Household food insecurity - the inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints - is a serious public health problem in Canada. It negatively impacts physical, mental, and social health, and costs our health care system considerably.

Statistics Canada began monitoring household food insecurity in 2005 through the Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS). Since then, it has persisted across Canada. From the most recent national estimate, 1 in 8 households in Canada is food insecure, amounting to over 4 million Canadians, including 1.15 million children, living in homes that struggle to put food on the table.

Household food insecurity is strongly related to mental health. Canadians living in food insecure households are at greater risk of poor mental health than those living in food secure households and this risk increases with the severity of food insecurity.1,2 The health consequences of food insecurity take a large toll on our health care system.3,4

Evidence from Ontario shows that adults living in food insecure households put a large burden on mental health care services.4 While 1 in 8 households in Ontario is food insecure, adults living in food insecure households account for more than 1 in 3 hospitalizations due to mental health problems.

More severe food insecurity is associated with higher odds of mental health care service utilization and this relationship remains even after accounting for prior care for mental health reasons.

For children, living in a food insecure household is associated with childhood mental health problems like hyperactivity and inattention.5

Experiences of hunger during childhood have a serious and lasting impact on mental health, manifesting in greater risks of depression and suicidal ideation in adolescence and early adulthood.6,7

The co-existence of food insecurity and mental health problems is highly detrimental. Food insecurity makes it difficult for individuals to manage chronic mental health problems, while mental illness can impede their ability to become food secure.8

Food insecurity can be reduced through public policies that improve the financial circumstances of low-income households, such as increased social assistance benefits or guaranteed annual income projects.9

Research has shown that receiving a guaranteed annual income can alleviate mental health problems and the burden on our healthcare system.10 An evaluation of Mincome, the guaranteed annual income project in Manitoba during the 1970s, found decreased mental health care utilization following its implementation.11

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