-50 years on OW would have a debt load of approximately \$456/month. A 2% increase in social assistance rates was proposed in the 2017 Provincial Budget;^{xli} however, this increase is well below what is needed to support household food security.

Several initiatives have been proposed and/or implemented across various levels of government to provide support to those living on low-income. These include:

- A **Basic Income Pilot** project initiated in three locations across Ontario.^{xlii}
- A proposal to raise minimum wage to \$15/hr, amongst several other actions, in **Bill 148: Fair Workplaces, Better Jobs Act**.
- A commitment to develop a provincial **Food Security Strategy** under the direction of the Minister responsible for the Poverty Reduction Strategy^{xliii} and a commitment to develop a national **Poverty Reduction Strategy** to guide future action and reduce the number of Canadians living in poverty.^{xliv}
- A **Provincial Child Care Plan** announced by the Ontario Ministry of Education which consists of a renewed early years and child care framework^{xlv}
- **Ontario's OHIP+: Children and Youth Pharmacare** program, launching January 1, 2018, providing universal drug coverage to all children and youth age 24 years and under, regardless of family income.^{xlvi}
- The development of a **Food Policy for Canada** which recognizes that not all Canadians have sufficient access to affordable, safe and nutritious food, and thus the need to improve food access, particularly for those most vulnerable.^{xlvii}

These initiatives benefit individuals and families by increasing the amount of money they have to purchase food after paying for basic expenses. It is hopeful that the results of these commitments will inform further, large-scale changes to support those most vulnerable and finally reduce poverty and food insecurity in Toronto.

Conclusion

A nutritious diet is key to achieving and maintaining good physical and mental health. Food insecurity does not exist due to a lack of food, but rather due to the high cost of living, including housing, child care, and food costs, as well as stagnating incomes and precarious employment.^{xlviii} In 2017, the estimated weekly cost of the Nutritious Food Basket (NFB) for a reference family of four in Toronto is \$197.55 (\$855.39 per month), representing a slight decrease of 0.4% from 2016; however, the cost of the NFB has

increased by 20.3% since 2009. Food insecurity is linked to many negative health outcomes, and is therefore a serious public health issue. Although progress has been made, the current systems to address poverty are sporadic and insufficient. More initiatives which increase the amount of money people have after paying for basic expenses are needed. Efforts that focus on coordinated action, especially policy and upstream approaches, are most likely to bring about positive outcomes and lead to improved health and the reduction of health inequities in the City of Toronto.

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SIGNATURE

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ATTACHMENTS

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2. Weekly Cost of the Nutritious Food Basket in Toronto - May 2017

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