



ELIMINATING FOOD INSECURITY – WE’RE
DOING IT WRONG:
HOW TO DEVELOP AN EFFECTIVE RESPONSE TO THE FOOD
SECURITY CRISIS IN DURHAM REGION

Introduction



Food insecurity affects 1 out of 10 households in Durham Region

Food insecurity is a significant problem in Durham Region affecting one out of 10 families. The majority are single parents with children under the age of 18 from low-income households. As shown in figure 1, this rate has stayed about the same since 2005 which suggests that existing responses have little impact on food insecurity.¹

Food security is a situation where everyone at all times has enough safe and nutritious food to support a healthy life. For a food source to be secure it must be available, accessible, usable, and stable. *Food insecurity* is the lack of food security. It can be chronic or transitory.

The current strategies to decrease food insecurity focus on the distribution of donated food. A 2009 study of low-income families in Toronto showed that community-based programs have low participation rates and do not resolve food insecurity. The University of Toronto’s Food Insecurity and Policy Research identifies low income as the main predictor of food insecurity.²² The effective response to food insecurity is to address the cause: economics.

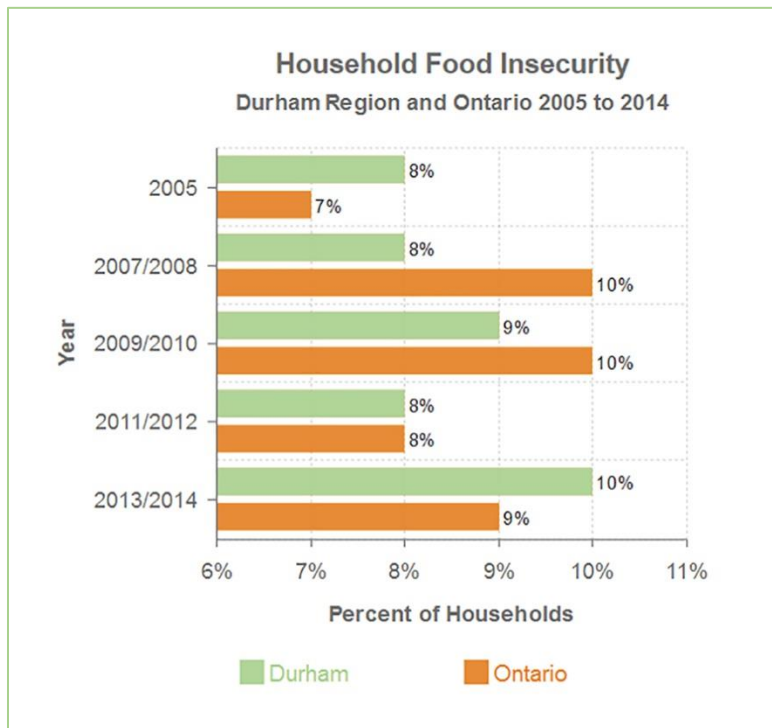


Figure 1: Food insecurity trend over time¹

How does this affect Durham Region?

The Durham Region Health Department's *2016 Nutritious Food Basket* report found that the cost of a healthy diet for a family of four has increased 12 percent over the last five years. The report shows that the cost to purchase food is \$193 per week or \$837 a month.²⁴

A 2016 report from the Region of Durham found that five of the seven poorest neighbourhoods in Durham Region are in Oshawa. Because of these poverty rates, people living in Oshawa are at a greater risk of food insecurity.³

What Causes Food Insecurity?

Food security is linked to secure, adequate income. Food insecurity isn't caused by a lack of food available; it is caused by a lack of economic power. Amartya Sen, Nobel winner and author of, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*, discovered that there wasn't a significant reduction in food during many instances of famine. Sen's research showed that starvation is a result of socio-economic factors such as unemployment, mismanaged food distribution and rising food prices.⁴

Food prices have driven millions of people worldwide into food insecurity

Several factors have driven food prices up. These include:

- High energy costs and climate change make it harder to produce food.
- Rich western diets increase the costs of food production.
- Corruption and mismanagement disrupt proper food distribution. Greedy and powerful corporations, corrupt governments and unstable countries in conflict contribute to poor food management.
- Population growth impacts the food supply. By 2050, the demand will increase by 50%.⁵

However, even if changes are made to make more food available, people who are poor still cannot access it. Income affects the quantity and quality of food that people can purchase. Fresh, healthy foods and meat cost more than unhealthy foods like pre-packaged goods. Even when world food prices dropped 14.5% in 2016, food prices rose significantly in Canada.⁶ Food prices have a bigger impact in Canada as the value of our dollar has declined, and we import 81% of the fresh produce sold here.

Current social assistance programs don't solve the problem

Households that receive social assistance and Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) are at an even higher risk of food insecurity, affecting more than half of these households.² This shows that these financial programs do not meet the basic needs of recipients.

The working poor struggle too

According to the Community Development Council Durham (CDCD), the employed make up two-thirds of the people who are food insecure. Lack of liveable wages and an increase in part-time and precarious work keeps people in poverty and makes it hard for people to access food. Also, most people earning minimum wage do not receive benefits through their employer. The CDCD calculated that the living wage in Durham Region is \$17 per hour. With the current minimum wage at \$11.40 an hour, this falls far below a liveable wage.⁷

Lack of affordable housing means people have to choose between shelter and food

While the average employment income has stalled, the cost of living has continued to rise along with housing and food prices. Even a full-time earner making minimum wage struggles to afford housing in Durham Region. The latest statistics provided by the Community Development Council Durham show that the average price to rent a one-bedroom apartment in Oshawa is \$885.00. If the same earner makes an average gross monthly income of \$1,906.00, that means almost half their income is spent on housing. The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation recommends that a person should not spend more than 30% of their income on housing.⁸

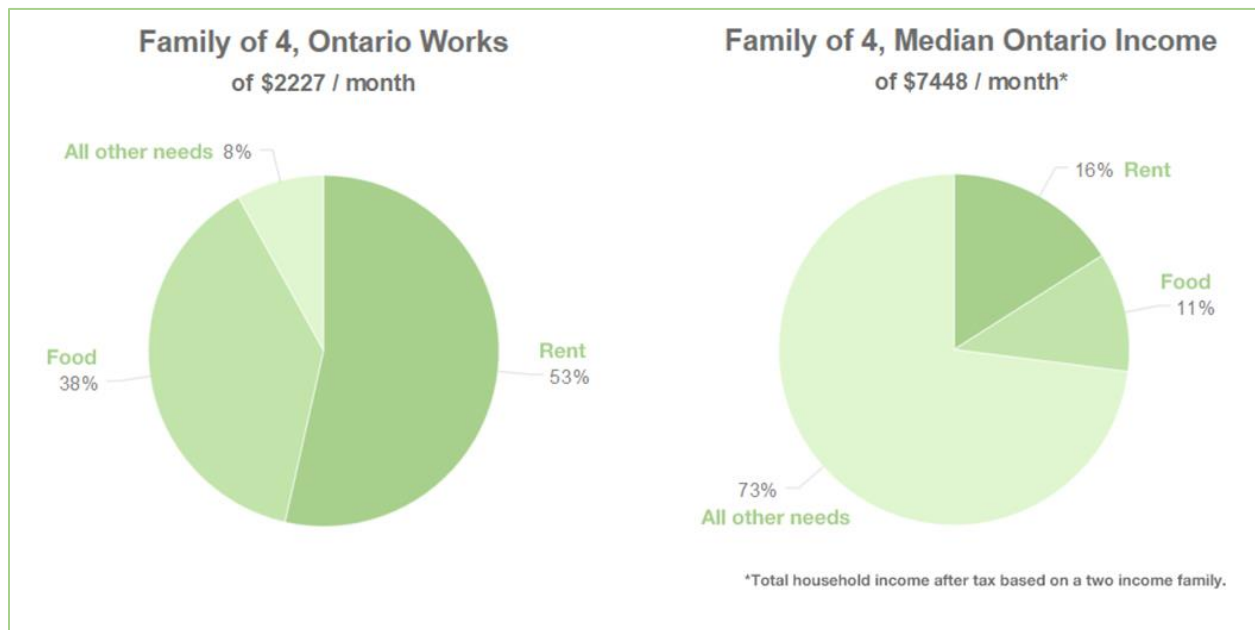


Figure 2: Comparison of Food Spending of Two Households with Different Monthly Incomes
Percent of Income Used for Housing, Food and All Other Needs, Durham Region, 2016²

Impact of Food Insecurity

The food that is most accessible in low-income neighbourhoods is fast food which is high in fat and sugar. Healthy food like fresh produce and meat is more expensive than processed foods and high-carbohydrate choices like pasta. Low-income households resort to purchasing food that is cheaper and more filling. This diet raises rates of obesity. Healthy, locally grown food is less accessible. Poor nutrition and the related stress cause many health issues. It can increase the rate of anxiety and depression and lead to chronic illnesses such as diabetes and heart disease. Food insecurity also causes learning and cognitive issues in children.⁹

"Studies have shown that adults in food insecure households have poorer self-rated health, poorer mental and physical health, poorer oral health, greater stress and are more likely to suffer from chronic conditions such as diabetes, high blood pressure and anxiety." – Deborah Lay, registered dietitian and public health nutritionist, Durham Region Health Department⁹

Food insecurity is one cog in a wheel of poverty. Other issues such as lower quality schools, unemployment, lack of affordable housing, and a higher rate of health issues compound the impact of food insecurity. All these factors combine to perpetuate a cycle that is difficult to break.

It takes more resources to deal with issues that result from food insecurity such as health care costs and food programs. In Ontario, health care costs for those with severe food insecurity is 76 percent (or \$1092) higher than food-secure households.¹⁰

Current Solutions

Some of the solutions already in place to reduce food insecurity are community gardens, food banks, meal programs, community kitchens and national/provincial credits. What is interesting to note is that most community-based programs in Oshawa receive little to no funding from local government.

Community gardens – *The Victory Garden* project in Oshawa, has 37 community garden plots and 20 teaching garden plots. They donate more than 1600 pounds of fresh vegetables annually to the regional food bank and other charities.¹¹

Food banks – *Feed the Need Durham* is the regional distributor for all the food banks, shelters, soup kitchens and breakfast programs within the region. They distribute, on average, 135,000 – 150,000 pounds of food per month to approximately 50,000 people within Durham Region.¹²

Meal programs – *St. Vincent Pallotti’s Kitchen* is a soup kitchen in Oshawa that serves free meals to those in need every day of the year. On average they provide 130 meals per day and 50,000 meals per year.¹³ *Durham’s Child Nutrition Program* administers in-school meal programs that reach 50,000 students throughout Durham Region.¹⁴

Community kitchens/workshops – *Carea Community Health Centre* offers many programs throughout the region. Services include counselling, outreach, a community garden and kitchen, as well as educational programs. The kitchen workshops help clients learn to budget and prepare nutritious meals. They have 8,972 registered clients (Katherine McConkey, personal communication, October 30, 2017).

National/Provincial Benefits – Because everyone receives these benefits directly, these programs remove the stigma of receiving charity, unlike social assistance and subsidized housing. In 1989, the Canadian government made a promise to eliminate child poverty.

However, child poverty has increased. Statistics Canada reports that in 1,066,150 children lived in poverty in 1989, which increased to 1,331,530 children in 2012.²³ Changes to the federal and provincial child tax benefit program in 2016 aimed to lift children out of poverty. High-earning households no longer qualify for these tax-free credits and increases were made for low-to-middle income households. The government predicts that child poverty will decrease by 1.1% after a year of implementation.¹⁵

“I find in the work that I do I still struggle with the government acknowledging that food insecurity has a massive negative impact on health and wellness, mental health is an ongoing struggle to get acknowledged.” – Katherine McConkey, Carea Community Health Centre

Why the Current Approach to Reducing Food Insecurity Doesn’t Work

The current responses to food insecurity are not effective because they only provide short-term relief. They are considered “Band-Aid” solutions that focus on the immediate need of hunger instead of providing a long-term solution. Community-based programs reach a small segment of those in need. Rates of participation in these programs are low. They are used out of desperation and not as an ongoing method to obtain food. There is also stigma attached to accessing these programs. As well, their reliance on donations limits the type and amount of food available. Studies have found that these programs do not resolve food insecurity. Most of these programs focus on the distribution of donated food rather than making sure people have enough money to buy the food that they need.¹⁶

Recommended Solutions

Giving people the power to access food builds healthier communities and strengthens the local economy. A secure food system requires several factors. These include proper food distribution, reducing waste, consumer protections, supporting local food systems and eradicating poverty. Because food insecurity is a serious, prevalent issue, we need to look at both short-term and long-term strategies with reform at the national and provincial levels.

“Poverty is created by bad public policies and this contributes to the inequitable distribution of the social determinants of health,” she says. Those determinants being such things as: income security, food security, job security, housing security, and early childhood development and education. “If we had policies that were supportive of those social determinants, those children would do better.” – Dr. Toba Bryant, associate professor in the Faculty of Health Sciences, UOIT²⁰

LONG-TERM STRATEGIES

Establish a national food policy. Canada needs to establish a national food policy that includes: reducing food waste, increasing domestic production, trading with countries where our dollar goes farther, and improving food distribution and storage. A national policy should support local food systems by providing credits and education to farmers, easing up on restrictions and removing seed monopolies. Local farms can’t feed everyone all the time but it is an extra layer of protection between consumers and world food markets. An effective national food policy should include the public in decision-making.

Provide a guaranteed basic income. Since food insecurity is linked to income, a national program like guaranteed basic income would remove income disparity. A guaranteed income would mean that anyone below a certain income threshold would receive a secure and liveable income. Social assistance rates are too low and a basic income would reach everyone. As of 2017, the Ontario government has initiated basic income pilot projects in a few select cities. Although the cost of a guaranteed basic income would be substantial, it would be less than the current costs of poverty.¹⁷

A guaranteed basic income would replace most existing social programs. There would also be long-term savings in health care and other costs related to poverty. It would give people dignity and lift them out of poverty. Studies suggest that this could be an effective solution when we look at existing income programs. For example, food insecurity rates among seniors dropped significantly when Canada started the Old Age Security and the Guaranteed Income Supplement programs.¹⁸

Push for employment reform. A giant step to ending poverty is by providing workers with a livable wage. The current minimum wage of \$11.60 per hour in Ontario is nowhere near enough for people to afford the necessities of life. Employment standards need to be put in place and enforced to end precarious work and protect employees. Ontario is set to raise the minimum wage to \$15 per hour by 2019. However, this still falls far below the cost of living. Contrary to some critics, raising the minimum wage does not hurt business. It stimulates the economy when people have the income to spend.

Current minimum wage in Ontario	
\$11.40 / HOUR	\$1,976 / MONTH
\$456 / WEEK	\$23,712 / YEAR
Proposed minimum wage in Ontario in 2019	
\$15 / HOUR	\$2,600 / MONTH
\$600 / WEEK	\$31,200 / YEAR
Recommended minimum wage in Durham	
\$17 / HOUR	\$2,947 / MONTH
\$680 / WEEK	\$35,360 / YEAR
Average hourly wage in Canada*	
\$27.95 / HOUR	\$4,844 / MONTH
\$1,118 / WEEK	\$58,136 / YEAR

*Across income levels, full-time, age 15+

*Figure 3: Wage comparisons based on a 40-hour work week, before taxes and deductions
Source: Statistics Canada, April 2017*

Push for housing reform. There is a lack of safe, affordable housing. Although housing development rates have increased, most of this housing is out of reach for low-income households. Years-long wait lists for subsidized housing do not meet the demand. Home ownership is out of reach for many people. Current housing markets are driving people into debt as they become house poor. Rental rates are skyrocketing while wages stagnate. Housing reform needs to include building affordable housing, capping rental rates and creating programs that allow home ownership to be more accessible to low-income earners.

SHORT-TERM STRATEGIES

Develop educational programs. Fund programs that educate on food literacy. Topics could include food safety, how to avoid food waste, nutritional meal planning and budgeting. Municipalities can do more to fund these programs.

Create food programs. Fund a national food program for children. The program can provide nutritional meals to children in daycares and schools. Removing some of this burden allows vulnerable households to free up resources for other areas instead of food. The program can also fund school and community food gardens. These gardens provide food as well as educational opportunities. One study found that adolescents no longer had difficulties in school when using a school food program.¹⁹ However, such programs only reach some people in need. We need to eliminate poverty with long-term solutions that focus on income.

Take Action



So how can a region or city provide solutions that require a national and provincial response? Cities can be doing more to fund short-term strategies such as community gardens and education and meal programs. For the long-term, the key strategy is to create policies that work. Creating effective public policy means that communities need to get involved.²¹ As individuals, we can do a lot to create change.

1. Educate yourself on food insecurity. Understand what is needed to influence policy.
2. Gather community-based evidence to show the problem and solutions. Build public awareness.
3. Make connections with community leaders and anti-poverty groups. Work with community gardens to support local food systems.
4. Identify the key policymakers.
5. Push for policy change with political representatives on the municipal, provincial and federal levels (e.g. Mayor, City and Regional Councillors, MLAs, Premier, Senators, Department Ministers)

More resources and tools, including sample letters, can be found on the *Thought About Food?* website at <http://www.foodthoughtful.ca/section7/index.html>.

We live in a powerful, Group of Eight (G8) nation, and yet we struggle to feed our people. A quarter of Canadians living in poverty are children. Studies show over and over that poverty is a result of bad public policies. As with housing and income, having an adequate amount of food should be a basic human right. It is the responsibility of individuals and communities, like Durham Region, to push for these rights to create change.

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