

Written Submission on Food Security in Northern Communities

By: Community Food Centres Canada and the Qajuqturvik Community Food Centre



qajuqturvik community food centre
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Summary of recommendations

Recommendation 1: That the federal government evaluate whether the Nutrition North Canada subsidy is benefiting higher-income households more than those that are food insecure, and make certain that any future changes to the NNC program ensure communities benefit directly from the subsidy and take into account the needs of food-insecure households.

Recommendation 2: That the federal government explore how to increase incomes for Northerners living in food insecurity, either through a refundable tax credit or by working with the provinces and territories to increase social assistance rates in Northern communities.

Recommendation 3: That the federal government increase investment in the Harvesters Support Grant and explore other methods of supporting Northern food production.

About Community Food Centres Canada

Community Food Centres Canada (CFCC) is a national charity that creates vibrant Community Food Centres and programs in low-income neighbourhoods where food is used as a tool to build health, belonging, and social justice.

CFCC currently supports 15 Community Food Centres nationally, of which 3 are in Indigenous communities. We support more than 300 community food security organizations with grants, training, resources, and an annual conference through our Good Food Organizations program. We also convene a learning network of 28 Indigenous-led and -serving organizations. Through our network of Community Food Centres and Good Food Organizations, we are active in more than 200 communities across Canada.

About the Qajuqturvik Community Food Centre

Qajuqturvik Community Food Centre, located in Iqaluit, Nunavut, strives to strengthen health, belonging and food sovereignty using the power of tradition and community. We provide programming in food access, skills and training, and advocacy. We have a first-hand understanding of food security in Nunavut and the various factors that affect our unique food system.

Food insecurity in Northern Canada

Even before COVID-19, food insecurity, defined as inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints, affected 12.7% of the Canadian population—or 1 in 8 Canadians.¹ Since the pandemic, food insecurity has increased by 39% and now affects 1 in 7 Canadians.²

This problem is much worse in Northern communities: in the territories, the rate of food insecurity pre-pandemic ranged from 16.9% in the Yukon to 57% in Nunavut.³ A staggering 76% of Inuit aged 15 and over living in Inuit Nunangat are food insecure.⁴

The high rates of food insecurity in Northern communities are due to the combination of lower incomes and a higher cost of living, including food prices. A 2015 report found that the cost of a nutritious food basket for a family of four in Attawapiskat, a remote First Nation in northeastern Ontario, was \$1,909, compared to just \$847 in Toronto, and that residents of nearby Fort Albany First Nation would need to spend 56% of their income on food in order to access a basic nutritious diet.⁵

It is well documented that food insecurity has deleterious physical and mental health effects. People who are food insecure are more likely to suffer from a number of chronic conditions, including diabetes, heart disease, and hypertension.⁶ Food insecurity also leads to increased instances of depression, anxiety, mood disorders, and suicidal ideation, and children who experience food insecurity are more likely to experience mental-health challenges as adults.⁷

A recent report released by Community Food Centres Canada found that the effects of food insecurity permeate all aspects of people's lives. Of the nearly 600 people living with food insecurity we surveyed:

- 81% said food insecurity takes a toll on their physical health;
- 79% said it takes a toll on their mental health;
- 64% said it erodes relationships with family and friends;
- 59% said it negatively impacts their children;
- 58% said it socially isolates them;
- 57% said it makes it harder to find and keep a job;
- 53% said it makes it harder to move their lives forward; and
- 46% said it limits their ability to celebrate their culture.⁸

Nutrition North Canada

Nutrition North Canada (NNC) aims to “make nutritious food and some essential items more affordable and more accessible.”⁹ Despite this goal, food insecurity in the territories has deepened since its implementation, most dramatically in Nunavut, where rates of food insecurity have increased from 36.4% in 2011¹⁰ to 57.0% in 2017-18.¹¹

As a retail subsidy, NNC relies on Northern retailers to pass on savings to consumers; however, a 2014 Auditor General's report found little evidence that the subsidy was reaching consumers.¹²

A recent report examining the huge increase in rates of food insecurity in Nunavut since NNC's

implementation posits that the focus on perishable and nutritious foods may have worsened food access for some households by increasing the prices of non-perishable foods. Moreover, the authors suggest that while NNC reports to have increased the volume of subsidized foods, it is possible that this is due to increased consumption by higher-income households.¹³

It is worth considering that there is a larger disparity in incomes in Nunavut than elsewhere in Canada: in 2015, 51.6% of Nunavummiut had after-tax incomes below \$30,000, while 20.5% had incomes in excess of \$80,000 (compared to 48.7% and 8%, respectively, in Canada).¹⁴ Considering the level of inequality, a universal subsidy is likely not the most effective food-security intervention.

The federal government should therefore evaluate whether the NNC subsidy is benefiting higher-income households more than those that are food insecure. Any future changes to the NNC program should ensure communities benefit directly from the subsidy and take into account the needs of food-insecure households, as was suggested by the Nunavut Food Security Coalition.¹⁵

Addressing food insecurity in Northern Canada

If NNC is not the appropriate vehicle to address the growing rates of food insecurity in Northern Canada, it is worth asking what is. Evidence from Canada is clear: increasing incomes decreases food insecurity. The Canada Child Benefit, for example, has decreased severe food insecurity in families with children by 30%.¹⁶ Upon reaching the age of 65 and becoming eligible for seniors' benefits such as OAS, GIS and CPP, people's risk of food insecurity decreases by 50%.¹⁷ The Qajuqturvik Community Food Centre saw dramatically lower demand for food aid immediately after the implementation of the Canada Emergency Response Benefit in April 2020.

This is not to say that the federal government has no role in subsidising the cost of food in Northern communities, rather that this alone will be insufficient to address the growing problem of food insecurity in the North. **The federal government should therefore explore how to increase incomes for Northerners living in food insecurity, either through a refundable tax credit or by working with the provinces and territories to increase social assistance rates in Northern communities.**

In all three territories, consumption of country foods is higher among lower-income households than among higher-income households.¹⁸ This suggests that supporting country food production and distribution would disproportionately impact people living in food insecurity. The Harvesters Support Grant was a welcome addition to the NNC program as it supports Northern food systems and, in doing so, also supports people living on lower incomes. It is, however, a relatively small investment—in Nunavut's case, amounting to \$76 per person per year.¹⁹ **The federal government should therefore increase investment in the Harvesters Support Grant and explore other methods of supporting Northern food production.**

References

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