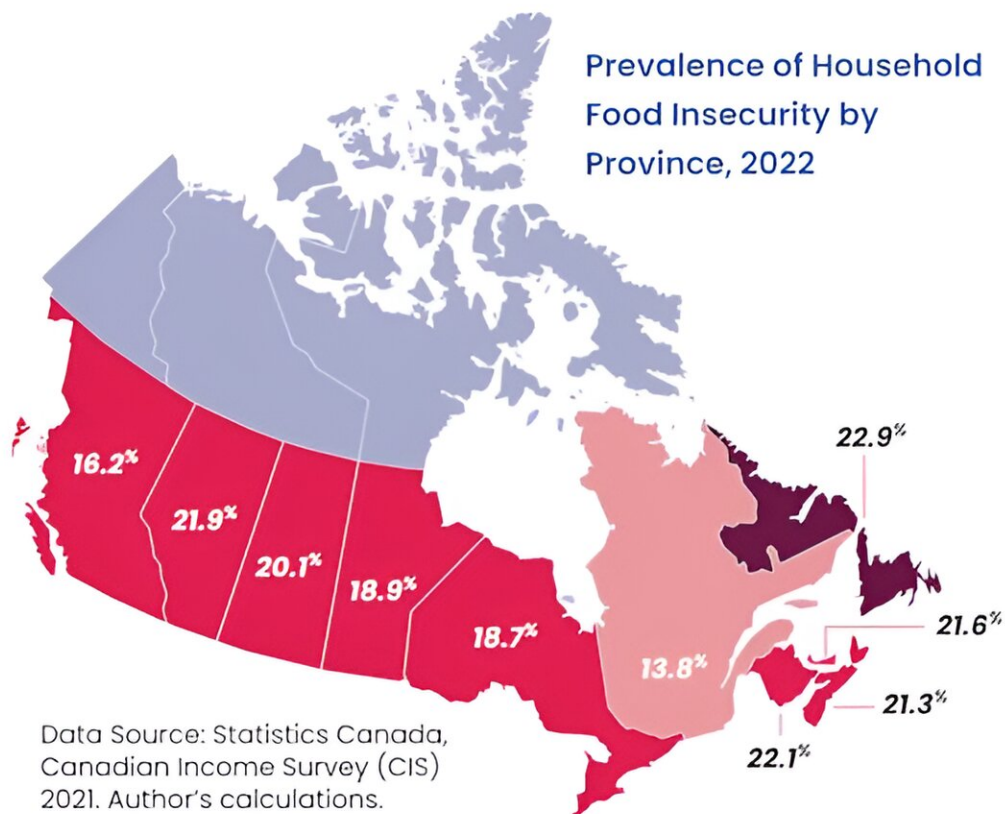


Researchers: Food insecurity in Canada is the worst it's ever been—here's how we can solve it

November 20 2023, by Valerie Tarasuk and Tim Li



From *Household Food Insecurity in Canada, 2022* by Li, Fafard St-Germain & Tarasuk, 2023

Map of household food insecurity in Canada by province. Credit: PROOF

According to the latest Statistics Canada data, household food insecurity in the ten provinces has reached a record high. Drawing on data from StatCan's Canadian Income Survey, our [new report](#) has found that the percentage of households with inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints rose to 17.8 percent in 2022 from 15.9 percent in 2021.

That amounts to 6.9 million Canadians—1.1 million more than in 2021—living in households with experiences that range from worrying about running out of food before there's enough money to buy more to not eating at all for entire days because of a lack of [income](#).

One-quarter of food-insecure households were severely food insecure, meaning 1.5 million Canadians had to cut or skip meals over the past 12 months.

These estimates don't include people living in First Nations or the territories—the Northwest Territories, Yukon, and Nunavut—[where rates of food insecurity are typically even higher](#).

The rate of [household food insecurity](#) differs dramatically across the provinces, ranging from 13.8 percent in Québec to 22.9 percent in Newfoundland and Labrador in 2022. Every province experienced an increase from the previous year.

Health-care system impact

These numbers are important because they tell us about more than just household food situations. By the time someone reports being unable to afford the food they need, they're likely compromising spending on other necessities, like housing and [prescription medications](#).

Living in these circumstances is [very harmful to people's health and well-](#)

[being](#). The [health implications](#) extend beyond poor nutrition and diet-related diseases to a sweeping array of adverse health outcomes, including physical and mental health conditions and [premature death](#).

When we look at the health administration records of Canadians living in food-insecure households, the extraordinary toll [food insecurity](#) is taking on individuals and on our health care system is obvious.

Because their health is worse, people living in these households require more health care. Both [the children](#) and [the adults](#) in food-insecure households are more likely to use outpatient services and to be hospitalized. Once admitted, [they stay in acute care for longer and are more likely to require readmission](#).

The increased use of the health-care system translates to greater health-care costs and an additional burden on our public system that simply isn't necessary.

Evidence-based policy interventions

Reducing food insecurity requires concerted efforts by federal and provincial governments to address the root cause—the inadequacy of household incomes to meet basic needs.

Providing better income support gives households a fighting chance of managing sudden losses of income or increases in expenses without having to compromise necessities.

Studies have shown food insecurity decreases when low-income households receive more money via [child benefits](#) or [social assistance programs](#). That's also the case when households transition to a more adequate and stable source of income—namely when low-income adults become [eligible for public pensions programs](#), Old Age Security and

Guaranteed Income Supplement.

However, the way these programs are currently designed means our social safety net is anything but.

Public income supports

Households with limited or no employment income and reliant on provincial social assistance or Employment Insurance are very likely to be food insecure. Relying on social assistance almost guarantees food insecurity; seven in 10 households on social assistance were food insecure in 2022.

In most jurisdictions, social assistance benefits aren't indexed to inflation, so the poorest people in our communities become even poorer as prices rise. Provinces should look to raise and index benefit amounts, asset limits, and earning exemptions so that recipients have enough for [basic needs](#) while in these programs of last resort.

Households reliant on employment income fare better, but simply having a job isn't enough to prevent food insecurity. In fact, the main source of income for 60 percent of food-insecure households in the ten provinces is salaries and wages. The policies meant to support workers in need, like the Canada Worker Benefit and similar provincial benefits, are clearly insufficient.

There's also a need to expand job opportunities and improve the quality and stability of employment through policies like higher employment standards, support for collective bargaining, and increased minimum wage, which several provinces are embracing.

Children in food-insecure households

The Canada Child Benefit has been widely credited for reducing [child poverty](#), but this benefit goes to [90 percent of families in Canada](#). In stretching itself so thin, the benefit isn't providing enough support to the families that really need it.

Just having a child in the household means a higher risk of food insecurity in Canada. In 2022, 1.8 million children—or one in four—under the age of 18 lived in a food-insecure household. Households with children also made up the majority of the increase in food insecurity from 2021 to 2022. The Canada Child Benefit needs to be restructured to insulate lower-income families from food insecurity more effectively.

Governments have failed to implement enduring changes to income policies informed by research on food insecurity. Instead, we've almost exclusively seen small, limited-time benefits, like the federal Grocery Rebate, and continued funding for community food programs as the response to the hardships Canadians are facing.

The noteworthy exception is the [newly announced Poverty Reduction Plan in Newfoundland and Labrador](#). The existing research suggests that it will help reduce food insecurity in that province.

Food insecurity festers

The prevalence and severity of food insecurity in Canada has likely already worsened since 2022, given continued high inflation—particularly the [record-setting increases in the cost of food, rent and mortgage interest](#)—and a lack of major policy action to offset the added burden on households.

The persistence of food insecurity in Canada is a policy choice. By not doing more to improve the adequacy and stability of household

resources, our federal and [provincial governments](#) are choosing to let [food insecurity](#) fester.

In doing so, they are allowing the health of millions of Canadians to be eroded as we unnecessarily tax our already over-burdened health care system.

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