



Opinion

A decade of proof on how to tackle food insecurity in Canada

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BY TIM LI

Every holiday season, Canadians are reminded to donate to their local food banks. The support shown over the 40-year history of food banks in this country is a testament to the compassion we have for each other. But food banks will be the first to tell you that they aren't the solution for food insecurity.

Food insecurity is a policy decision. It exists because people do not have adequate financial resources to meet basic needs and our current policies fail to ensure that they do. We know this from having over 20 years of Statistics Canada data on food insecurity.

Twenty-seven years ago, the first questions about households' inability to meet their food needs due to financial constraint appeared on national surveys. Sixteen years ago, Statistics

Canada began systematically monitoring household food insecurity. Ten years ago, we formed the research program, PROOF, bringing together researchers from universities across North America to examine this data and identify effective solutions to this problem.

The name, PROOF, was the suggestion of the late Cathleen Kneen, a leader in Canada's food movement. The idea was that the research coming out of our research program would be the



Food insecurity is a policy decision. It exists because people do not have adequate financial resources to meet basic needs and our current policies fail to ensure that they do, writes Tim Li. *Photograph courtesy of Unsplash/Dan Gold*

“proof” that would drive action on this serious problem.

By the time a household is struggling to afford food, they are also struggling to afford other basic expenses. When we look at the other compromises they make, we see that food-insecure households spend substantially less on everything and are far more likely to reduce or skip prescriptions because of cost. When we look at the health implications of food insecurity, we see a sweeping array of physical and mental health conditions that extend beyond poor nutrition and amount to considerably higher health care use and expenditures.

This is proof that the struggles experienced by people who are

food insecure go beyond food. Food insecurity is a sign of pervasive material deprivation; hence the importance of approaching it as an issue of poverty.

Our research on the extent of food insecurity in Canada is proof that it is a massive problem, and it is festering. The number of people experiencing food insecurity has steadily grown since monitoring began, with the latest numbers from 2017-2018 being the highest to date. We estimated that over 4.4 million Canadians

lived in a food-insecure household during that period and by all accounts the pandemic has further exacerbated the situation. The sharp rise in living costs can only make things worse.

The solution to food insecurity is to ensure all Canadians have enough money to meet their basic needs. We have examined the impact of numerous provincial and federal policies on food insecurity in Canada. The conclusion is always the same: increases to the income of very low-income households are what reduces food insecurity. We see this in varying degrees with our public old-age pensions, the Canada Child Benefit, and Newfoundland and Labrador's 2006 poverty reduc-

tion strategy. When food-insecure households receive additional income, they spend it in ways that improve their food security.

It's clear that this understanding of food insecurity is missing from our public policies. Before the pandemic, most food-insecure households, almost two-thirds, were reliant on income from employment. Whatever policies have been in place to protect workers from poverty have failed to do so. Looking at households relying on social assistance, over half were food-insecure, meaning that these programs have been sentencing people to food insecurity. Despite efforts like the Canada Child Benefit, households with children are still more likely to be food-insecure than those without.

This is proof that we need to redesign our public policies so that no one lacks the money to meet their basic needs, regardless of their income source. That means acting on existing policies that determine Canadian's financial circumstances, like social assistance, minimum wage, taxation, child benefits, and other income supports, and exploring new policies like basic income. The failure to do so will only continue to harm the health of Canadians and burden our public health systems.

We have 40 years of leaving it to food banks to manage the holes in our social safety net, with no indication food insecurity has abated. We have 10 years of proof that what matters most is policy action on low income. What more do we need before governments step up?

Tim Li is the research program coordinator of PROOF, a research program studying effective policy interventions for food insecurity in Canada at the University of Toronto.

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