

The impact of COVID-19 on **food insecurity** in our community

Food insecurity takes a serious toll on people's physical, mental and social health.

COVID-19 affects every single one of us

The COVID-19 pandemic has wide-reaching effects on all aspects of our work, family, and social lives. We all experience and cope with the COVID-19 pandemic in our own way. This Vital Focus series examines the impacts of measures to control COVID-19 on health and wellbeing in our community.

What is food insecurity?

"Food insecurity, also called household food insecurity, is not having enough money to buy food. Individuals and families living on low incomes struggle to pay for basic living expenses such as rent, utilities, phone, childcare, clothing, medication, transportation **and** food."¹⁰ Experiences of food insecurity can range from concerns about running out of food before there is money to buy more, to the extreme case of not eating for whole days.¹¹



Individuals and families living on low incomes struggle to pay for basic needs like food. If they have lost jobs or have less income because of COVID-19, accessing food may be even more difficult.

How has COVID-19 impacted food insecurity?



- **Food insecurity may affect more people and be more severe** because people have lost jobs or are working less.^{1,2, 1.3, 1.26} Less income creates more stress on personal and family budgets, especially for people close to or living in poverty. Unexpected changes in expenses, food prices or difficulty accessing food adds to this stress.^{14, 1.5} Even with emergency government benefits and employment insurance, it may be challenging for those financially impacted by COVID-19 to recover.
- **It can be harder for community organizations to deliver services that ease food insecurity** because of physical distancing measures, closure of public spaces and changing demand. Many local organizations have joined forces and shifted service delivery models, inventory and hours to provide emergency access to food and help relieve hunger.^{1.6, 1.7, 1.8} School closures in the spring stopped or altered delivery of school food programs that feed children from low-income families.^{1.9}
- **The pandemic may magnify existing disparities and disproportionately affect food-insecure households** already struggling to meet basic needs.^{1.10, 1.22} Food insecurity is most often found in households with low incomes, lone-parent families, those who rent rather than own housing, and those who identify as Black or Indigenous.^{1.1}
- **Diet-related chronic disease and health care costs may increase in the long term**, influenced by rising rates of food insecurity.^{1.25, 1.26} People dealing with food insecurity may not get enough key nutrients and the experience of food insecurity can lead to a variety of physical and mental health issues like diabetes, heart disease, depression, and lower life expectancy.^{1.4, 1.11, 1.12, 1.13} Health care costs rise with increasing severity of household food insecurity, with diet-related diseases already costing the Canadian economy an estimated \$26 billion a year.^{1.14,}

Food insecurity during COVID-19

According to a Statistics Canada study* conducted between May 4 and 10, 2020, food insecurity has increased and is significantly higher during COVID-19 compared to a 2017/2018 reference period.^{1,20} During COVID-19, this study found:



Almost 1 in 7 (15%) of Canadians reported living in a food insecure household.



Canadians living in households with children were more likely to be food insecure (19%) compared to those with no children (12%).



Canadians who were absent from work due to COVID-19 (because of business closure, layoff or personal circumstances) were almost three times more likely to be food insecure than those who worked.

Our Food Future initiative

Guelph-Wellington implemented the [Our Food Future](#) initiative through Infrastructure Canada's Smart Cities Challenge. One of the visions of this work is to increase access to affordable, nutritious food. Recognizing immediate needs within the community, the Grow Back Better 10-Point Recovery Plan was launched in response to COVID-19. As part of this plan, projects are underway to learn more about food insecurity and food access locally during COVID-19.



If you or someone you know is food insecure

If you are experiencing food insecurity and interested in receiving more information about emergency government supports, employment income or emergency food access during COVID-19:

Please visit the following

[Toward Common Ground](#)

[Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health Community Support](#)

The SEED launched an Emergency Food Home Delivery program to support community members most affected by COVID-19 and they deliver food from their warehouse to partner organizations every week.

Recommendations

Recommendations to address food insecurity in Guelph and Wellington

- **Provide resources (e.g., funds, materials, personnel) to local food provision initiatives** working to provide immediate access to food during COVID-19, such as the organizations listed in Guelph's COVID-19 Food Access Guide and Wellington's COVID-19 Food Access Guide available on [Toward Common Ground's website](#).
- **Prioritize and invest resources for ongoing monitoring** of local food insecurity rates and inequities.
- **Advocate for income security as the effective evidence-based response to address the root cause of food insecurity.**^{1,2, 1.5, 1.15, 1.16, 1.17, 1.18} Advocate collaboratively as one community to the provincial and federal governments asking them to:
 - **Prioritize the design and implementation of a basic income guarantee** (e.g., universal basic income) as an effective long-term policy option to address persistent poverty, household food insecurity and the economic fallout of COVID-19.^{1,3, 1.4, 1.5, 1.15}
 - **Re-evaluate existing income supports and benefit programs** (e.g., Canada Workers Benefit, Canada Child Benefit) to make sure they are designed and delivered in ways that are adequate to meet basic needs.^{1,3, 1.17}
 - **Increase social assistance rates** to reflect the costs of nutritious food and adequate housing.^{1,15, 1.17}
 - **Provide basic minimum employment standards** to reduce precarious employment and provide decent jobs with living wages, paid sick days and health benefits.^{1,4, 1.15, 1.17}
 - **Increase investment in subsidized, affordable and stable housing** options, recognizing that households struggling to meet basic needs have to prioritize a large portion of their budget for housing and utility costs.^{1,15, 1.19}
 - **Advance a National School Food Program** to ensure that children consistently have access to healthy food at school while encouraging food literacy and supporting local economies.^{1,2}



Volunteers with Kitchen Bees, a community program at Church of the Apostles, prepare food that is distributed by partner organizations.

Food insecurity facts

- Over a 12-month period, adults in severely food-insecure households cost the province, on average, about 2.5 times the health care dollars of those who were food secure.¹¹
- Food insecurity is a measure of not being able to afford basic needs, it is not a reflection of a person's food skills or shopping habits.^{1,21} Those struggling to afford food are also struggling to pay for other basic living costs like rent, childcare and medications.
- The majority of food-insecure households in Canada rely on employment income—many in low-wage, short-term, part-time or precarious work¹¹. Outside of the workforce, 60% of those who received social assistance were food insecure and high risk for severe food insecurity.¹¹
- Despite the high number of charitable food programs, only 25% of those who are food insecure access these programs. Charity-based models can not solve long-term household financial constraints.^{11, 1.2, 1.4, 1.23, 1.24}
- The Poverty Task Force (PTF) works collaboratively, informed by diverse voices of experience, to take local action and advocate for system and policy change to address the root causes of poverty. One of the PTF's priority areas is food insecurity.



Footnotes and references are available at [Toward Common Ground](#).

Note: There are limitations associated with the data and research sources included in this Vital Focus. For more information about sources and citations, please go to [Toward Common Ground](#). If you know of research or data about diverse communities not represented in this Vital Focus, please contact us at sarahh@towardcommonground.ca