

# Niagara Food Security Network – Lived Experience Engagement, November 2020

## Report on Findings February 2021

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## INTRODUCTION

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In late 2020, a series of conversations were conducted to gather the voices of individuals who are experiencing food insecurity and living in the Niagara region of Ontario.

This work was completed as a component of the *Strengthening Food Security in Niagara* project, supported by an Ontario Trillium Foundation (OTF) Seed Grant. The project is led by the *Food Security in Niagara Community Collaborative*, a partnership between Community Support Services Niagara, Niagara Connects, Community Care of West Niagara, and United Way Niagara.

The OTF-funded project supports the early phase of the Niagara Food Security Network (NFSN). The NFSN is focused on better understanding the Niagara-wide food security landscape; and “creating the conditions for people who are food insecure to be able to access adequate healthy, nutritious food”.

The goal for the lived experience conversations was to gather information about “food-related access experiences including challenges/barriers as well as effective factors/strategies, as seen through the eyes of individuals experiencing food insecurity”. The conversations were also seen as an opportunity for the NFSN to gather Niagara-focused evidence to inform COVID-19 response policy and planning, for all levels of government.

The following outlines the methodology developed, to gather voices of individuals with lived experience:

- Facilitate conversations, in 4 areas within the Niagara region, with small groups of individuals (e.g. 6 to 8 people per group), who are experiencing, or have experienced food insecurity.
- Each conversation will be facilitated by a front-line worker with the respective agency conducting the conversation. The facilitator will be a person with whom the individuals with lived experience have an already-established trusted relationship.
- Each conversation will be framed by asking participating individuals questions that will facilitate them describing and relating their experience of food security/insecurity.
- The information gathered through these conversations will provide qualitative, Niagara-focused evidence:
  - About the challenges/barriers to food security as experienced by individuals and families living with food insecurity; and
  - The individuals’ ideas and perspective on what is needed to address the condition of living with food insecurity.

This Report provides the results of what was heard, as expressed by Niagara residents living with food insecurity and presents their voices within the context of a broader recognition that the existence of food insecurity in our country cannot be ignored, nor can it be accepted as a

chronic condition. A systemic response by governments, informed by the Social Determinants of Health<sup>1</sup>, is required.

This work to gather voices of lived experience was led by a dedicated team of people from Strong Fort Erie Neighbourhoods; Westview Centre4Women; Niagara Region Public Health LEAN (Lived Experience Advisory Network); Community Care of West Niagara; Niagara Connects; and United Way Niagara. Their leadership and willingness to work around the challenges presented by the pandemic are greatly appreciated.

We are especially grateful to the 33 individuals who so generously shared their experiences of food insecurity in Niagara. Their participation is the cornerstone of this report.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://niagaraknowledgeexchange.com/resources-publications/social-determinants-of-health-the-canadian-facts-2014/>

## BACKGROUND

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We will begin by providing some background on what “food insecurity” is; what the numbers say about the level of food insecurity in our community and country; and by describing food insecurity as part of the overall condition of poverty in our community and country.

### Defining Food Insecurity

The definition of “food insecurity” varies. From Statistics Canada to non-profit research groups, to individuals experiencing food insecurity, the definition has nuanced differences.

Statistics Canada:

““food insecurity refers to the inability to access a sufficient quantity or variety of food because of financial constraints and is an established marker of material deprivation in Canada.”<sup>2</sup>

The Food Insecurity Policy Research (PROOF)<sup>3</sup>:

“**inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints.**”<sup>4</sup>

United Way Niagara and other community organizations, such as the Ontario Dietitians in Public Health (ODPH), use the PROOF definition of food insecurity. For the purposes of this report, the PROOF definition of food insecurity will be used.

Further, PROOF identifies that *‘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 costs.’*<sup>5</sup>

This more comprehensive understanding of food insecurity is heard through the voices of individuals and families living with food insecurity. Indeed, the perspectives of Niagarans experiencing food insecurity reveal the far-reaching impacts of food insecurity in people’s lives. Their voices are shared in this report.

Finally, it is important to recognize that **different levels of severity** of food insecurity are experienced by people. The specific breakdown of the severity has been defined by Statistics Canada. These different levels are helpful to consider in looking at and further understanding food insecurity within a community. Statistics Canada had previously defined only two levels of

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<sup>2</sup> J. Y. Polsky and H. Gilmour. (December 16, 2020). Food Insecurity and mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Health Reports*. Statistics Canada. DOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.25318/82-003-x202001200001-eng>

<sup>3</sup> PROOF is an interdisciplinary [research team](#) investigating household food insecurity in Canada.

<sup>4</sup> V. Tarasuk and A. Mitchell. (2020). Household food insecurity in Canada, 2017-18. Toronto: Research to identify policy options to reduce food insecurity (PROOF). p.5.

<sup>5</sup> Tarasuk, p.5

food insecurity: *moderate* and *severe*. In 2020, they added a new category: *marginal*. The following are the definitions of the 3 different levels of severity<sup>6</sup>:

- **Marginal** food insecurity – worrying about running out of food and/or having a limited selection of food.
- **Moderate** food insecurity – not eating an adequate quality or selection of food.
- **Severe** food insecurity – not eating an adequate quantity of food or, at the most extreme, not eating for a whole day or more due to lack of money.

### **Rate of Food Insecurity – National and Local**

Based on data from Statistics Canada’s Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS), 2017-18, **12.7% of households** in Canada experienced some level of food insecurity (marginal, moderate or severe) in the respective 12-month period. 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.”<sup>7</sup> [Note: Historically, Statistics Canada’s measurement of food insecurity included just the two levels of severity: moderate and severe. Based on this measurement, the rate of food insecurity in 2017-18 was 8.7%.]

The rate of food insecurity in Ontario, 13.3%, is reported in the 2017-18 CCHS and it includes the three levels of severity. This exceeds the national rate by 0.6% and represents approximately 702,500 households or 1,719,300 Ontarians.

The estimated rate for food insecurity in the **Niagara region**, during the same time period, was **15.1%**<sup>8</sup> This rate was higher than for both the province and the country.

Food insecurity is more prevalent among households with children than those without children. From the CCHS survey data for 2017-18, 16.2% of Canadian 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.<sup>9</sup>

Children First Canada has identified food insecurity as one of the top ten “threats” to the well-being of children in Canada. In its most recent report on Raising Canada, it included recent survey results from Statistics Canada (May 2020) that showed a higher rate of food insecurity being reported among Canadians living in a household with children (19.2%) compared with those living with no children (12.2%).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Statistics Canada. (June 24, 2020). *Household food insecurity, 2017-18* [Health Fact Sheets]. p. 5. [Household food insecurity, 2017/2018 \(statcan.gc.ca\)](https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/82-625-x/2020001/article/00005-eng.htm)

<sup>7</sup> Tarasuk, p. 8

<sup>8</sup> Tarasuk, p. 26 (Appendix E - Prevalence Estimates and Confidence Intervals for Census Metropolitan Areas, 2015-16 and 2017-18)

<sup>9</sup> Tarasuk, p. 10.

<sup>10</sup> Children First Canada. (September 2020) *Raising Canada 2020: Top 10 Threats to Childhood in Canada and the Impacts of COVID-19*. University of Calgary O’Brien Institute for Public Health; Alberta Children’s Hospital Research Institute. p.28.

Overall, these numbers are recognized as an underrepresentation of the full picture of food insecurity throughout the country. They do not include individuals living on First Nations reserves, Crown Lands, or in the Quebec health regions of Région du Nunavik and Région des Terres-Criées-de-la-Baie-James, and persons in prisons or care facilities.<sup>11</sup>

## **Measuring Poverty**

**Food insecurity exists in a household, fundamentally, because there is an income problem: not enough money coming into a household to cover the basic necessities of life.** Measuring the “income problem” is part of measuring poverty. Over the years, various yardsticks have been used by governments and social service agencies to measure poverty. For the purposes of this report, we will use the Low-income measure (LIM)<sup>12</sup>. It is the yardstick used by Niagara Region’s Niagara Prosperity Initiative, the Niagara Poverty Reduction Network (NPRN) and other relevant social service and advocacy organizations.

The Low-Income Measure (LIM) is a measurement of the proportion of Canadian families that have an after-tax annual income which is less than 50 per cent of the median Canadian income.

It is relevant to note that under the federal government’s *Opportunity for All: Canada’s First Poverty Reduction Strategy* (2018), the Market Basket Measure (MBM)<sup>13</sup> is used to measure poverty. A household is considered to be living in poverty if it does not have enough money to buy a specific basket of goods and services that allows it to meet its basic needs and achieve a modest standard of living in its community.<sup>14</sup> The cost of the basket of goods and services is to be regularly adjusted to reflect the cost of living in 50 different communities across Canada. The Strategy includes a commitment to improve the measurement of poverty, and regular updates are to be made to the basket of goods and services to reflect the reality of what is needed to participate in society today.<sup>15</sup>

## **Rate of Poverty (LIM) – National & Local**

In 2018, based on the LIM, 5.9 million Canadians, 16.5%, lived in poverty.<sup>16</sup> In Ontario, 16.7% of the population lived in poverty in 2018.

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<sup>11</sup> Tarasuk, p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Niagara Prosperity Initiative Story Map; [Niagara Prosperity Initiative Story Map \(arcgis.com\)](https://arcgis.com) .

<sup>13</sup> Employment and Social Development Canada. (2018) *Opportunity for All: Canada’s First Poverty Reduction Strategy*. p. 54. [Canada’s First Poverty Reduction Strategy - Canada.ca](https://www.canada.ca)

<sup>14</sup> Employment and Social Development Canada. p. 66

<sup>15</sup> Employment and Social Development Canada. p. 65

<sup>16</sup> N. Appleyard. (October 2020). *Poverty Trends 2020*, Citizens for Public Justice. p. 6. [Poverty Trends 2020 – Citizens for Public Justice \(cpj.ca\)](https://www.cpj.ca)

In the **Niagara region in 2018, the rate of poverty, based on the LIM was 15.6%** (63,740 persons).<sup>17</sup> (Note: The Niagara Prosperity Initiative (NPI) reports on the LIM. NPI's recent report shows a lower rate of the LIM for Niagara region, at 14.46%, based on Statistics Canada income data from 2015.<sup>18</sup>)

### **Cost and Affordability of Healthy Eating**

What does healthy eating look like in terms of foods needed and their cost? In Ontario, the Nutritious Food Basket (NFB) survey tool has been used, since 1998, to monitor the cost and affordability of healthy eating. Different versions of food baskets have been used in Canada over time, reflecting changes in dietary recommendations and food habits. Health Canada released an updated National Nutritious Food Basket in 2019. The Ontario Dietitians in Public Health (ODPH) and Public Health Ontario used this updated information to develop a new food costing tool and protocol for use by public health units starting in 2021.<sup>19</sup>

Ontario public health units regularly monitor the cost of healthy eating and food affordability and do a cost analysis to compare the monthly cost of food and the rental market housing rate to monthly incomes for various individuals and family household types. **ODPH reports that these analyses consistently demonstrate that households with incomes from minimum wage employment and social assistance cannot afford the basic cost of living, including nutritious food.**<sup>20</sup>

What does this look like in the day-to-day lives of individuals and families who regularly face not having enough income to buy healthy food or any food? What impact does this have on an adult and a child's physical and mental health? What choices are they making to try and respond to such a fundamental chronic problem in their lives and that of their family?

To answer these questions, we connected with individuals in our community who would share their experience with food insecurity. Their perspectives provide us with increased understanding. The findings in this report are essential to inform decision-makers' work to create programs and services that address root causes of food insecurity in our community.

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<sup>17</sup> Statistics Canada. [Table 11-10-0018-01 After-tax low income status of tax filers and dependants based on Census Family Low Income Measure \(CFLIM-AT\), by family type and family type composition](#) DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25318/1110001801-eng>

<sup>18</sup> [Niagara Prosperity Initiative Story Map \(arcgis.com\)](#)

<sup>19</sup> Ontario Dietitians in Public Health. (2020). Position Statement and Recommendations on Responses to Food Insecurity. P. 9. Available from: [odph.ca](http://odph.ca).

<sup>20</sup> Ontario Dietitians in Public Health. p. 10.

## THE VOICES OF LIVED EXPERIENCE

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This section summarizes findings from conversations held with individuals from four different areas in the Niagara region, who are experiencing or have experienced food insecurity in their day-to-day lives.

A total of 33 individuals participated in the conversations, in one of two formats: in a focus group or an individual interview. As part of the process, participants were asked to fill out a short survey, to draw a picture of the demographic profile of participants.<sup>21</sup>

The majority of participants (32 of the 33) identified as women. Two-thirds (21) of the participants were between the ages of 30 to 55; 21% were between 55 to 64 and 15% were 65 or older.

In terms of family status, just over one-third (36%) of participants identified as single adults; 24% - single parents with children; 21% - couple with children; 9% - couple with no children; and 9% - single parent with no child living with them.

For source of income, most participants identified more than one source. Some responses, however, identified only one source of income. Thirteen participants (39%) identified Disability support as a source of income, with 2 of those individuals identifying a second source. Seven participants (21%) identified Employment as a source of income, and of those, 5 also cited a second source (e.g. pension, child support or disability). Five participants (15%) identified Ontario Works and of those, 4 also checked a second source (Child Support/CCB and Pension). 4 participants identified Pension as their only source of income, and 4 participants identified only 'Other' as their source of income.

The following is a summary of main themes arising from the conversations. The conversations were standardized by asking 5 preset questions of all participants. (See Appendix A for these questions.)

### ❖ **Living with Constant Worry and Anxiety**

The majority of respondents expressed worry or anxiety about getting or having food and/or having healthy food. Some expressed their worry or anxiety very starkly:

***“I am filled with anxiety and sadness when I cannot afford to feed my daughter. I have bills that are large enough to not allow me to keep food in my house.”***

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<sup>21</sup> This engagement process was initial exploratory work to gain understanding about the perspectives of individuals and families in Niagara who are experiencing food insecurity. The demographic information collected was minimal, for initial baseline information purposes. A more in-depth investigation of the nature of who is experiencing food insecurity in the community, such as that based on race and ethnicity would be an important next level of research to pursue on food insecurity in Niagara.

***“Anxiety because ‘where’s my next meal’; survival.”***

***“Unfortunately, almost everyone I know, and in my family can’t feed themselves even one meal a day. I personally spent all my extra money after my rent and bills and go to community kitchens for my meals. This causes me health problems not just due to inadequate nutrition but exacerbates my mental health issues.”***

***“I am constantly worried; I compromise on what I buy. I only can go shopping when my cheque is in at the beginning of the month and the food I can afford is often low in stock or the shelf is empty.”***

***“I am 90% of the time worried; my kids are fruit and veggie eaters and that costs money. With the number of kids I have the income is a challenge.”***

....and some expressed their worry more subtly:

***“We run out of milk and bread and fruit sometimes. That is just the way it is.”***

***“Sometimes I worry; fresh fruit and vegetables don’t last long. It’s a long way to the grocery store. My worker sometimes drives me.”***

***‘If [participant] didn’t have access to the local food bank, would be worried.’***

#### ***❖ Making Difficult Choices Because of Scarcity***

Among all the groups, there were individuals that expressed making difficult choices with the resources that they had available:

***“... going without eating so my child can ...”***

***“... I personally spent all my extra money after my rent and bills and go to community kitchens for my meals...”***

***“Get things that are cheap and affordable but not healthy (e.g. spaghetti, pancake mix, bread with PB and J-goes a long way); No fresh fruit or vegetables; Buy filler foods-bread or starchy so you feel full longer and don’t need to eat as much; May go without certain foods.”***

***“worried about housing before food”***

***“The house we were living in was sold. We are seniors, retired. The rent we paid was only \$900.00 for a 2-bedroom house – now rents are \$1200 so our food insecurity will increase more.”***

***“It limits where I go. Pay bills first and then worry about groceries.”***

*“... survival – sometimes people steal ...”*

*“... When you are on assistance you are not provided enough for rent and bills therefore you are always behind on payments, stressed out and starving.”*

*“I get by with the bare necessities. I weigh 140 now I used to weigh 167 when I was working.”*

*“Can’t afford fresh fruit, vegetables or meat; too expensive.”*

*“I compromise on what I buy.”*

*‘Sometimes have to shorten or not pay certain bills so they can get groceries for the week.’*

*“can’t afford food for pets.”*

❖ **Stressed with Increased Costs of Food/Housing/Living**

*“... it’s never over; I never get ahead.”*

*“The price of food going up regularly makes it challenging.”*

*“With increase in prices, I already stretch my limited income how can I stretch it anymore?”*

❖ **Additional Barriers to Accessing Food**

In addition to not having enough money to access food or healthy food, there are other barriers including transportation issues (cost, physical accessibility); limited opportunity to go shopping because of timing of benefit payment; and isolation (having limited support in getting out to get groceries/buy items in bulk):

*“It’s a long way to the grocery store; sometimes my worker drives me...”*

*“Taxi is expensive.”*

*“I can’t walk all that far; sometimes I can take a taxi but not often.”*

*“I ride my scooter to No Fills (3 miles). The weather has to be dry or the scooter will short out.”*

*“I only can go shopping when my cheque is in at the beginning of the month and the food I can afford is often low in stock or the shelf is empty.”*

**‘Difficulty to get to store with no regular form of transportation; if using bus or walking, restricted from buying some bulk items as they are too heavy to carry; difficult if you need to bring whole family as single parents often have to.’**

❖ **Impact for Children and Overall Impact on Lives**

Responses reflected broader impacts on people’s lives, including health impacts; stress for children; mental health stress for parents; and chronic sense of always not having enough.

***“... most people on low income have health issues, due to not enough money for good food.”***

***“I have not had adequate health food since I was a child at home with my parents 30 years ago.”***

***“Mom goes without. Stretching to make last; eating unhealthy because it’s too expensive for meats and fruit & veg; my chronic pain could be better managed if cost of living wasn’t so overwhelming.”***

***“The children are lucky to have a single sandwich, not meat, just jam. This is every day, all the time, if they have anything at all, some days they have nothing. This is painful for both the starving children and the embarrassed, guilt-ridden, stressed-out parents.”***

**An awareness by teens in household of extra stresses; causes teen to worry, feeling need to contribute/buy needed items.**

**More reliance on food programs in schools, and accessing other community supports (e.g. RAFT).**

❖ **Additional Impacts Due to COVID-19**

Overall, the impact of COVID-19 did not change the existence of food insecurity itself for the individuals and their families. It did, however, make it more difficult, in various ways, to access food; and restrictions put in place caused additional stresses for people already struggling with the effects of poverty.

**Additional challenges included: having to line-up (either at the store or foodbanks); lack of items available when able to get to store or foodbank; wearing masks all the time when out; some fear around going out and contracting the virus; frustration over isolation and loss of in-person counselling or medical services; on-line school very stressful (not comfortable with online).**

***“Nothing has changed because of COVID. I still need more food than I have money. The food bank only lets you come twice in the month and the food is not what the kids will eat. Except the Kraft Mac and Cheese.”***

***“My kids are home schooled now and are home all day during COVID so I find I need more food. That’s a change I was not expecting.”***

***“I did not have enough money before and I do not have enough money during COVID to feed my family.”***

***“I am now homeless & living in a shelter because rent is unaffordable; mental health/anxiety/depression has grown because I could no longer volunteer or be active. I need an AA meeting and can’t find one.”***

***“a lot of juggling to get out of house while children were at home (not at school); limited time to shop and prepare meals”.***

***“not working now under COVID, less money to buy good food”.***

***“no hot lunches or other food programs at schools since COVID”.***

**One family with 2 children with disabilities, are not able to attend Centre in Niagara Falls; ‘home all day and hungry’ (used to have meals at Centre).**

#### **❖ Ideas for What’s Needed to Reduce Food Insecurity**

The last question was asked with the purpose of providing individuals with the opportunity to share any additional information about their experiences related to food and getting/having food that they need. Essentially, this question elicited specific comments on the inadequacy of the level of benefits participants receive, in relation to the cost of having basic necessities in life and about the high cost of housing:

***“the government does not give enough for basic survival!”***

***“Lower rent; allow us to earn more money; We need a bus pass”.***

***“Lower rental apartments and houses and raise government pensions, Disability and Ontario Works to make living more affordable”.***

***“Raise ODSP or OW; Have a guaranteed income for people; reduce rent for people struggling.”***

#### **Connections to Community Resources Beyond Food**

In addition to addressing food insecurity, the facilitators/frontline staff also identified the importance of having an opportunity to provide further support to individuals, once an initial connection has been made to help with basic food needs, to assist them accessing other services. (e.g. connecting with housing assistance options, child care options/subsidy, assistance with filing income tax and accessing eligible tax credits, credit counselling, counselling services.) Supporting food needs is often just the start to providing a connection and further support to individuals.

## FOOD INSECURITY AND INCOME

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As the Ontario Dietitians in Public Health (ODPH) stated it in their recent Position Statement and Recommendations on Responses to Food Insecurity, “**food insecurity is an income problem.**”<sup>22</sup>

While the research data on food insecurity tells us this with numbers, it is the voices of people living the harsh reality of food insecurity that tell us what this really means in day-to-day living. **They do not have enough money for the basic necessity of food and this brings daily anxiety, stress, low self-esteem and a life of such challenges that it leaves people feeling not valued as an equal member of society.**

There is a current concerted call for governments in Canada, at all levels, to address the persistent condition of food insecurity and poverty that exists in our country of plenty. The persistence of such a destructive and demeaning quality of life for more than 4 million Canadians, of which 1.2 million are children, is evidence that the existing interventions (income assistance and support programs as well as private charities) to address food insecurity and poverty are failing. It must be said that food banks and community charity food or meal programs cannot be expected to solve the problem or to fill the often significant gaps left by public programs. Further, any expectation that ‘left-over’ or ‘discarded’ food is an answer in addressing food insecurity undermines the value of equity for all in our society. Canadians need their governments to take leadership in providing basic income supports designed for all Canadians to live with dignity.

Various approaches and options have been researched and put forward to improve different income support and assistance programs<sup>23</sup>, and to enhance existing social programs such as the expansion of quality and accessible childcare in all communities.<sup>24</sup>

Recent research completed in Canada, has demonstrated the positive impacts of increases in an income benefit or access to an unconditional income support. Positive effects have been shown, both on improving the state of food security for individuals and family households, and on mitigating other negative impacts of income poverty.

One example of an increased benefit’s impact is demonstrated through a recent study<sup>25</sup> of the effect on food insecurity in family households in receipt of the Canada Child Benefit (the reconfigured and enhanced child benefit introduced by the federal government in 2016). The study demonstrated that the new federal benefit reduced the likelihood of severe food insecurity among low-income families with children, although not lowering the overall

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<sup>22</sup> Ontario Dietitians in Public Health. p. 9.

<sup>23</sup> Tarasuk, p. 18.

<sup>24</sup> Community Food Centres Canada. (September 2020). *Beyond Hunger: The Hidden Impacts of Food Insecurity in Canada*. pp. 44-54.

<sup>25</sup> Erika Browne and Valerie Tarasuk, “Money speaks: Reductions in severe food insecurity follow the Canada Child Benefit”, 2019, [Reduction in food insecurity due to CCTB.pdf](#)

prevalence of food insecurity for these families. The key takeaway from this study is noted by the authors, that it:

*“speaks to the potential of income transfers to impact food insecurity, emphasizing the (positive or negative) role that changes in social protections might play.”<sup>26</sup>*

The COVID-19 situation is illuminating inequalities that exist in our society. Beyond existing income benefit or support programs, there is an increased focus on the option of a guaranteed basic income program, and how it would effectively address food and income insecurity, while providing fundamental dignity for individuals and families. As governments seek to address social and economic impacts of the pandemic, the opportunity to move forward on effectively reforming Canada’s social safety net, to include a basic income, is uniquely upon us.

### **Toward a Basic Income**

The concept of a guaranteed basic income has been on and off the social policy table over the last 50 years in Canada. Along with considerable research<sup>27</sup>, there have been basic income pilot projects undertaken in different Canadian jurisdictions. The two main pilots, one in Manitoba in the 1970s and the more recent one in Ontario (2017-19), each ended before their planned conclusion. However, some valid outcomes were identified, particularly for the more recent pilot in Ontario.<sup>28</sup>

The topic was examined in Niagara in 2013 and 2014, beginning with (then) Senator Hugh Segal speaking at the Niagara Community Foundation Leaders Breakfast<sup>29</sup>. Mr. Segal highlighted gaps in our current welfare system and showed how a Guaranteed Annual Income Supplement could be the efficient anti-poverty solution we’ve been seeking. He stated, **“... I do really believe in equality of opportunity as the centre of a dynamic free enterprise, mixed-market and growing economy. Choosing efficiency over waste, respect over condescension and making room at the family table for all Canadians is never wrong.”**

Specific to impacting food insecurity, the initial findings of the Basic Income pilot in Southern Ontario (2017-19) indicated that a basic income contributes to improving food security for families. **“In terms of food security, most of the survey participants reported a better diet (86%), more frequent nutritious feedings (85%), lower meal-skipping behavior (69%) and less food bank usage (68%).”<sup>30</sup>**

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<sup>26</sup> Brown and Tarasuk, p. 7.

<sup>27</sup> C. Pasma and S. Regehr. (2019) *Basic income: Some Policy Options for Canada*. Report Prepared for the Basic Income Canada Network; H. Segal, E. Forget and K. Banting. (October 2020). *A Federal Basic Income Within the Post COVID-19 Economic Recovery Plan*. An Royal Society of Canada Policy Briefing.

<sup>28</sup> M. Ferdosi, T. McDowell, W. Lewchuk & S. Ross. (March 2020). *Southern Ontario’s Basic Income Experience* for Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction. McMaster University and Hamilton Community Foundation.

<sup>29</sup> <https://niagaraknowledgeexchange.com/community-blog/guaranteed-income-in-niagara-first-steps-and-a-vision-for-the-future/>

<sup>30</sup> M. Ferdosi et al., p. 59 and p. 43-47.

With COVID heightening the condition of income insecurity for so many Canadians since March 2020, there has been a particular renewed focus on looking at a basic income and the significant impact it would have on reducing food insecurity and, overall, raising individuals and families out of poverty. The pointed and swift creation by the federal government of the Canadian Emergency Relief Benefit (CERB), in response to the immediate social and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown in March 2020, is a real-time demonstration of how a comprehensive benefit can be created and implemented: a type of basic income for eligible Canadians.

These factors and the heightened need to address poverty and food insecurity that the COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare have not gone unnoticed by policymakers and social service agencies throughout Canada, including here in Niagara. The following is a list of some of the agencies that have recently called on all levels of government and policymakers to undertake revision of our income assistance and support programs towards developing a guaranteed basic income:

- Niagara Poverty Reduction Network, “Letter to Niagara Regional Council Public Health and Social Services Committee” (July 6, 2020)<sup>31</sup>
- Motion by Niagara Regional Council Public Health and Social Services Committee: Basic Income for Income Security (July 14, 2020) - Carried unanimously. (See Appendix B). [Motion based on Report by the Public Health and Social Services Committee: *Basic Income for Income Security*, July 14, 2020.<sup>32</sup>]
- Canadian Mental Health Association, “Now is the Time for a Universal Basic Income” (Oct. 2020)<sup>33</sup>
- Ontario Dietitians in Public Health, “Position Statement and Recommendations on Responses to Food Insecurity” (December 2020)
- A Royal Society of Canada Policy Briefing, “A Federal Basic Income Within the Post COVID-19 Economic Recovery Plan” (October 2020)
- Basic Income Canada Network, *Brief to the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology*. (June 2020)<sup>34</sup>; *Basic Income: Some Policy Options for Canada* (February 2020)

Of particular note, the national research group, the Basic Income Canada Network (BICN), released a significant report in February 2020 (as referenced above), based on two years of research and rigorous modelling, that provides three options for a basic income in Canada. Most recently the BICN presented before the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology to advise the Committee in its work on government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. The BICN recommends:

- *That the federal government establish a basic income guarantee for 18- to 64-year-olds comparable to the CERB monthly amount of \$2000...*”

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<sup>31</sup> [NPRN - BI Letter to NR.pdf](#)

<sup>32</sup> [filestream.ashx \(escribemeetings.com\)](#)

<sup>33</sup> [Statement on Universal Basic Income - CMHA National](#)

<sup>34</sup> [BICN Brief - Advocating for a Basic Income in the wake of COVID-19 - Basic Income Canada Network](#)

- *That the federal government consult and work with recognized academic and nongovernment experts who have been researching, working for a basic income and developing policy design for Canada as well as those who have expertise in developing and implementing related pilots and programs.*
- *That the federal government lead in immediately adopting a basic income guarantee in response to the pandemic and as a way to recover and rebuild the economy, adapting as evidence may require, while working towards a fully national basic income, in collaboration with provinces, territories, municipalities and First Nations, to ensure that all orders of government contribute and benefit fairly and that other necessary changes and supports are made appropriately to ensure that no one is left behind.*

## CONCLUSION

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Food insecurity and poverty in Canada continue to be persistent in our country of plenty. This corrodes and undermines the health and well-being of our communities and our country as a whole.

Food insecurity impacts individuals and families beyond not having access to enough food to allay hunger. These include: anxiety and depression, low self-esteem, poor health status and outcomes and negative impacts on child development. All of these were evident in the voices of Niagara residents who shared their stories of their day-to-day experiences facing uncertainty and challenges around accessing healthy (or just daily) food for themselves and/or family.

Throughout all the group and individual conversations, the majority of the participants referenced either the high cost of healthy foods/housing/living (*“With increase in prices, I already stretch my limited income how can I stretch it anymore?”*) and/or not having enough money to cover all monthly costs which leads to living with food insecurity (*“... When you are on assistance you are not provided enough for rent and bills therefore you are always behind on payments, stressed out and starving.”*)

**To address food insecurity is to address inadequate income for individuals and families.** Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, an estimated 4.4 million Canadians were living with food insecurity. The social and economic impacts of the pandemic shutdown since March 2020 will only increase these numbers, as people either have lost their jobs or had to leave employment for health or other reasons, such as care responsibilities. A more recent survey by Statistics Canada for the month of April 2020 revealed an increase in Canadians living in a household with food insecurity (1 in 7 or 5.4 million). Further, Canadians who missed work due to COVID-19 were almost three times more likely to be food insecure than those who worked (e.g. 28.4% vs. 10.7%).<sup>35</sup> The precariousness of Canada’s social safety net has been laid bare by the pandemic.

The current social and economic circumstances have put our society at a pivotal point in the work of further developing our social safety net to achieve greater equity for Canadians in need. Providing a guaranteed basic income would address both food insecurity and the many other debilitating impacts of poverty. It would restore dignity in the lives of Canadians who are struggling to meet the basic needs of daily living.

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<sup>35</sup> Statistics Canada. Food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic, May 2020 [Internet]. Ottawa: Statistics Canada; 2020 Jun 24 [cited 2020 Aug]. 5 p. Catalogue No.: 45280001. Available from: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/45-28-0001/2020001/article/00039-eng.htm>

### **Opportunities for NFSN Consideration:**

- To add its support to the call to the federal government, to work with provincial and municipal/regional governments, social policy advocates and researchers in the field of income assistance and support programs, to build on the work undertaken in creating the CERB, towards developing a basic income program.
- To support the Niagara Regional Council progress, as identified in its Public Health and Social Services Committee’s Report (PHSSC 6-2020)<sup>36</sup>, in advancing its recommendation “that the federal and provincial governments engage in pilot projects to study policy innovations that can address poverty and income inequality, including the study of a basic income guarantee project in Niagara region”.
- To support the pursuit of further research and evaluation on the impact and effectiveness of “wrap-around” services for individuals and families in need, in recognition of how food banks/community service agencies that support food security needs of individuals can (and many do) provide additional and “wrap-around” services.

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<sup>36</sup> [eSCRIBE Minutes \(escribemeetings.com\)](https://www.escribemeetings.com)

# APPENDIX A

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## METHODOLOGY

In order to gather input from individuals and families in Niagara who have experienced and/or are currently experiencing food insecurity in the last 12 months, it was determined to seek out existing community groups or agencies, representing different areas of the region, that had regular contact with individuals/families in need and seek their assistance in facilitating a focus group or individual conversations.

The following four community agencies/groups participated:

- Community Care West Niagara – (Participants interviewed by front-line staff person.)
- Strong Fort Erie Neighbourhoods - (Telephone conversations with individuals)
- Lived Experience Advisory Network (LEAN) – NRPH (Facilitated by NRPH staff.)
- Westview Centre 4 Women – (Facilitated by agency staff)

Five questions were developed by the Working Committee and provided to each facilitator, to help guide the conversation, whether with an individual or in a group setting. For a group, it was recommended that the size be 6 to 8 people. In addition, a short participant information survey, to provide basic demographic information, was provided for each participant to complete.

The following are the five questions:

### **Question 1:**

*If a person is not worried about having enough food on a certain day or for the week ahead, that usually means there's basic foods in the fridge & cupboard (e.g. milk, eggs, some hamburger or chicken, cereal, pasta, some fruit or veggies).*

*If you or someone you know is feeling worried about getting food and/or having enough food for themselves or their family, what does that look like for you or them in their day or week?*

### **Question 2:**

*Is having or getting access to regular, good food an on-going challenge for you or someone you know, now or in the past?*

*If Yes:*

*What makes it an on-going challenge?*

*For example:*

- *Limited or no money to buy food.*
- *Transportation problems to get to store or food bank/community kitchen.*
- *Mental health – difficulty to interact/ go out/get help.*
- *Physical access issues*
- *Having to walk to the store and not being able to carry everything back.*
- *There isn't a near-by place to access food.*

**Question 3:**

*If you or someone you know has children, have you or them experienced finding it challenging to have regular, good food for your/their children?*

*If Yes:*

*What does this look like in your (that person's) home when this happens?*

*For example (Offer one or more questions to help solicit responses):*

- *Do you/they make adjustments in your/their day/week with what you/they can do?*
- *Make different decisions with money you/they have?*
- *Do you/they see impacts on your/their children?*
  - *What does this look like in your/their home?*
  - *How does that impact you/them?*

**Question 4:**

*In the past 8 months with COVID, there have been many changes. We would like to know about any changes that have happened in your/their world, particularly related to accessing food and other essential needs in life.*

*Are there any particular changes that you/they noticed, that you'd like to share?*

*For example:*

- *Did you/they have new or different challenges about accessing food?*
- *Did you/they see an improvement in accessing food?*
- *If yes, what created the improvement?*

**Question 5:**

*Is there anything else that you would like to share about your experiences related to food and getting/having food that you need, that we haven't talked about?*

## APPENDIX B

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Motion of the Regional Municipality of Niagara Public Health and Social Services Committee:

“Basic Income for Income Security”

That Report PHD 6-2020, dated July 14, 2020, respecting Basic Income for Income Security, BE RECEIVED and the following recommendations BE APPROVED:

1. That Regional Council ACKNOWLEDGE the inequitable impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Niagara residents, including the disproportionate burden of both illness and economic harm borne by those of lower income or in poverty;
2. That Regional Council CALL UPON the federal and provincial government to prioritize measures to reduce poverty and income inequality in our society as one of the changes that should be initiated by this pandemic;
3. That Regional Council RECOMMEND that the federal and provincial governments engage in pilot projects to study policy innovations that can address poverty and income inequality, including the study of a basic income guarantee project in Niagara region;
4. That Regional Council particularly RECOMMEND that the federal government carefully study the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) for its impact on health and poverty of recipients as lessons that could be applied to a basic income guarantee pilot, or as a platform for instituting a basic income guarantee; and
5. That Regional Council DIRECT the Regional Chair to communicate these calls and recommendations to the federal and provincial governments.<sup>37</sup>

Carried Unanimously July 14, 2020.

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<sup>37</sup> Minutes of the Regional Municipality of Niagara Public Health & Social Services Committee Open Session, PHSSC 6-2020, Tuesday, July 14, 2020, Council Chamber/Teleconference Niagara Region Headquarters, Campbell West 1815 Sir Isaac Brock Way, Thorold, ON, p.3-4. [eSCRIBE Minutes \(escribemeetings.com\)](https://www.escribemeetings.com)