

Municipal-level responses to household food insecurity in Canada: A call for critical, evaluative research

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ABSTRACT

Household food insecurity (HFI) is a persistent public health problem affecting 3.8 million Canadians. While the causes of HFI are rooted in income insecurity, solutions to HFI have been primarily food-based, with the bulk of activity occurring at the municipal level across Canada. We conceptualize these municipal-level actions as falling within three models: “charitable”, “household improvements and supports” and “community food systems”. Many initiatives, especially non-charitable ones, generate widespread support, as they aim to increase participants’ food security using an empowering and dignified approach. While these initiatives may offer some benefits to their participants, preliminary research suggests that any food-based solution to an income-based problem will have limited reach to food-insecure households and limited impact on participants’ experience of HFI. We suspect that widespread support for the local-level food-based approach to HFI has impeded critical judgement of the true potential of these activities to reduce HFI. As these initiatives grow in number across Canada, we are in urgent need of comprehensive and comparative research to evaluate their impact on HFI and to ensure that municipal-level action on HFI is evidence-based.

KEY WORDS: Food insecurity; municipalities; program evaluation; poverty; social policy; Canada

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Household food insecurity (HFI) is a persistent public health problem affecting 3.8 million Canadians.¹ As federal and provincial governments have clawed back social programming that aims to reduce poverty – HFI’s root cause – action to address HFI is occurring primarily at the municipal level across Canada.² While these actions have traditionally been charitable in nature, a groundswell of popular support has emerged for other food-based initiatives, such as “good food boxes”, community gardens and food charters. Many of these approaches conjure up visions of a just and sustainable food system, providing healthy, local, organic food for all. But unchecked support for, and reliance upon, municipal-level food-based approaches to address HFI is problematic for two key reasons. First, while they likely offer some benefits to participants, we suspect these initiatives do little to reduce HFI prevalence over the long-term because they fail to address the root cause of food insecurity. Second, they take pressure off provincial and federal governments to reduce income insecurity through social programs. In this commentary, we provide an overview of HFI and its links to income insecurity; present a conceptual framework for HFI action that includes three models of municipal-level food-based approaches; and identify knowledge gaps that need addressing with critical, evaluative research to ensure that there is effective municipal-level action on HFI.

Prevalence and health impacts of HFI

Defined as “the inability to acquire or consume an adequate diet quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways,

or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so”, HFI affects approximately 12% of Canadian households.¹ Adults in food-insecure households have a higher risk of inadequate nutrient intake.³ They also have poorer self-rated mental, physical and oral health; greater risk of experiencing diabetes, heart disease, hypertension and depression; and limited ability to manage conditions requiring dietary treatment.⁴ With stagnant or negative income growth in the poorest households⁵ and rising costs of food and basic needs (e.g., heating fuel),⁶ the negative health implications of HFI will only increase in prevalence and severity.

Links between HFI and income insecurity

The risk of food insecurity is well correlated with declining income.¹ Of households reliant on provincial social assistance programs, the majority (65%) experience some level of food insecurity, and over one quarter (27%) experience severe food insecurity.¹ High rates of food insecurity are also experienced in households reliant on worker’s compensation/employment

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insurance (37%), as well as those headed by a female lone parent (35%), Aboriginals (27%) and renters (25%).¹ Although income security programs have done well to protect seniors from HFI (7%),¹ the recent decision to raise the age of eligibility for pension benefits is expected to adversely affect the food security status of low-income seniors.⁷

Municipal-level HFI action

Since 1995, when the Canada Assistance Plan was replaced by the Canada Health and Social Transfer, provincial governments have aggressively clawed back social benefits while at the same time downloading responsibilities for social programs to the municipal level.⁸ These pressures, coupled with the fact that municipal governments cannot access policy levers to increase income security – a key strategy for the long-term elimination of HFI⁶ – have made municipal-level *food-based* initiatives the default option for addressing HFI in Canada. This approach to HFI action is further buttressed by popular assumptions that increasing local-level food security will not only alleviate the problem of HFI but also increase environmental sustainability, social cohesion and cultural inclusivity.⁹

Models of food-based HFI action

Given the wide variety of municipal initiatives in Canada, it is time to focus on the traits of these efforts and address the gaps in our understanding of such attempts to alleviate HFI. On the basis of typical objectives of food-based initiatives, we conceptualize municipal-level HFI action as falling within three typical models: “charitable”, “household improvements and supports” and “community food systems”.

Charitable Model

Food banks were the first type of local-level food-based initiative designed explicitly to address widespread HFI. Emerging in the 1980s in response to an economic downturn, food banks rapidly became institutionalized and remain the most widespread response to HFI.¹⁰ In March 2012, nearly 900,000 Canadians, 38% of whom were children, received food from food banks.¹¹ However, only approximately 20%-30% of those objectively classified as food-insecure use food banks,¹² and research has shown that this use is more an act of desperation than a protective strategy against HFI.¹² Food banks are problematic for other reasons: geographical fragmentation from other resources; inability to meet ethnocultural preferences; stigma; inadequate nutritional value; and insufficient food supply.¹³

Household Improvements and Supports Model

The public health sector has responded to the limitations of charitable approaches through initiatives that focus on supporting and improving conditions for vulnerable households. Encompassing community kitchens, community gardens, “good food boxes”, and budgeting and cooking skills workshops, these programs aim to increase access to fresh, nutritious food while emphasizing participants’ knowledge, skill development and empowerment.¹⁴ Some of these programs seek specifically to address locational barriers to food by explicitly attempting to redistribute fresh produce in low-income neighbourhoods known to be “food deserts”.^{15,16} While they are more dignified and provide more nutritious food, these initiatives suffer similar flaws as food

banks (e.g., lack of entitlement to service)¹⁷ while reaching far fewer food-insecure households.¹²

Community Food Systems Model

Initiatives stemming from this model tend to operate from a *community food security* framework,¹⁸ aiming for “a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice”.¹⁹ Driven largely by partnerships between municipal governments, food activists and local service providers, this model is manifested primarily in the form of food charters and food policy councils. Support for these initiatives has also been spurred by emerging research on food deserts;¹⁶ by their presumed potential to revitalize low-income neighbourhoods;²⁰ and by a growing public desire to “localize” and “democratize” the food system.¹⁸ What we find troubling, however, is that these initiatives often appear to be motivated more by middle-class desires for organic, local food than by the needs of food-insecure and hungry households in these communities. While addressing HFI may not be the primary goal of these initiatives, making food insecurity explicit in municipal food policy discourse is critical for developing a coordinated strategy for HFI action at multiple levels of government.

Conceptual framework for HFI action

Figure 1 presents a conceptual framework for HFI action, contrasting municipal-level food-based models with income support programs delivered through federal and provincial governments. The framework illustrates how these various approaches to HFI action could effect positive change in key determinants of HFI and health. Of the three food-based models, the community food systems model has the greatest *potential* to generate positive impacts on participants through increased access to food, self-efficacy, dignity and social cohesion. However, since community food systems approaches have not been rigorously evaluated, we simply do not know whether this is the case. Since the generosity of income support programs has a direct inverse effect on poverty,^{21,22} and by extension food insecurity status,^{7,23} it is our belief that generous income support programs are the best approach to reduce HFI, by increasing food-insecure households’ material access to food while maximizing their dignity in the process.

Knowledge gaps: A call for critical, evaluative research

Despite recent growth in food-based initiatives across Canada, there is a dearth of critical and systematic evaluation of these initiatives, particularly of those from the community food systems model (e.g., food charters). The limited research that exists is cross-sectional in scope and focused on single initiatives at a time (e.g., community kitchens and gardens). Although some research has generated promising results,^{24,25} other studies have not.^{12,26} Thus, more, and especially longitudinal, research is critically needed to establish the following: 1) whether participation in these initiatives actually increases participants’ food security over the long term; 2) what the barriers are to participation for non-users; and 3) how food-based policies affect the overall food security status of communities.

Most studies on community food initiatives have focused on large urban centres (e.g., Toronto, Calgary),^{12,24} offering limited generalizability to smaller Canadian municipalities. While urban

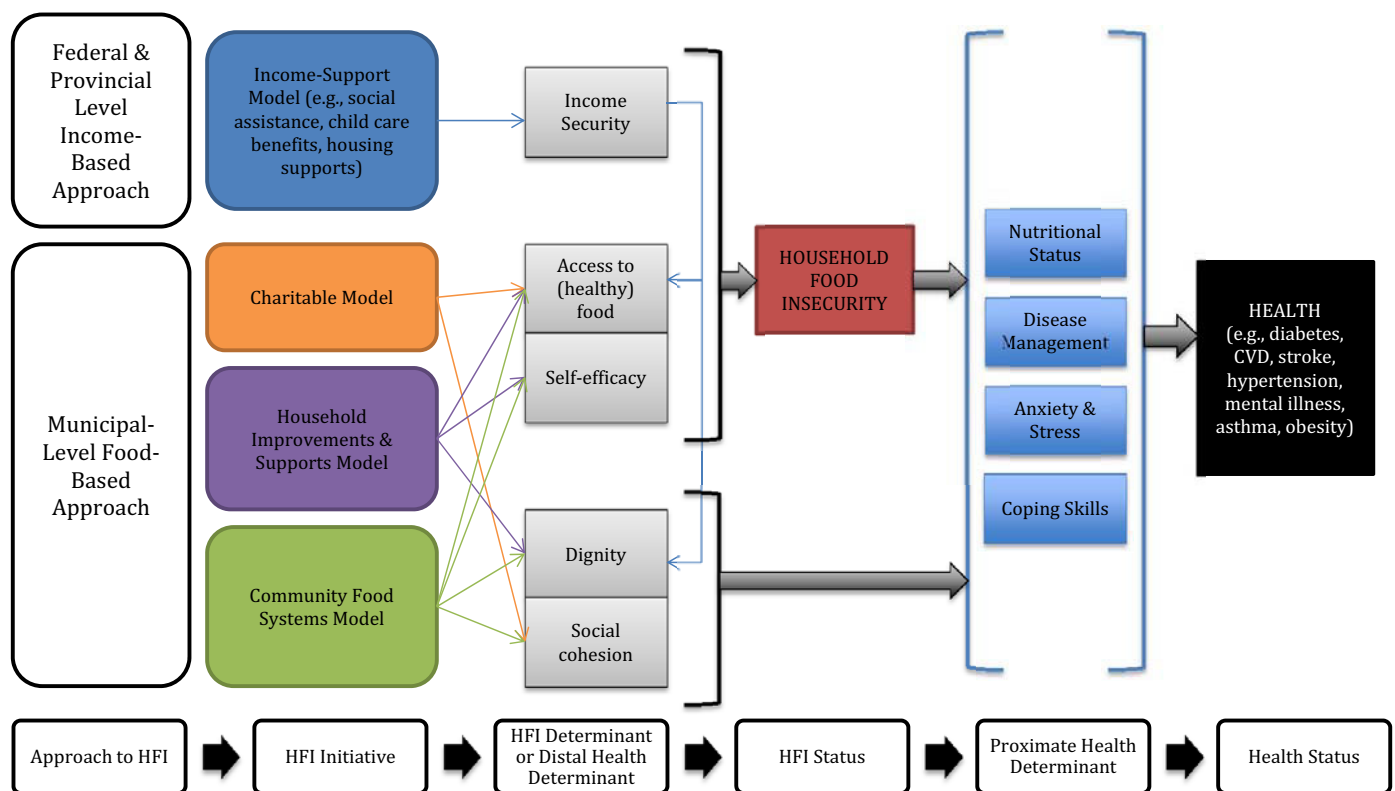


Figure 1. Conceptual framework for HFI action

centres may have more food-insecure households to accommodate, they are also hubs for innovation and are better equipped to address HFI through local-level action. Thus, research is needed on the conditions and experiences in smaller municipalities in Canada. Also needed is research on the relationship between the food security status of communities on the whole and the rates of HFI in those communities.

Finally, we have little understanding of the public costs of delivering food-based initiatives and how they might compare with the costs associated with increasing provincial and federal social benefits. Downloading the responsibility and costs of reducing HFI to municipalities and community-based organizations is especially problematic if the initiatives being delivered have limited effectiveness.

CONCLUSIONS

HFI is a persistent public health problem with well-established links to income insecurity. With provincial downloading of social responsibilities to municipalities and a lack of municipal policy levers to increase income security, municipal-level *food-based* action has become the default approach to tackle HFI in Canada. A range of models for municipal-level action on HFI exists, many of the models generating widespread support from the public health sector, food security advocates and the public. However, these initiatives have largely evaded scrutiny, and we suspect that food-based solutions to HFI offer only limited effectiveness for a problem rooted in poverty. Comprehensive and comparative research is urgently needed to evaluate these food-based approaches in order to establish evidence-based municipal-level action on HFI.

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RÉSUMÉ

L'insécurité alimentaire des ménages (IAM) est un problème de santé publique tenace qui touche 3,8 millions de Canadiens. Ses causes sont ancrées dans l'insécurité financière, mais ses solutions sont principalement fondées sur l'alimentation, le gros des efforts étant entrepris à l'échelle municipale au Canada. Nous avons classé ces actions municipales en trois modèles possibles : « bienfaisance », « améliorations et mesures de soutien aux ménages » et « systèmes alimentaires communautaires ». De nombreuses initiatives, surtout celles sans vocation de bienfaisance, reçoivent un appui massif, car elles visent à accroître la sécurité alimentaire des participants selon une démarche d'autonomisation et de respect de la dignité. Ces initiatives peuvent procurer certains avantages à leurs participants, mais selon des études préliminaires, toute solution fondée sur l'alimentation à un problème lié au revenu aura une portée limitée auprès des ménages aux prises avec l'insécurité alimentaire et un impact limité sur l'expérience d'IAM des participants. Nous soupçonnons que l'appui massif aux démarches alimentaires locales pour contrer l'IAM entrave le jugement critique du véritable potentiel de ces activités pour réduire l'IAM. Avec l'augmentation du nombre de ces initiatives au Canada, il existe un urgent besoin de mener des études complètes et comparatives pour évaluer l'impact sur l'IAM et pour s'assurer que l'action municipale de lutte contre l'IAM est fondée sur des données probantes.

MOTS CLÉS : insécurité alimentaire; municipalités; évaluation de programme; pauvreté; politique sociale; Canada