

Food IS a human right. Why do we have so many empty plates?



Food in Peterborough after COVID-19

How We Recover from 'Normal' by Seeing Food as a Human Right

Peterborough Food Action Network, October 16, 2021, World Food Day

The many challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic have people longing for a return to a pre-pandemic “normal.” However, at Peterborough Food Action Network (PFAN), we hope for something BETTER than “normal.” We hope for a time when ALL people have fair and dignified access to healthy and appropriate food.

Why NOT “normal”? Because, before the pandemic:

- In 2017-18, Canada had more people living with food insecurity than ever before reported: 4.4 million people or 12.7% of all households.ⁱ In Peterborough, the rate was 14.5%.ⁱⁱ In 2011-14, *half* of all female lone parent households lived with food insecurity in Peterborough.ⁱⁱⁱ And while it is not the focus of this document, the situation in the North is particularly dire, with 57% of households in Nunavut experiencing food insecurity.^{iv}
- Food banks had already been a primary way of addressing food insecurity in Canada for about 40 years, even though they have not been proven to lower food insecurity levels.^v
- Housing, an inflexible and substantial household cost, takes a bite out of food spending when incomes are not sufficient. In Peterborough, it was not possible to rent *any kind of housing* affordably on an income of less than \$30,000.^{vi} Yet *half* of Peterborough residents live below \$31,867.^{vii}

What we've learned during the pandemic:

In the first 2 months of the pandemic in Canada, food insecurity jumped 39% in Canada.^{viii} Here in Peterborough, we saw many more people struggling to afford food and experiencing mental health concerns, substance use, overdoses, and suicides.^{ix}

We learned that anyone can be vulnerable to circumstances beyond their control. But we also learned that particular groups are consistently more vulnerable. Those groups who were already struggling before the pandemic struggled more during it. Food insecurity and the poverty that most often leads to it, are not about individual behaviours or choices. They are about inequity.



As we move past the pandemic, we need to move to a better “normal” where food is treated as a human right for everyone. When we say something is a human right, it means everyone should be able to access it. Consider this:

- Everyone should be able to access the food that they need, along with other basic needs, like housing, clean air, and water.
- People need to be able to choose food that is nutritious and appropriate for them in a dignified way. Charities are not always able to provide this.
- Our food system should prioritize the well being of producers, eaters, and the planet.
- Canadians have universal healthcare, but do not have universal access to the food needed to maintain health and reduce the risk of disease, which can in turn reduce health care costs.^x In fact, chronic diet-related diseases are one of the main causes of premature death in Canada.^{xi}
- Ensuring that people can access the food that they need in order to thrive means establishing policies that support this.



Who sees food as a human right?

- **La Via Campesina**, a global peasant movement, initially developed six pillars of food sovereignty that focus on all people having the food that they need and control over their own food systems. A seventh pillar was later added to reflect **Indigenous Food Sovereignty**. It says that Food is Sacred, meaning that food should be treated as a precious gift, not a commodity.^{xii}
- **The United Nations** has outlined the right to food through numerous agreements including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Canada has signed on to all of these.^{xiii}
- **Prince Edward Island** has committed to eliminating food insecurity by 2030.^{xiv}
- **The Peterborough Food Charter** envisions that “all people, at all times, have physical & economic access to nutritious, safe, personally and culturally appropriate foods.”^{xv}



Could you imagine... if everyone had enough money to pay for what they need, including healthy food and decent housing?

This would mean that nobody would have to experience difficult choices between: paying for food or paying for other necessities; asking for help or going without food; feeding one’s family members or feeding oneself.

Recommendations for moving towards a new normal of universal food access:

For provincial and federal government:

1. **Income supports** like Basic Income, to ensure all people can afford what they need. Eliminating poverty is essential for addressing food insecurity.^{xvi}
2. **Affordable housing is essential.** When people need to spend more than 30% of their incomes on housing, other basic needs such as food may be compromised.^{xvii}
3. **Adequate government funding for organizations that work to address roots of food insecurity.** As long as food insecurity remains an issue, organizations dedicated to long-term systems change need to be sustained in order to support community members and work for change.



For local government and organizations:

4. **Continuing cross-sectoral collaboration and participation** which was happening before Covid-19 between non-profit organizations, food banks, farmers, people with lived experience, and others. More collaboration with diverse communities is needed.
5. **Food growing** at home and in community gardens needs to be supported so that local residents have the opportunity to access local, nutritious, and affordable food in a dignified manner.



For all governments and organizations:

6. **A systemic approach to anti-racism** is necessary for addressing the ongoing inequities in health, income, housing, and employment that have become even clearer during the pandemic.^{xviii}

- **PFAN (Peterborough Food Action Network)** brings together agencies and individuals to build community food security as part of local poverty reduction efforts. All voices are important, and welcomed. PFAN's vision is that everyone in Peterborough City and County will have enough healthy food to eat as part of a long-term food security strategy. Since the start of the pandemic, PFAN has been bringing together people promoting food access through the COVID-19 and Food Access for Vulnerable Populations group.
- **For more information, go to www.foodinpeterborough.ca**
- **Nourish** is a collaborative whose goal is to make sure everyone is able to feed themselves well, with dignity. Visit nourishproject.ca to learn more or get involved.

-
- ⁱ Tarasuk, Valerie and Andy Mitchell. "Household Food Insecurity in Canada, 2017-2018." PROOF Food Insecurity Policy Research. 2020. <https://proof.utoronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Household-Food-Insecurity-in-Canada-2017-2018-Full-Reportpdf.pdf>
- ⁱⁱ Tarasuk, Valerie and Andy Mitchell. "Household Food Insecurity in Canada, 2017-2018." PROOF Food Insecurity Policy Research. 2020. <https://proof.utoronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Household-Food-Insecurity-in-Canada-2017-2018-Full-Reportpdf.pdf>
- ⁱⁱⁱ Peterborough Public Health. (2018). Food Insecurity in Peterborough. <https://www.peterboroughpublichealth.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/2018-Food-Insecurity-Infographic.pdf>
- ^{iv} Tarasuk, Valerie and Andy Mitchell. "Household Food Insecurity in Canada, 2017-2018." PROOF Food Insecurity Policy Research. 2020. <https://proof.utoronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Household-Food-Insecurity-in-Canada-2017-2018-Full-Reportpdf.pdf>
- ^v Tarasuk, V., Fafard St-Germain, A. & Loopstra, R. (2019). The relationship between food banks and food insecurity: Insights from Canada. VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-019-00092-w>
- ^{vi} United Way Peterborough & District. (2020). Housing is Fundamental. <https://www.uwpeterborough.ca/how-we-help/housing-is-fundamental/>
- ^{vii} Statistics Canada. (2019). Census Profile, 2016 Census. <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo1=CMACA&Code1=529&Geo2=PR&Code2=35&SearchText=Peterborough&SearchType=Be-gins&SearchPR=01&B1=All&TABID=1&type=1>
- ^{viii} Statistics Canada. (2020). Food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic, May 2020. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/45-28-0001/2020001/article/00039-eng.htm>
- ^{ix} Martin, M.A., Classens, M., Agyemang, A., (2021). From Crisis to Continuity: A Community response to local food systems challenges in, and beyond the days of COVID-19 https://www.trentu.ca/agriculture/sites/trentu.ca.agriculture/files/documents/Community%20Report_web.pdf
- ^x Men, F., Gundersen, C., Urquia, M.L., and Tarasuk, V.(2020). Food insecurity is associated with higher health care use and costs among Canadian adults. *Health Affairs*, 39(8). <https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2019.01637>
- ^{xi} Government of Canada. (2021). What are Canada's Dietary Guidelines? <https://food-guide.canada.ca/en/guidelines/what-are-canadas-dietary-guidelines/>
- ^{xii} Food Secure Canada. (n.d.). What is Food Sovereignty? <https://foodsecurecanada.org/who-we-are/what-food-sovereignty>
- ^{xiii} Rideout, K., Riches, G., Ostry, A., Buckingham, D. & MacRae, R. (2007). Bringing home the right to food in Canada: challenges and possibilities for achieving food security. *Public Health Nutrition*, 10(6), 566–573. DOI: 10.1017/S1368980007246622
- ^{xiv} PROOF Food Insecurity Policy Research. (2021). Prince Edward Island: The first jurisdiction to set explicit targets for reducing food insecurity. <https://proof.utoronto.ca/prince-edward-island-the-first-jurisdiction-to-set-explicit-targets-for-reducing-food-insecurity/>
- ^{xv} Peterborough Food Action Network. (2017). Food Charter. <http://www.foodinpeterborough.ca/food-charter/>
- ^{xvi} Tarasuk, V. (2017). Implications of a basic income guarantee for household food insecurity. Retrieved from: <http://proof.utoronto.ca/resources/proof-annual-reports/implications-of-a-basic-income-guarantee-for-household-food-insecurity/>
- ^{xvii} United Way Peterborough & District. (2020). Housing is Fundamental. <https://www.uwpeterborough.ca/how-we-help/housing-is-fundamental/>
- ^{xviii} Public Health Agency of Canada. (2021). From risk to resilience: An equity approach to COVID-19. <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/corporate/publications/chief-public-health-officer-reports-state-public-health-canada/from-risk-resilience-equity-approach-covid-19.html>