



HOUSEHOLD FOOD INSECURITY IN CANADA

2017
2018

Acknowledgments

This report is a PROOF initiative supported by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research grant PJT 153260 and the Joannah and Brian Lawson Centre for Child Nutrition at the University of Toronto. The authors are indebted to Stephanie Vasko, Sarah Anne Charlebois, and Niveen Saleh from the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness for their layout and design work on the report.



Hub Solutions is a social enterprise embedded within the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (COH). Income generated from Hub Solutions fee-for-service work is reinvested into the COH to support research, innovation, policy recommendations and knowledge mobilization.

Learn more: www.hubsolutions.ca



How to cite this document: Tarasuk V, Mitchell A. (2020) Household food insecurity in Canada, 2017-18. Toronto: Research to identify policy options to reduce food insecurity (PROOF).

Retrieved from <https://proof.utoronto.ca/>



© 2020 Research to identify policy options to reduce food insecurity (PROOF)

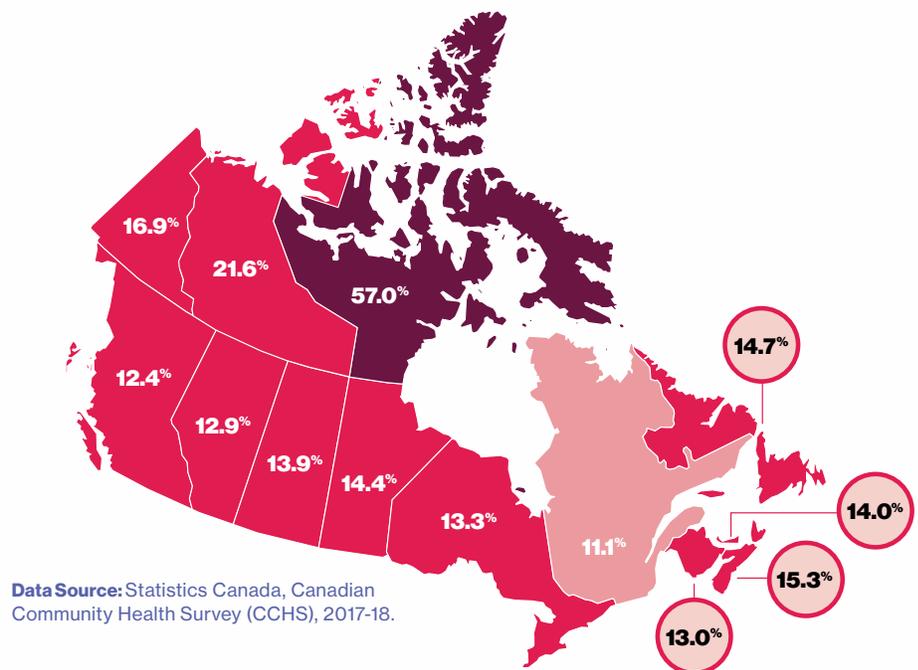
This research paper is protected under a [Creative Commons license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) that allows you to share, copy, distribute, and transmit the work for non-commercial purposes, provided you attribute it to the original source.

Executive Summary

Household food insecurity refers to the inadequate or insecure access to food because of financial constraints. Food insecurity takes a serious toll on individuals' health and well-being, and it places a significant burden on our health care system. Although there has been rigorous measurement and monitoring of household food insecurity in Canada since 2005, there is little indication that this problem is getting better. Drawing on data for 103,500 households from Statistics Canada's Canadian Community Health Survey conducted in 2017 and 2018, we found that 12.7% of households experienced some level of food insecurity in the previous 12 months. There were 4.4 million people, including more than 1.2 million children under the age of 18, living in food-insecure households in 2017-18. This is higher than any prior national estimate.

Food insecurity is much more prevalent in Nunavut than any other part of Canada. In 2017-18, 57.0% of households in Nunavut reported some level of food insecurity and almost half of these households were severely food insecure. The prevalence of food insecurity was also high in Northwest Territories, at 21.6%. The lowest prevalence of household food insecurity was 11.1% in Quebec. Quebec was the only place in Canada where the prevalence of food insecurity fell significantly between 2015-16 and 2017-18.

Household Food Insecurity *BY PROVINCE & TERRITORY*



Among the 35 census metropolitan areas examined, food insecurity was most prevalent in St John's, affecting more than 1 in 6 households in this city. The lowest rate of food insecurity was in Quebec City, where 1 in 12 households was food-insecure.

Food insecurity is more prevalent among households with children. In 2017-18, 17.3% of children under 18, or more than 1 in 6, lived in households that experienced food insecurity. Nunavut and the Northwest Territories had the highest prevalence of children living in food-insecure households at 79% and 30% respectively, but rates were also high in many provinces. About 1 in 5 children in Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick lived in households reporting some food insecurity.

Food insecurity is closely related to other markers of social and economic disadvantage. It is most prevalent among households with low incomes, lone-parent families, those who rent rather than own their housing, and those who identify as Indigenous or Black. In 2017-18, 65% of food-insecure households were reliant on employment incomes. Among those outside the workforce, food insecurity affected 60% of households reliant on social assistance, 32% of those reliant on Employment Insurance or Workers' Compensation, and 7% of households reliant on pensions and retirement incomes.



Data Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS), 2017-18.

Most food-insecure households are in the workforce.

65% reported their main source of income as wages or salaries from employment.

The persistently high prevalence of household food insecurity across Canada highlights the need for more effective, evidence-based policy responses by the federal government to address the social and economic circumstances that give rise to this problem. The differences in food insecurity rates across the provinces and territories also point to the important roles that provincial and territorial governments can play in protecting their populations from food insecurity.

Introduction

The Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS) in 2017-18 marks the first time since 2011-12 that the household food insecurity has been measured in every province and territory. Drawing on data from this survey, we present a portrait of household food insecurity in Canada, examining who is most affected and how food insecurity rates differ across the country. Our report is designed to provide a tool to monitor trends and identify priorities for interventions to address this major public health issue. It builds on the extensive work of [Health Canada](#) and [Statistics Canada](#) in measuring and monitoring household food insecurity in Canada. To gain a deeper understanding of the problem of food insecurity in Canada, readers are encouraged to consult the research papers and reports footnoted throughout this report.

The report has been prepared by **PROOF**, a research program launched in 2011 with funding from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, to identify effective policy interventions to address household food insecurity. This is the fifth report on household food insecurity in Canada that **PROOF** has released.

What is Food Insecurity?

Household food insecurity, as this problem is measured and monitored in Canada, refers to the inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints. The experience of food

insecurity can range from concerns about running out of food before there is more money to buy more, to the inability to afford a balanced diet, to going hungry, missing meals, and in extreme cases, not eating for whole days because of a lack of food and money for food.

The deprivation experienced by households that are food-insecure is not confined to food; household food insecurity denotes pervasive material deprivation.

Although food insecurity was initially understood to be a food problem, with more research it has become clear that the deprivation experienced by

households that are food insecure is not confined to food. Rather, the food problems that define household food insecurity denote much more pervasive material deprivation. Food-insecure households compromise spending across a broad range of necessities, including housing and prescription medication costs¹.

Food insecurity is a serious public health problem in Canada because individuals' health and well-being is tightly linked to their household food security status. Among children, exposure to severe food insecurity (measured as child hunger) has been linked to poorer health status and the subsequent development of a variety of chronic health conditions, including asthma and depression². Adults in food-insecure households are much more likely than food-secure adults to report having been diagnosed with a wide variety

¹ For more information about household expenditure patterns in the context of household food insecurity, please see Fafard St-Germain & Tarasuk. Prioritization of the essentials in the spending patterns of Canadian households experiencing food insecurity. *Public Health Nutrition* 2018;21(11):2065-78. doi: 10.1017/S1368980018000472. To learn about the relationship between food insecurity and people's abilities to afford prescription medications, see Men et al, *CMAJ Open* 2019.

² This information comes from the results of several studies using data from Canada's National Longitudinal Study of Children and Youth. See, for example, Kirkpatrick and McIntyre & Potestio. Child hunger and long-term adverse consequences for health. *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine* 2010;164(8):754-62. McIntyre et al. The pervasive effect of youth self-report of hunger on depression over 6 years of follow up. *Soc Psychiatry Psychiatr Epidemiol* 2017;52:537-47.



How is Food Insecurity Measured in Canada?

Data on food insecurity are collected through the **CCHS**, a cross-sectional survey administered by Statistics Canada that collects health-related information from about 130,000 Canadians over a two year period. The sample is designed to be representative of the ten provinces and three territories, but it excludes full-time members of the Canadian Forces, individuals living on First Nations reserves, Crown Lands, or in the Quebec health regions of Région du Nunavik and Région des Terres-Cries-de-la-Baie-James, and persons in prisons or care facilities. Although on-reserve First Nations people and homeless people comprise relatively small proportions of the Canadian population, their high levels of vulnerability to food insecurity must mean that the true prevalence of food insecurity is underestimated because of their omission⁵.

of chronic diseases, including mood and anxiety disorders, arthritis, asthma, back problems, and diabetes³. The relationship between food insecurity and health is graded, with adults in more severely food-insecure households more likely to report **poorer mental health** across a broad spectrum of measures and to have been diagnosed with multiple chronic conditions⁴. Food insecurity has also been associated with **higher mortality rates** among adults in Canada.

Food insecurity places a substantial burden on our health care system. We charted a sharp increase in **provincial health care expenditures** for adults in Ontario with increasing severity of household food insecurity, such that over a 12 month period, adults in severely food-insecure households cost the province, on average, about 2.5 times the health care dollars of those who were food secure.

Since 2004, the **Household Food Security Survey Module** has been included in the CCHS to monitor households' experiences of food insecurity over the previous 12 months. (See **Appendix A** for the full Household Food Security Survey Module.) This survey module consists of 18 questions asking the respondent whether he/she or other household members experienced the conditions described, which range in severity from experiences of anxiety that food will run out before household members have money to buy more, to modifying the amount of food consumed, to experiencing hunger, and in the extreme, going a whole day without eating. These questions distinguish the experiences of adults from those of children, recognizing that in households with children, adults may compromise their own food intake to reallocate scarce resources for children.

³ Tarasuk et al. Chronic physical and mental health conditions among adults may increase vulnerability to household food insecurity. *J Nutr* 2013;143(11):1785-93. doi: 10.3945/jn.113.178483.

⁴ Tarasuk et al. Chronic physical and mental health conditions among adults may increase vulnerability to household food insecurity. *J Nutr* 2013;143(11):1785-93. doi: 10.3945/jn.113.178483.

⁵ For information about food insecurity among First Nations living on reserves and in northern communities, see reports from the First Nations Regional Health Survey.

Based on the number of positive responses to the questions posed, households are classified as either food secure or marginally, moderately, or severely food insecure. (See [Appendix B](#) for a full description of the classification scheme.) Food-secure households are those who gave no indication of any income-related problem of food access. Those who are marginally food insecure have reported some concern or problem of food access over the past 12 months. Households classified as moderately food insecure have reported compromises in the quality and/or quantity of food consumed among adults and/or children. Those classed as severely food insecure have reported more extensive compromises,

including reduced food intake among adults and/or children because of a lack of money for food.

In this report, we present estimates of the number of adults and children living in food-insecure households and the rate of household food insecurity among

children, based on population-weighted data from about 103,500 households surveyed in CCHS 2017-18. In contrast to the annual reports PROOF issued for 2011, 2012, 2013, and 2014, we are presenting the results for 2017 and 2018 together in this status report. Pooling the two years is consistent with Statistics Canada's approach to sampling in the cycle, and it allows us to report more stable estimates of key indicators for smaller jurisdictions.

Our estimates differ from those released by [Statistics Canada](#) and included in [Canada's Official Poverty Dashboard](#). Firstly, we have

included marginally food-insecure households in our estimates of the prevalence of household food insecurity in Canada, whereas the results provided by Statistics Canada only count households that are moderately or severely food insecure. Secondly, we have calculated the total number of people affected by food insecurity by counting all members of households classified as food insecure. The prevalence estimates presented here provide a comprehensive account of the problem of household food insecurity in Canada.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A MARGINALLY FOOD-INSECURE HOUSEHOLD?

34.6% reported being worried that their food would run out before they got money to buy more.

41.6% reported that they could not afford to eat balanced meals.

14.6% reported that the food they bought for the household did not last and there was no money to buy more.

12.5% reported that they relied on a few low-cost foods to feed their children.

2.4% reported that they could not afford to feed their children balanced meals.

In 2015, Statistics Canada implemented a major redesign of the CCHS. This included changes to the method of sampling households for the survey⁶. The changes were implemented to improve the population representativeness of the data from CCHS. However, because of the changes, Statistics Canada cautions users against comparing more recent survey results with those prior to 2015. Consequently, we only present a comparison of prevalence estimates from CCHS 2017-18 and 2015-16. This comparison is limited to provinces and territories that measured food insecurity in 2015-16. The food security module

⁶ The method of sampling employed for CCHS since 2015 is described [here](#).

was optional content during that cycle of CCHS, and the governments of Ontario, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Yukon chose to not measure food insecurity among their populations.

In comparing prevalence estimates over time within the provinces and territories for which food insecurity measurements are available for both 2015-16 and 2017-18, it is important to consider the 95% confidence intervals around these estimates. The confidence intervals are an indication of the degree of uncertainty associated with each prevalence estimate. Only where confidence intervals do not overlap can the differences in prevalence estimates between the two survey cycles be considered statistically significant.

Prevalence of Food Insecurity

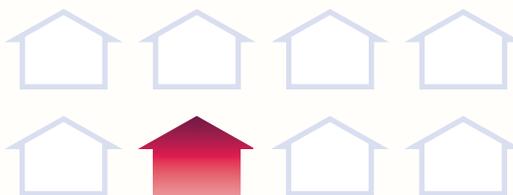
In 2017-18, 12.7% of households in the country experienced some level of food insecurity during the previous 12 months. This represents 1.8 million households, or 4.4 million individuals, including over 1.2 million children under the age of 18. This means that 17.3% of children under 18, or more than 1 in 6, lived in households that experienced food insecurity in 2017-18.

4.4 million INDIVIDUALS INCLUDING **1.2 MILLION CHILDREN** in Canada are living in food-insecure households.

Data Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS), 2017-18.

1.8 million CANADIAN HOUSEHOLDS

12.7% of households, **one in eight**, are food-insecure



3.0%
Households in Canada are severely food insecure

5.7%
Households in Canada are moderately food insecure

4.0%
Households in Canada are marginally food insecure

Data Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS), 2017-18.

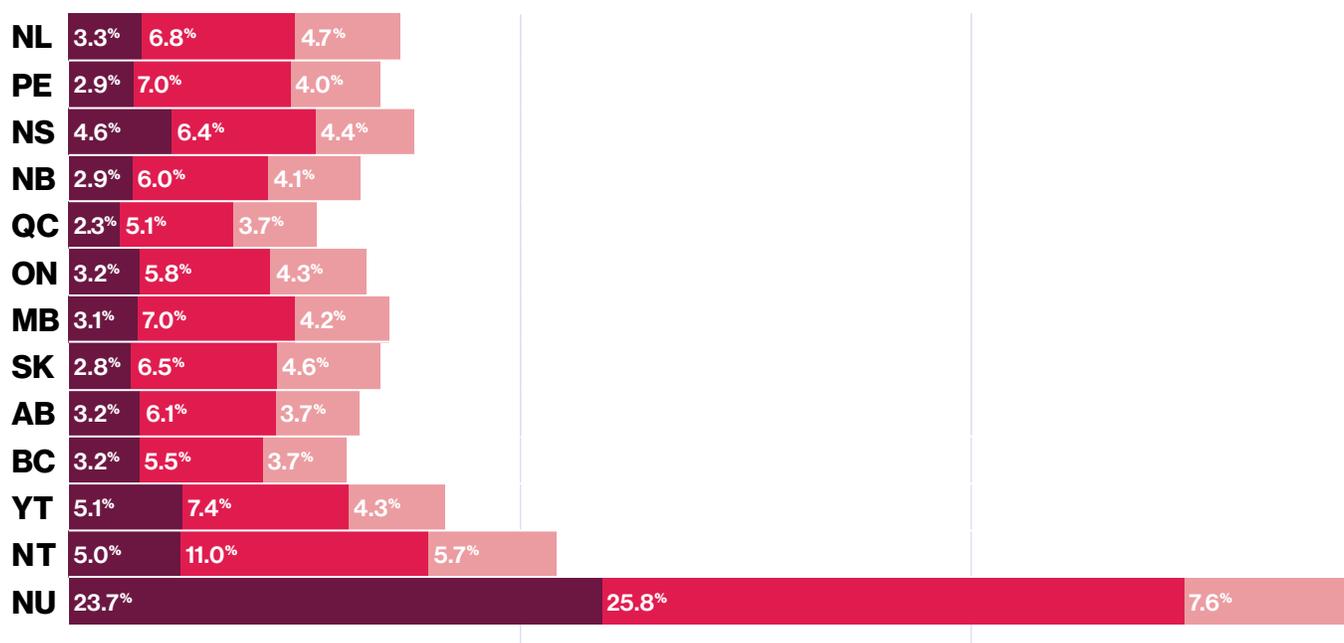
429,900 households were severely food insecure, experiencing serious levels of food deprivation because of a lack of money for food.

The levels of deprivation documented were substantial, with 5.7% of households (i.e. 819,900 households)

classified as moderately food insecure, indicating compromises in the quality and possibly the quantity of food consumed over the past 12 months, and 3.0% (i.e. 429,900 households) severely food insecure. Almost 1 in 4 food-insecure households in Canada were severely food insecure. This is concerning because severe food insecurity denotes an extreme level of deprivation that is strongly associated with multiple negative health outcomes, including mortality.

Household Food Insecurity In Canada By *PROVINCE & TERRITORY*

KEY ■ Severe Food Insecurity ■ Moderate Food Insecurity ■ Marginal Food Insecurity



Data Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS), 2017-18.

20%

40%

Food Insecurity by Province or Territory

Food insecurity in Nunavut was extraordinarily high, with a prevalence of 57.0% in 2017-18. This is the highest rate of food insecurity charted in Nunavut since monitoring began. The second highest prevalence (21.6%) of food insecurity in the country in 2017-18 was found in the Northwest Territories, and the third highest prevalence (16.9%) was found in Yukon. The lowest prevalence of household food insecurity in 2017-18 was in Quebec, at 11.1%.

As with food insecurity overall, the prevalence of severe food insecurity was much higher in Nunavut (23.7%) than elsewhere in Canada. Relatively high rates of severe food insecurity were also observed in Yukon (5.1%), Northwest Territories (5.0%), and Nova Scotia (4.6%). Severe food insecurity was lowest in Quebec, with a prevalence of 2.3%.

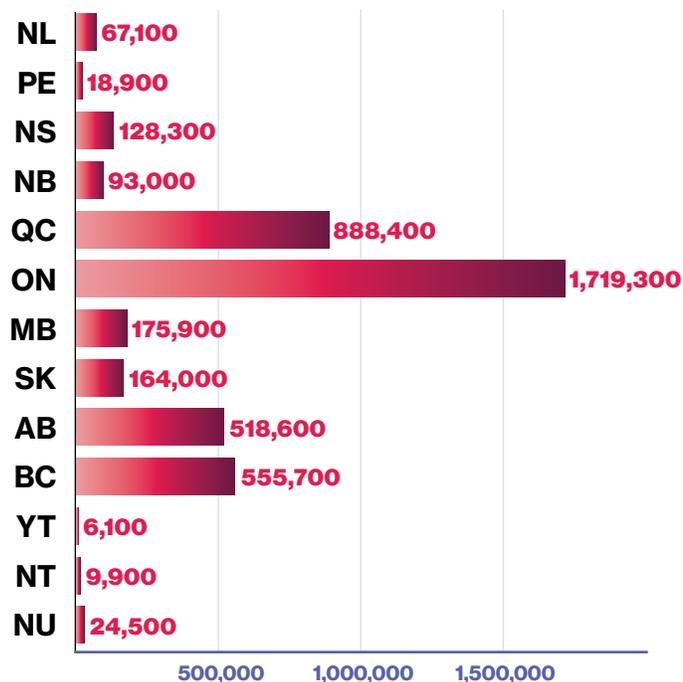
Prevalence tells us the proportion of the population or subpopulation experiencing food insecurity. To understand how the problem of food insecurity affects Canadians, it is also instructive to examine the distribution of individuals living in food-insecure households across the country. In 2017-18, 84% of people living in food-insecure households were in one of four provinces: Ontario, Quebec, Alberta, or British Columbia.

Ontario, Québec, Alberta & British Columbia accounted for the largest share of food insecure households in Canada, accounting for:

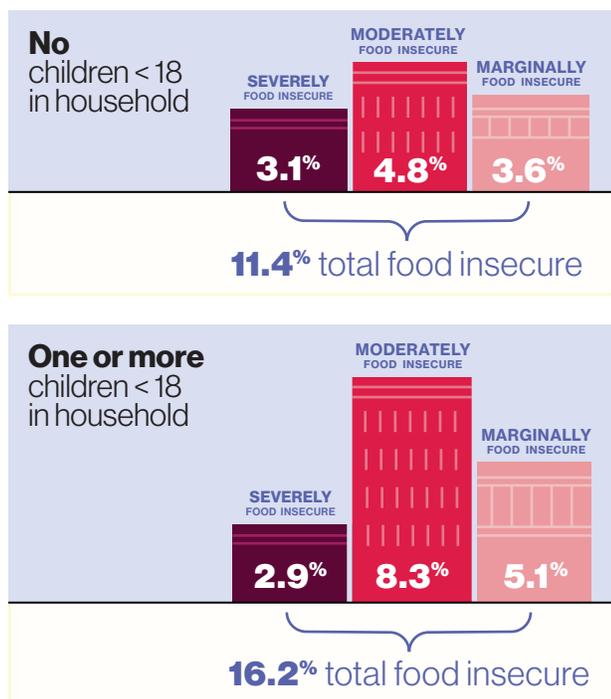
84% OF THE FOOD INSECURE POPULATION

Data Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS), 2017-18.

NUMBER OF PEOPLE LIVING IN FOOD-INSECURE HOUSEHOLDS by Province & Territory



HOUSEHOLDS WITH CHILDREN VS. THOSE WITHOUT CHILDREN



Which Households are Most Vulnerable to Food Insecurity?

Food insecurity is more prevalent among households with children than those without children. In 2017-18, 16.2% of households with at least one child under 18 years of age were food-insecure, compared to 11.4% of households without a child under 18 years of age.

Among households with children, the risk of food insecurity is much higher for lone parents than couples. In 2017-18, 11.8% of couples with children under 18 were food-insecure, but this rate rose to 21.6% for male lone-parent households and 33.1% for female lone-parent households with children under 18.

Household food insecurity is a measure of material deprivation, tightly linked to other indicators of social and economic disadvantage. Not surprisingly, therefore, food insecurity is most prevalent among households with inadequate, insecure incomes and few if any financial assets⁷.

Households with before-tax incomes in the lowest decile had the highest prevalence of food insecurity (35.6%) and 11.9% were severely food insecure. The prevalence of food insecurity fell to 22% among households in the second lowest income decile, and only 5.5% reported severe food insecurity. The rate of food insecurity continued to fall as household income rose (See [Appendix C](#) for the detailed breakdown of household food insecurity status by income decile).

Data Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS), 2017-18.

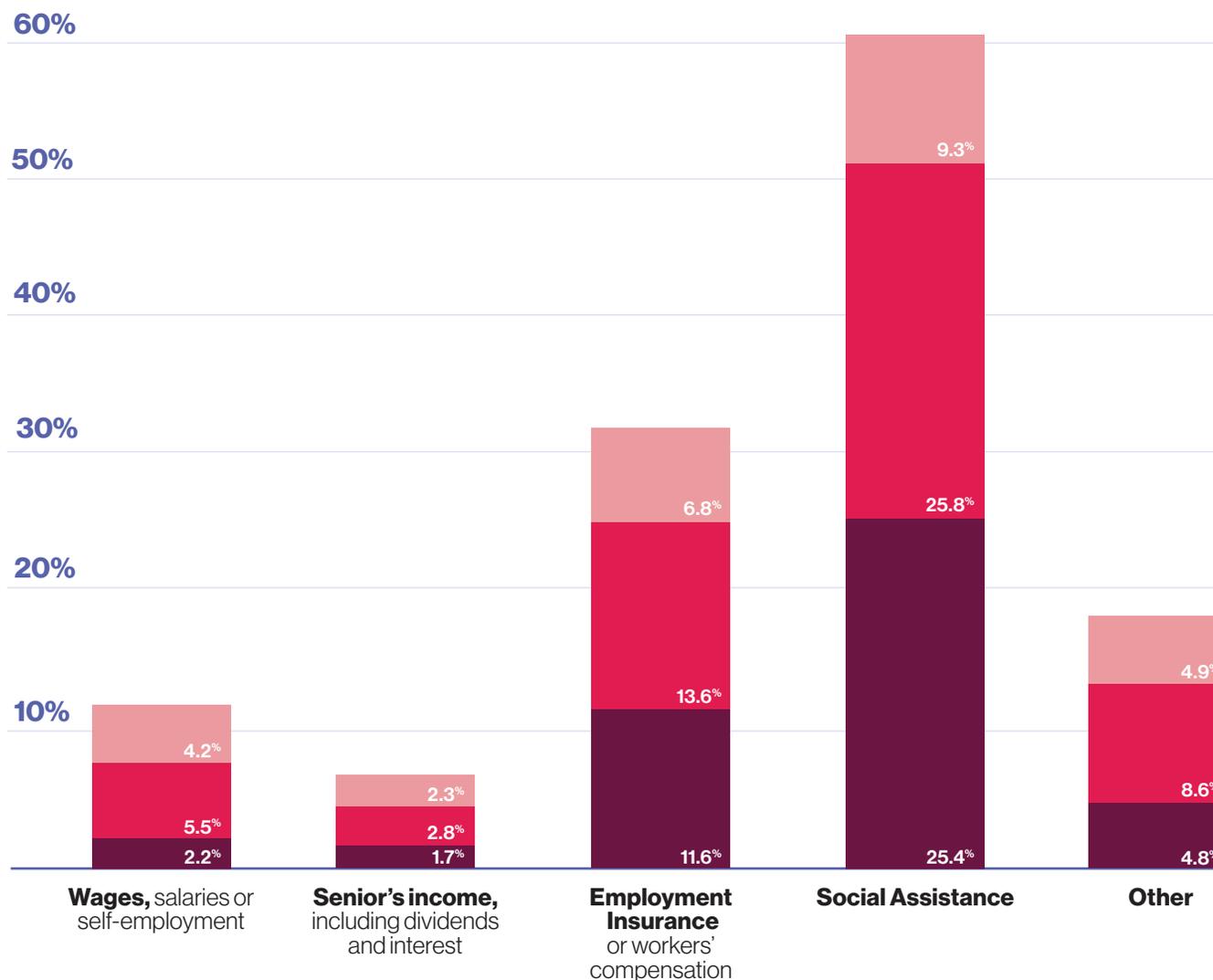
⁷ For a more in-depth analysis of the predictors of food insecurity in Canada, see Tarasuk et al, *Geographic and socio-demographic predictors of household food insecurity in Canada, 2011-12*. BMC Public Health 2019;19.

Food Insecurity Levels by MAIN SOURCE OF HOUSEHOLD INCOME

Data Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS), 2017-18.

KEY

- Severe** Household Food Insecurity
- Moderate** Household Food Insecurity
- Marginal** Household Food Insecurity



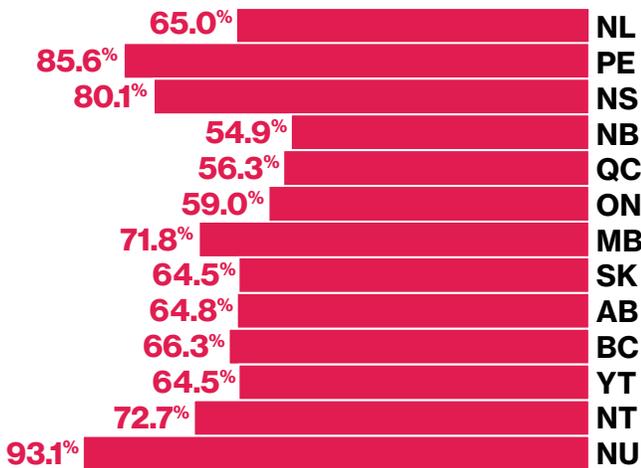
The main source of a household's income is also a strong predictor of their food security status. Households whose main source of income was either pensions or dividends and interest had the lowest rate of food insecurity (6.8%). This finding is consistent with the results of earlier population surveys, and it has been linked to the protective effect of Canada's public pension system⁸. Food insecurity affected 11.7% of households reliant on employment incomes, 32.0% of households

who reported their main source of income as Employment Insurance or Workers' Compensation, 60.4% of households reliant on social assistance (i.e. welfare and disability support programs), and 18.4% of those reliant on other income sources (e.g., child benefits, child support, alimony, etc). Among households reliant on social assistance, the levels of deprivation were substantial, with 25.8% experiencing moderate food insecurity and 25.4% experiencing severe food insecurity.

⁸ See the discussion of this issue by Emery et al, [How a guaranteed annual income could put food banks out of business](#). SPP Research Papers 2013;6(37):1-20.

Social assistance programs are administered by the provincial and territorial governments and **vary considerably across jurisdictions**. The bar graph below presents the rate of food insecurity among social assistance recipients by province and territory. Social assistance recipients in Nunavut had the highest rate of food insecurity in the country (93.1%); the lowest rate (54.9%) was found in New Brunswick.

Proportion of Households Reliant on SOCIAL ASSISTANCE who were Food Insecure by Province/Territory



Data Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS), 2017-18.

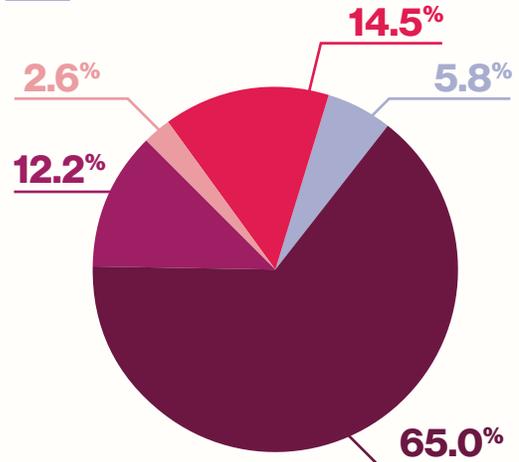
Although the prevalence of food insecurity among households reliant on wages and salaries was relatively low, they made up the majority (65.0%) of food-insecure households⁹. Conversely, while social assistance recipients were at highest risk of food insecurity, they comprised only 14.5% of all food-insecure households in the country. The percentage of food-insecure households who were reliant on wages and salaries differed by province, ranging from a low of 53.8% in Newfoundland and Labrador to a high of 75.2% in Alberta.

⁹ To learn more about food insecurity in the workforce, see McIntyre et al, When working is not enough: food insecurity in the Canadian labour force. Public Health Nutrition 2012;17(1):49-57.

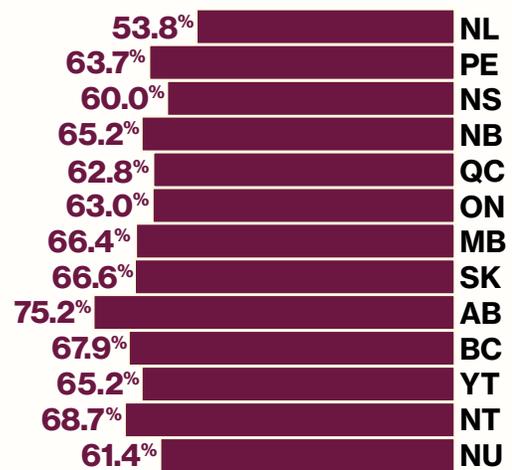
Food-insecure households' MAIN SOURCE OF INCOME

KEY

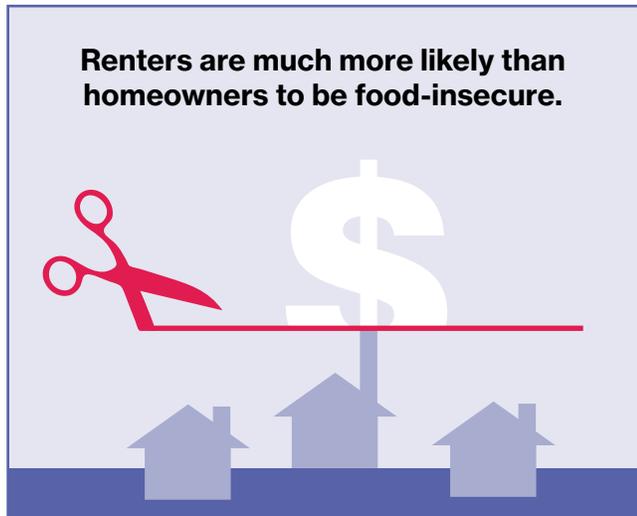
- Wages, salaries or self-employment**
- Senior's income**, including dividends and interest
- Employment Insurance** or workers' compensation
- Social Assistance**
- Other**



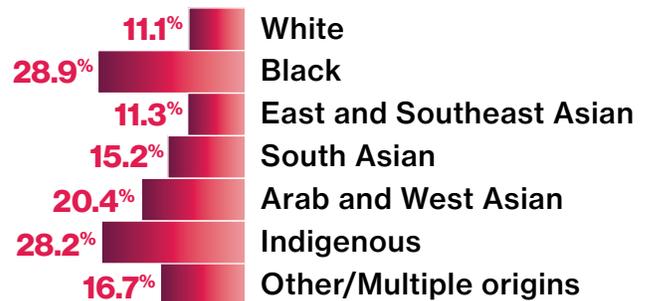
Proportion of Food-Insecure Households who were reliant on WAGES, SALARIES OR SELF-EMPLOYMENT by Province/Territory



Data Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS), 2017-18.



Prevalence of Household Food Insecurity in Relation to **RACIAL/CULTURAL IDENTITY & INDIGENOUS STATUS**



Data Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS), 2017-18.

Food insecurity is much more prevalent among households who rent rather than own their dwelling, with 25.4% of renters and 7.2% of owners affected by some degree of food insecurity. In fact, 61% of food-insecure households in Canada are renting their accommodation. This finding is consistent with the results of two recent Canadian studies examining the protective effects of home ownership in relation to food insecurity¹⁰.

Although the vast majority of food-insecure households in Canada identify as White, the prevalence of household food insecurity differs markedly by Indigenous status and racial/cultural group. The highest rates of food insecurity were found among households where the respondent identified as Indigenous or Black, at 28.2%, and 28.9% respectively. While most of the differences between racial/cultural groups shown in the graph below diminish when other household characteristics are taken into account, the much greater probability of food insecurity among Indigenous and Black households persists¹¹.

¹⁰ To learn more about the relationship between homeownership and food insecurity, see McIntyre et al, Homeowner versus non-homeowner differences in household food insecurity in Canada. *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment* 2015;31(2):349-66. doi: 10.1007/s10901-015-9461-6; and Fafard St-Germain & Tarasuk, *International Journal of Equity in Health* 2020.

¹¹ See analysis of vulnerability associated with race and Indigenous status in McIntyre et al, *When working is not enough: food insecurity in the Canadian labour force*. *Public Health Nutrition* 2012;17(1):49-57; and Tarasuk et al. Household food insecurity in Ontario during a period of poverty reduction, 2005-2014. *Canadian Public Policy* 2019.

Some other household characteristics associated with increased risk of food insecurity:

Food insecurity was also more prevalent among households with lower levels of education. Whereas only 7.2% of households including at least one member with a Bachelor's degree or higher were food insecure, this rate rose to 13.9% among those with other post-secondary education, 18.4% among households where the highest level of educational attainment was high school completion, and 21.1% among those where no one had completed high school.

The prevalence of food insecurity differed in relation to respondent's immigration status. The prevalence among households where the respondent was a recent immigrant to Canada (less than 5 years) was 17.1%, but the rate for households where the respondent had immigrated to the country five or more years ago was 13.8%, approaching the rate for Canadian-born respondents (12.2%)¹².

¹² When other household characteristics (e.g., income, housing tenure, income source) are taken into account, studies repeatedly indicate that immigration per se is not an independent risk factor for food insecurity in Canada. However, it is important to note that refugees cannot be identified through the data available in CCHS.

How Many Children are Affected?

In 2017-18, 17.3% of children under 18 years of age in Canada (an estimated 1,227,900 children) lived in households affected by some level of food insecurity.

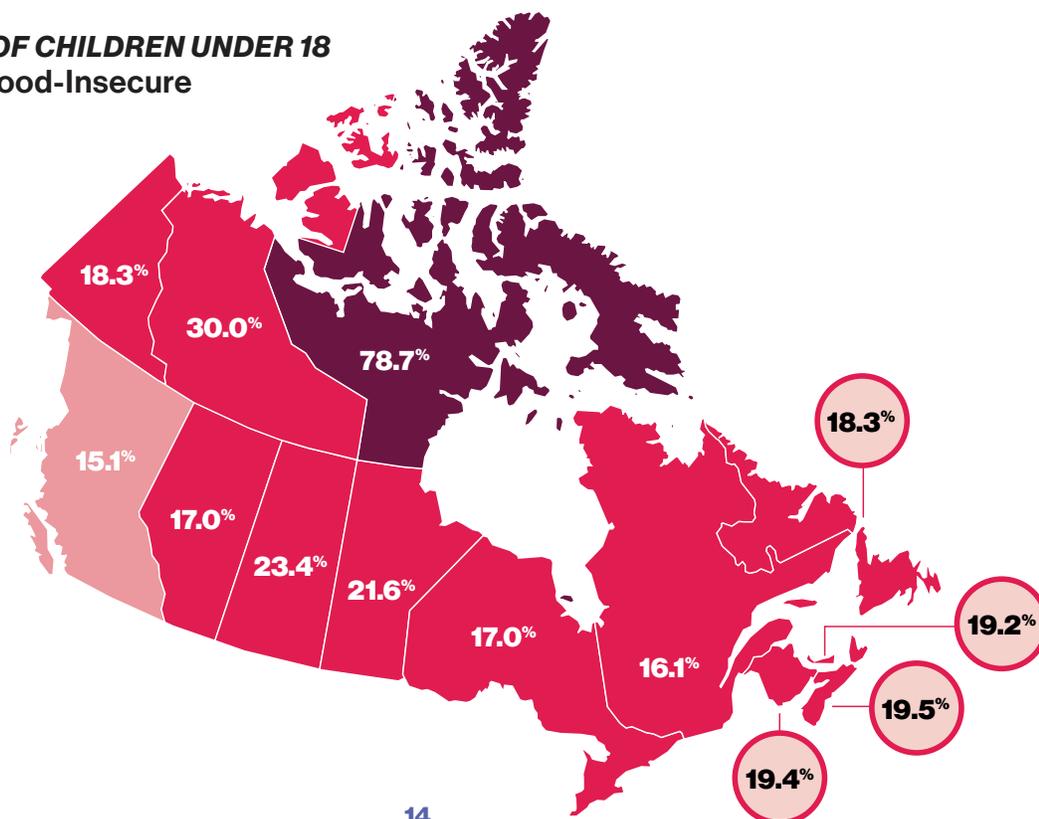
The prevalence of food insecurity for households with children differs dramatically depending on the province or territory of residence. Nunavut and the Northwest Territories had the highest prevalence of children living in food-insecure households, at 78.7% and 30.0% respectively. Elsewhere in Canada, however, the proportion of children living in food-insecure households was also of concern. Over 20% of children in Manitoba and Saskatchewan and about 19% of children in Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick were in food-insecure households. This means that about 1 in 5 children in these provinces were in families who sometimes struggled to afford the food they needed. The lowest prevalence of children in food-insecure families was found in British Columbia, at 15.1%.

Is the Problem of Food Insecurity in Canada Getting Better or Worse?

Although food insecurity has been measured consistently in Canada since 2005, major changes to the design of the CCHS in 2015 mean that the results from 2017-18 are only directly comparable to those from the 2015-16 survey cycle. The graph below shows the prevalence of total (marginal, moderate and severe) food insecurity in each province and territory in 2015-16 and 2017-18, with blanks for the three jurisdictions that did not measure their food insecurity in 2015-16. Differences from one survey cycle to the next can only be considered statistically significant if the 95% confidence intervals for these estimates (indicated by the thin black line at the top of each column) do not overlap. The only statistically significant change in prevalence was in Quebec where food insecurity fell from 12.7% in 2015-16 to 11.1% in 2017-18.

PROPORTION OF CHILDREN UNDER 18 Who Lived in Food-Insecure Households

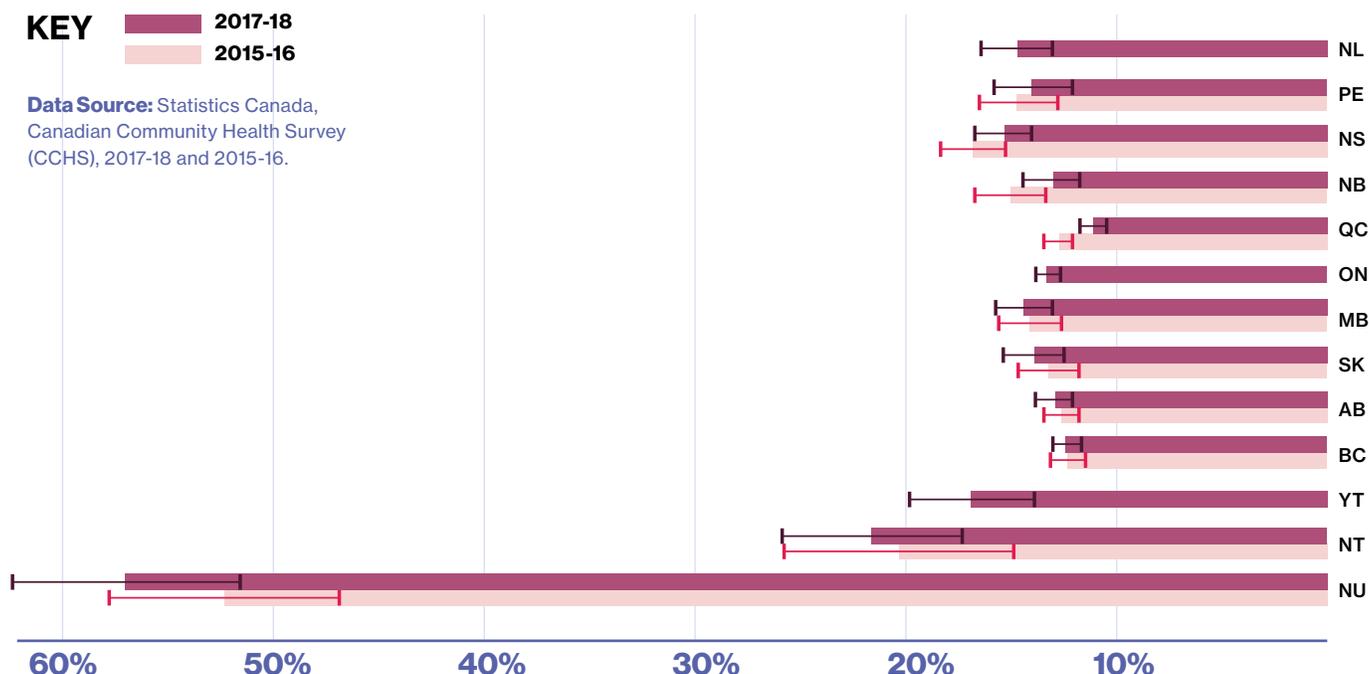
Data Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS), 2017-18.



Prevalence of household food insecurity *BY PROVINCE/TERRITORY, 2015-16 AND 2017-18*

KEY ■ 2017-18
■ 2015-16

Data Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS), 2017-18 and 2015-16.



Food insecurity rose in Nunavut from 52.3% in 2015-16 to 57.0% in 2017-18, and in Northwest Territories from 20.3% to 21.6% over this period. Slight increases were also charted in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia between 2015-16 and 2017-18. The prevalence of food insecurity appears to have fallen slightly in 2017-18 in the Maritime provinces. However, given the wide confidence intervals around these estimates, none can be considered statistically significant except the change seen in Quebec. (See [Appendix D](#) for the prevalence estimates and confidence intervals for the provincial/territorial prevalence estimates in 2015-16 and 2017-18.)

with the results of earlier surveys, the lowest prevalence of food insecurity was in Quebec City, at 8.5%. This is the only metropolitan area in Canada where the prevalence of food insecurity was below 10%.

These results also reveal large differences across urban areas within individual provinces. In British Columbia, the prevalence of food insecurity ranged from 10.8% in Kelowna to 15.8% in Abbotsford-Mission. In Quebec, the prevalence ranged from 8.5% in Quebec City to 13.5% in Sherbrooke. In Ontario, the prevalence of food insecurity ranged from a low of 10.9% in Kingston to a high of 16.8% in nearby Belleville.

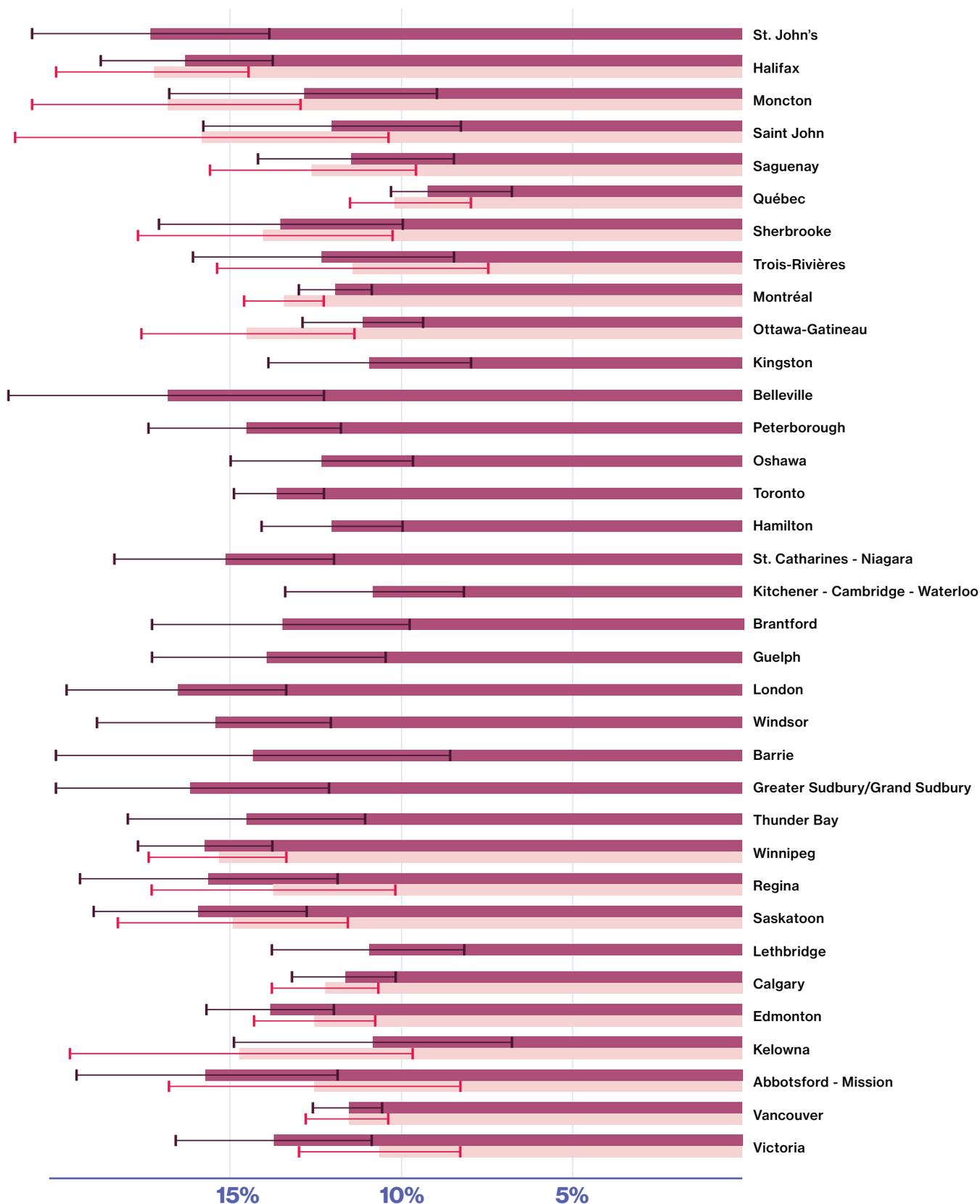
Food Insecurity – Major Census Metropolitan Areas

The estimated prevalence of household food insecurity differs markedly across the 35 major urban areas captured in this survey. St John's had the highest prevalence at 17.3%, meaning that more than 1 in 6 households in this census metropolitan area were food-insecure in 2017-18. Consistent

Between 2015-16 and 2017-18, there were large differences in the estimated prevalence of food insecurity in many census metropolitan areas. However, the overlap of 95% confidence intervals around these estimates means that none of the increases and decreases charted here can be considered statistically significant, even though the differences in some areas appear to be quite large. (See [Appendix E](#) for the prevalence estimates and confidence intervals for census metropolitan areas, 2015-16 and 2017-18.)

**Prevalence of household food insecurity by *CENSUS METROPOLITAN REGION*,
2015-16 AND 2017-18**

KEY ■ 2017-18 ■ 2015-16 **Data Source:** Statistics Canada, Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS), 2017-18 and 2015-16.



Conclusions

Household food insecurity is a serious problem in Canada. It denotes an extreme level of material deprivation that is intimately tied to compromised health and well-being. Although there has been rigorous measurement and monitoring of household food insecurity since 2005, this examination of the results from CCHS 2017-18 provides little indication that the problem is getting better.

The number of Canadians living in food-insecure households in 2017-18, 4.4 million, is higher than any prior national estimate. Among the provinces and territories that elected to measure food insecurity in 2015-16, only Quebec has registered a significant decrease in prevalence, and the drop was less than 2 percentage points. There is no indication of improvement elsewhere in Canada, and the rate of food insecurity in Nunavut is higher than anything documented to date. Household food insecurity affected 57% of households and almost 80% of children under 18 in Nunavut in 2017-18.

The socio-demographic profile of food-insecure households in Canada in 2017-18 highlights the ways in which food insecurity tracks with other markers of social and economic disadvantage in Canada. Those most at risk are households with low incomes and limited assets. Indigenous and Black households are disproportionately impacted by food insecurity, as are families with children (especially those headed by lone-parent women) and households reliant on social assistance, Employment Insurance or Workers' Compensation. However, most food-insecure households are in the workforce.

The patterns of vulnerability documented in this report are not new. Indeed, the same household circumstances and demographic characteristic associated with heightened risk of food insecurity here have been observed consistently since indicators of household food insecurity were first included on population surveys in the 1990s. The

societal conditions that give rise to and perpetuate household food insecurity in Canada are clearly deeply entrenched.

The persistently high prevalence of household food insecurity in Canada points to the need for concerted action by the federal government to address this problem. For federal responses to be effective, however, they need to be grounded in evidence, targeted to the causes of household food insecurity - not its symptoms, and evaluated in relation to their impact on food insecurity prevalence and severity. Food banks, charitable meal programs, and other community food initiatives cannot be expected to solve this problem. Tackling the conditions that give rise to food insecurity means re-evaluating the income supports and protections that are currently provided to very low-income, working-aged Canadians and their families. Our recent study of the [Canada Child Benefit](#) suggests that this new federal benefit reduced the likelihood of severe food insecurity among low-income families with children, but it was insufficient to lower their prevalence of food insecurity overall. The high rate of food insecurity among families with children indicates the need to reassess the benefit amounts for low-income families (i.e., those most vulnerable to food insecurity) to ensure that these families are adequately supported to meet basic needs. Other federal programs like the Canada Workers Benefit also need to be re-examined to ensure that they are designed and delivered in ways that protect vulnerable, low-income, working-aged Canadians from food insecurity.

While federal leadership is imperative, provincial and territorial governments' engagement in policies to reduce food insecurity is also critical. Given that the provinces and territories are responsible for health care, they bear the costs of food insecurity insofar as it increases people's needs for health services. The effects of specific provincial/territorial policies on food insecurity rates warrant much more evaluation, but what is known suggests

that provincial and territorial government actions matter. Many important policy levers rest with the provinces and territories, including social assistance, minimum wages and employment standards, housing programs, and child benefits. The marked variation in food insecurity prevalence across the provinces and territories and the significant drop in food insecurity in Quebec highlight the importance of actions at this level of government.

Without evidence-based policy interventions to reduce food insecurity, this problem will continue to fester.

There is now ample evidence to inform government responses,

with several recent studies documenting the positive impact of policy interventions at the federal and provincial level that have improved the financial resources of low-income households¹³. Without deliberate, evidence-based policy interventions to reduce food insecurity, this problem will continue to fester, with devastating implications for the health and well-being those affected.

13 Studies assessing the effects of specific policy interventions on the prevalence and severity of food insecurity in Canada:

Brown & Tarasuk. Money speaks: Reductions in severe food insecurity follow the Canada Child Benefit. *Preventive Medicine*. 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ypmed.2019.105876>

Ionescu-Iltu et al. A difference-in-difference approach to estimate the effect of income-supplementation on food insecurity. *Preventive Medicine* 2015;70:108-16.

Li et al. The impact of changes in social policies on household food insecurity in British Columbia, 2005-2012. *Preventive Medicine* 2016;93:151-8.

Loopstra et al. An exploration of the unprecedented decline in the prevalence of household food insecurity in Newfoundland and Labrador, 2007-2012. *Canadian Public Policy* 2015;41(3):191-206.

McIntyre et al. Reduction of food insecurity in low-income Canadian seniors as a likely impact of a Guaranteed Annual Income. *Canadian Public Policy* 2016;42(3):274-86. doi: 10.3138/cpp.2015-069.

Tarasuk et al. Household food insecurity in Ontario during a period of poverty reduction, 2005-2014. *Canadian Public Policy* 2019. <https://doi.org/10.3138/cpp.2018-054>.

APPENDIX A - CCHS Household Food Security Survey Module

STAGE 1 Questions 1 - 5 – ask all households

Now I'm going to read you several statements that may be used to describe the food situation for a household. Please tell me if the statement was often true, sometimes true, or never true for you and other household members in the past 12 months.

Q1. The first statement is: you and other household members worried that food would run out before you got money to buy more. Was that often true, sometimes true, or never true in the past 12 months?

- | | |
|-------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. Often true | 3. Never true |
| 2. Sometimes true | - Don't know / refuse to answer |

Q2. The food that you and other household members bought just didn't last, and there wasn't any money to get more. Was that often true, sometimes true, or never true in the past 12 months?

- | | |
|-------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. Often true | 3. Never true |
| 2. Sometimes true | - Don't know / refuse to answer |

Q3. You and other household members couldn't afford to eat balanced meals. In the past 12 months was that often true, sometimes true, or never true?

- | | |
|-------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. Often true | 3. Never true |
| 2. Sometimes true | - Don't know / refuse to answer |

IF CHILDREN UNDER 18 IN HOUSEHOLD, ASK Q4 AND Q5; OTHERWISE, SKIP TO FIRST LEVEL SCREEN

Now I'm going to read a few statements that may describe the food situation for households with children.

Q4. You or other adults in your household relied on only a few kinds of low-cost food to feed the child(ren) because you were running out of money to buy food. Was that often true, sometimes true, or never true in the past 12 months?

- | | |
|-------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. Often true | 3. Never true |
| 2. Sometimes true | - Don't know / refuse to answer |

Q5. You or other adults in your household couldn't feed the child(ren) a balanced meal, because you couldn't afford it. Was that often true, sometimes true, or never true in the past 12 months?

- | | |
|-------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. Often true | 3. Never true |
| 2. Sometimes true | - Don't know / refuse to answer |

FIRST LEVEL SCREEN (screener for Stage 2):

If **AFFIRMATIVE RESPONSE** to **ANY ONE** of Q1-Q5 (i.e., "often true" or "sometimes true"), then continue to **STAGE 2**; otherwise, skip to end.

STAGE 2 Questions 6 - 10 – ask households passing the First Level Screen

IF CHILDREN UNDER 18 IN HOUSEHOLD, ASK Q6; OTHERWISE SKIP TO Q7

Q6. The child(ren) were not eating enough because you and other adult members of the household just couldn't afford enough food. Was that often, sometimes or never true in the past 12 months?

- | | |
|-------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. Often true | 3. Never true |
| 2. Sometimes true | - Don't know / refuse to answer |

The following few questions are about the food situation in the past 12 months for you or any other adults in your household.

Q7. In the past 12 months, since last [current month] did you or other adults in your household ever cut the size of your meals or skip meals because there wasn't enough money for food?

- | | |
|------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. Yes | - Don't know / refuse to answer |
| 2. No (Go to Q8) | |

Q7b. How often did this happen?

- | | |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. Almost every month | 3. Only 1 or 2 months |
| 2. Some months but not every month | - Don't know / refuse to answer |

Q8. In the past 12 months, did you (personally) ever eat less than you felt you should because there wasn't enough money to buy food?

- | | |
|--------|---------------------------------|
| 1. Yes | - Don't know / refuse to answer |
| 2. No | |

Q9. In the past 12 months, were you (personally) ever hungry but didn't eat because you couldn't afford enough food?

- | | |
|--------|---------------------------------|
| 1. Yes | - Don't know / refuse to answer |
| 2. No | |

Q10. In the past 12 months, did you (personally) lose weight because you didn't have enough money for food?

- | | |
|--------|---------------------------------|
| 1. Yes | - Don't know / refuse to answer |
| 2. No | |

SECOND LEVEL SCREEN

(screener for Stage 3): If AFFIRMATIVE RESPONSE to ANY ONE of Q6-Q10, then continue to STAGE 3; otherwise, skip to end.

STAGE 3 Questions 11 - 15 — ask households passing the Second Level Screen

Q11. In the past 12 months, did you or other adults in your household ever not eat for a whole day because there wasn't enough money for food?

- 1. Yes - Don't know / refuse to answer
- 2. No (IF CHILDREN UNDER 18 IN HOUSEHOLD, ASK Q12; OTHERWISE SKIP TO END)

Q11b. How often did this happen?

- 1. Almost every month 3. Only 1 or 2 months
- 2. Some months but not every month - Don't know / refuse to answer

IF CHILDREN UNDER 18 IN HOUSEHOLD, ASK Q12-15; OTHERWISE SKIP TO END

Now, a few questions on the food experiences for children in your household.

Q12. In the past 12 months, did you or other adults in your household ever cut the size of any of the children's meals because there wasn't enough money for food?

- 1. Yes - Don't know / refuse to answer
- 2. No

Q13. In the past 12 months, did any of the children ever skip meals because there wasn't enough money for food?

- 1. Yes - Don't know / refuse to answer
- 2. No

Q13b. How often did this happen?

- 1. Almost every month 3. Only 1 or 2 months
- 2. Some months but not every month - Don't know / refuse to answer

Q14. In the past 12 months, were any of the children ever hungry but you just couldn't afford more food?

- 1. Almost every month 3. Only 1 or 2 months
- 2. Some months but not every month - Don't know / refuse to answer

Q15. In the past 12 months, did any of the children ever not eat for a whole day because there wasn't enough money for food?

- 1. Yes - Don't know / refuse to answer
- 2. No

End of module

APPENDIX B - Food Security Status, Based on 18 Item Questionnaire

Food security status, based on 18 item questionnaire*			
Status	Interpretation	10 item adult food security scale	8 item child food security scale
Food secure	No report of income-related problems of food access.	No items affirmed	No items affirmed
Marginal food insecurity**	Some indication of worry or an income-related barrier to adequate, secure food access.	Affirmed no more than 1 item on either scale	
Moderate food insecurity	Compromise in quality and/or quantity of food consumed by adults and/or children due to a lack of money for food.	2 to 5 positive responses	2 to 4 positive responses
Severe food insecurity	Disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake among adults and/or children	6 or more positive responses	5 or more positive responses

* Adapted from: Canadian Community Health Survey, cycle 2.2, Nutrition (2004): Income related Household Food Security in Canada.

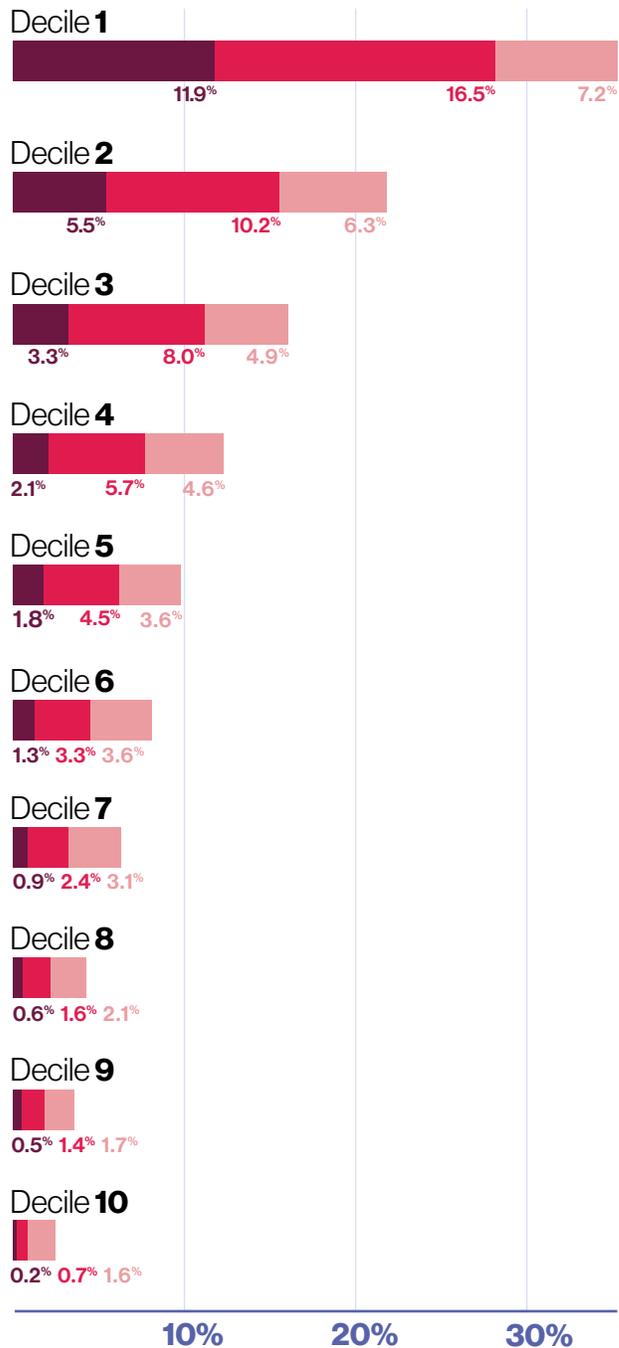
** One item in either scale affirmed.

APPENDIX C - Food Insecurity and Household Income Decile

KEY

- Severe** Household Food Insecurity
- Moderate** Household Food Insecurity
- Marginal** Household Food Insecurity

Data Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS), 2017-18.



APPENDIX D - Prevalence estimates and confidence intervals for Provinces and Territories

		2017-2018			2015-2016		
		Percent (%)	Confidence Limits (%)		Percent (%)	Confidence Limits (%)	
NL	Food secure	85.3	83.5	87			
	Marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity	14.7	13	16.5			
	Total	100					
PE	Food secure	86	84.1	88	85.3	83.4	87.3
	Marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity	14	12	15.9	14.7	12.7	16.6
	Total	100			100		
NS	Food secure	84.7	83.2	86.1	83.2	81.6	84.7
	Marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity	15.3	13.9	16.8	16.8	15.3	18.4
	Total	100			100		
NB	Food secure	87	85.5	88.4	85	83.2	86.7
	Marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity	13	11.6	14.5	15	13.3	16.8
	Total	100			100		
QC	Food secure	88.9	88.2	89.6	87.3	86.5	88
	Marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity	11.1	10.4	11.8	12.7	12	13.5
	Total	100			100		
ON	Food secure	86.7	86.1	87.4			
	Marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity	13.3	12.6	13.9			
	Total	100					
MB	Food secure	85.6	84.2	87	85.9	84.4	87.4
	Marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity	14.4	13	15.8	14.1	12.6	15.6
	Total	100			100		
SK	Food secure	86.1	84.6	87.6	86.8	85.3	88.3
	Marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity	13.9	12.4	15.4	13.2	11.7	14.7
	Total	100			100		
AB	Food secure	87.1	86.1	88	87.4	86.5	88.3
	Marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity	12.9	12	13.9	12.6	11.7	13.5
	Total	100			100		
BC	Food secure	87.6	86.9	88.4	87.7	86.8	88.6
	Marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity	12.4	11.6	13.1	12.3	11.4	13.2
	Total	100			100		
YK	Food secure	83.1	80.1	86.2			
	Marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity	16.9	13.8	19.9			
	Total	100					
NT	Food secure	78.4	74.1	82.7	79.7	74.2	85.2
	Marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity	21.6	17.3	25.9	20.3	14.8	25.8
	Total	100			100		
NU	Food secure	43	37.6	48.5	47.7	42.2	53.2
	Marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity	57	51.5	62.4	52.3	46.8	57.8
	Total	100			100		

APPENDIX E - Prevalence Estimates and Confidence Intervals for Census Metropolitan Areas, 2015-16 and 2017-18

		2017-2018			2015-2016		
		Percent (%)	Confidence Limits (%)		Percent (%)	Confidence Limits (%)	
St. John's	Food secure	82.7	79.2	86.2			
	Marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity	17.3	13.8	20.8			
	Total	100.0					
Halifax	Food secure	83.7	81.2	86.3			
	Marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity	16.3	13.7	18.8	17.2	14.4	20.1
	Total	100.0					
Moncton	Food secure	87.2	83.2	91.1			
	Marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity	12.8	8.9	16.8	16.8	12.9	20.8
	Total	100.0					
Saint John	Food secure	88.0	84.2	91.8			
	Marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity	12.0	8.2	15.8	15.8	10.3	21.3
	Total	100.0					
Saguenay	Food secure	88.7	85.8	91.6			
	Marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity	11.3	8.4	14.2	12.6	9.5	15.6
	Total	100.0					
Québec	Food secure	91.5	89.7	93.3			
	Marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity	8.5	6.7	10.3	9.7	7.9	11.5
	Total	100.0					
Sherbrooke	Food secure	86.5	82.9	90.1			
	Marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity	13.5	9.9	17.1	14.0	10.2	17.7
	Total	100.0					
Trois-Rivières	Food secure	87.7	83.9	91.6			
	Marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity	12.3	8.4	16.1	11.4	7.4	15.4
	Total	100.0					
Montréal	Food secure	88.1	87.0	89.2			
	Marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity	11.9	10.8	13.0	13.4	12.2	14.6
	Total	100.0					
Ottawa-Gatineau	Food secure	88.9	87.1	90.7			
	Marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity	11.1	9.3	12.9	14.5	11.3	17.6
	Total	100.0					
Kingston	Food secure	89.1	86.1	92.1			
	Marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity	10.9	7.9	13.9			
	Total	100.0					
Belleville	Food secure	83.2	78.5	87.8			
	Marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity	16.8	12.2	21.5			
	Total	100.0					
Peterborough	Food secure	85.5	82.6	88.3			
	Marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity	14.5	11.7	17.4			
	Total	100.0					

		2017-2018			2015-2016		
		Percent (%)	Confidence Limits (%)		Percent (%)	Confidence Limits (%)	
Oshawa	Food secure	87.7	85.0	90.4			
	Marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity	12.3	9.6	15.0			
	Total	100.0					
Toronto	Food secure	86.4	85.1	87.8			
	Marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity	13.6	12.2	14.9			
	Total	100.0					
Hamilton	Food secure	88.0	85.9	90.1			
	Marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity	12.0	9.9	14.1			
	Total	100.0					
St. Catharines - Niagara	Food secure	84.9	81.6	88.1			
	Marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity	15.1	11.9	18.4			
	Total	100.0					
Kitchener - Cambridge - Waterloo	Food secure	89.2	86.6	91.9			
	Marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity	10.8	8.1	13.4			
	Total	100.0					
Brantford	Food secure	86.5	82.7	90.3			
	Marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity	13.5	9.7	17.3			
	Total	100.0					
Guelph	Food secure	86.1	82.7	89.6			
	Marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity	13.9	10.4	17.3			
	Total	100.0					
London	Food secure	83.5	80.2	86.7			
	Marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity	16.5	13.3	19.8			
	Total	100.0					
Windsor	Food secure	84.6	81.1	88.0			
	Marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity	15.4	12.0	18.9			
	Total	100.0					
Barrie	Food secure	85.7	79.9	91.5			
	Marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity	14.3	8.5	20.1			
	Total	100.0					
Greater Sudbury /Grand Sudbury	Food secure	83.9	79.9	87.9			
	Marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity	16.1	12.1	20.1			
	Total	100.0					
Thunder Bay	Food secure	85.5	82.0	89.0			
	Marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity	14.5	11.0	18.0			
	Total	100.0					
Winnipeg	Food secure	84.3	82.3	86.3			
	Marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity	15.7	13.7	17.7	15.3	13.3	17.4
	Total	100.0					
Regina	Food secure	84.4	80.6	88.2			
	Marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity	15.6	11.8	19.4	13.7	10.1	17.3
	Total	100.0					

		2017-2018			2015-2016		
		Percent (%)	Confidence Limits (%)		Percent (%)	Confidence Limits (%)	
Saskatoon	Food secure	84.1	81.0	87.3			
	Marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity	15.9	12.7	19.0	14.9	11.5	18.3
	Total	100.0					
Lethbridge	Food secure	89.1	86.2	91.9			
	Marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity	10.9	8.1	13.8			
	Total	100.0					
Calgary	Food secure	88.4	86.8	89.9			
	Marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity	11.6	10.1	13.2	12.2	10.6	13.8
	Total	100.0					
Edmonton	Food secure	86.2	84.3	88.1			
	Marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity	13.8	11.9	15.7	12.5	10.7	14.3
	Total	100.0					
Kelowna	Food secure	89.2	85.1	93.3			
	Marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity	10.8	6.7	14.9	14.7	9.6	19.7
	Total	100.0					
Abbotsford - Mission	Food secure	84.3	80.5	88.2			
	Marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity	15.7	11.8	19.5	12.5	8.2	16.8
	Total	100.0					
Vancouver	Food secure	88.5	87.4	89.5			
	Marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity	11.5	10.5	12.6	11.5	10.3	12.8
	Total	100.0					
Victoria	Food secure	86.3	83.4	89.2			
	Marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity	13.7	10.8	16.6	10.6	8.2	13.0
	Total	100.0					