

## **Basic Income Guarantee to End Food Insecurity**

### **Submitted to the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs (INAN) by**

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# Basic Income Guarantee to End Food Insecurity

## Summary

**Basic Income Guarantee (BIG), implemented through the tax system, is the most resource-effective, equitable, and comprehensive policy option to increase food security, reduce health inequities, and raise Canadians out of poverty, now and in the future.**

## What is food insecurity?

Food insecurity is a symptom of poverty. It is an income-rooted problem that disproportionately impacts Indigenous and other racialized groups, those with disabilities, children, lone-parent families, and those receiving social assistance or earning less than a livable wage. [1, 2, 3, 4] Food insecurity is especially high in northern and remote communities. [5, 6]

Food insecurity is the “inadequate or uncertain access to food because of financial constraints” (Tarasuk and Mitchell, 2020)

**Food insecurity is escalating.** In 2011, 12% of Canadians were food insecure, with much higher rates in Indigenous (27%) and northern communities (e.g., Nunavut, 36.4%).[5] By 2018 this rate rose to 12.5% of Canadians, *more than any previous national estimate*, and food insecurity in Nunavut had increased to a shocking 57%. [1] With the onset of the pandemic, the rate of food insecurity grew *significantly*; 28.4% of Canadians who were absent from work due to business closure, layoff, or personal circumstances resulting from COVID-19, were food insecure.[2]

**Food insecurity severely impacts health.** Food insecurity is a social determinant of health.[6] It is costly for individuals and for the Canadian health-care system to treat and manage.[7] Physical and mental health is deleteriously affected by food insecurity. It is implicated in a significantly higher prevalence of numerous chronic illnesses including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, anxiety and depression and causes premature deaths.[3] Those who are severely food insecure live 9 years less, on average, and cost the healthcare system more than *twice* as much as those who are food secure.[8]

## **Current efforts to address food insecurity have been ineffective.**

Current efforts have not addressed the root cause of food insecurity—poverty. Previous efforts include:

**Employment.** A singular focus on paid employment ignores the many forms of unpaid and invisible work required for society to function, such as caring labour. It imposes a colonial view of work, devaluing traditional Indigenous hunting and gathering pursuits. It ignores the impacts land dispossession and limitations placed on the ability to exercise treaty rights have on the economic well-being of Indigenous communities.[9, 10] There are many barriers to paid work in rural communities such as access to reliable internet services. Moreover, jobs alone are not a guaranteed solution to poverty and food insecurity, especially with the rise of precarious labour and the gig economy. Most food insecure households (65%) rely on wages.[11] To address food insecurity, jobs must be stable,

wages must be sufficient, and those who are not employed such as those caring for children or elderly family, new entrepreneurs, and students must have a livable income.

**Emergency and charity-based food programs.** Food banks' decades-long role as Canada's dominant response to food insecurity has intensified with the pandemic. However, only one-fifth of food insecure households access food banks.[15] Food banks are unable to provide—with consistency and dignity—the quantity, quality, variety, and choice of food that households require. Hence, food banks cannot improve people's food security status. Nutrition North Canada provides subsidies to companies to allay the costs of transporting food into remote communities, but these are inadequate to address rising food insecurity.[3, 16] Food insecure people require an income sufficient to prioritize not only food but rent, utilities, medication, and a myriad of other needs; an income sufficient for choice with dignity.

**Social Assistance.** Relying on social assistance is one of the strongest predictors of severe food insecurity. [16] There are clear reasons for this. Social assistance programs across Canada scrutinize and humiliate people through their means testing practices. The income provided through these programs is well below the poverty line, making it impossible for recipients to maintain healthy diets.[16] In 2017-2018, 60% of households on social assistance were food insecure.[17] Even after taking into account education, housing, and other demographic characteristics, households reliant on social assistance in Canada are *5.18 times more likely* than others to be severely food insecure.[18]

**CERB and other pandemic government initiatives.** The COVID pandemic made even more apparent the need for the Government of Canada to restructure its income security system to ensure that all Canadians can afford a sufficient quality and quantity of food to live an active and meaningful life. New government programs for specific populations brought relief to many in a discreet and dignified manner and demonstrated that income security programs can be delivered through the tax system in a timely, responsive manner. However, they also excluded many who needed the support, especially those who were already vulnerable and their temporary nature did not allow people to plan for their futures.

**A Basic Income Guarantee (BIG) would effectively provide enough money so that people can meet their basic needs regardless of their employment status.**

A BIG is a regular payment, made to people who need it, distributed through the tax system.

**A just BIG would follow these 5 principles:**

- 1. Income tested.** Available to anyone below a certain income.
- 2. Not means tested.** No eligibility criteria except income level. No expectations for how the money will be spent.
- 3. Complementary.** Replaces social assistance programs but does not replace other vital social programs like housing, childcare, education, and mental health supports. It does not replace the need to increase minimum wage, pay equity, other employment standards, corporate regulation, pharmacare, or measures to enhance the employment situation and economic sufficiency for women, people with disabilities, Indigenous people, or racialized people.

**4. Sufficient.** Designed so that everyone in Canada has at least enough income to cover their basic needs regardless of where they live. A reasonable index of poverty[19] is based on an adequate and comprehensive concept of basic needs, varies with geographic location, community size, and family size, reflects the true costs of the communities where people are living, and is indexed to inflation.

**5. Indigenous self-determination.** Development and implementation respects the autonomy of Indigenous peoples and their determination of whether it is delivered in their communities and, if so, how it will be implemented. The final report of the Commission on *Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls* called for implementation of a BIG for all Canadians, including Indigenous Peoples (#4.5) and the development and implementation of a “guaranteed annual livable income model” in Inuit Nunangat (#16.20).[20]

### **Canada already has experience with a targeted BIG. We know it works.**

Old Age Security (OAS) payments, in combination with the Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS) for seniors act as a form of BIG and together have dramatically reduced poverty and increased food security for seniors. The probability of food insecurity drops by half for unattached adults on income assistance once they reach 65, the age at which they qualify for OAS and GIS.[11] The Canada Child Benefit (CCB), another targeted income transfer program, is implemented so as to maintain the dignity of families. Studies of CCB demonstrate reductions in poverty and economic benefits to local communities.[24] Participants from the Ontario Pilot Project reported a dramatic reduction in food insecurity and positive dietary outcomes after receiving a BIG.[21, 22] Contrary to some critiques, BIG has little effect upon paid work engagement [12,13] and stimulates local economies.[14] This research illustrates that BIG effectively reduces poverty and food insecurity.[13, 23]

**It is time to ensure everyone has enough income to live with dignity and have their basic needs met, no matter who they are or where they live.**

**Just as universal healthcare is there when people need it, a Basic Income Guarantee would ensure that no one lacks the ability to pay for essentials like food.**

**We request:**

**1. To meet with INAN to discuss the relationship between a basic income and food security.**

**2. That INAN work within government to implement a BIG throughout Canada as a powerful and proven strategy for eliminating poverty and ensuring food security for all.**

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### Associated Groups

1. Coalition Canada: basic income, revenu de base. A cross-country alliance of basic income advocacy groups and networks. <https://basicincomecoalition.ca/en/about-coalition/>
2. Basic Income Nova Scotia. A Nova Scotia-based BIG advocacy group. <https://www.big-ns.org/>
3. Ontario Basic Income Network (OBIN). An Ontario-based coalition of advocates for BIG. <https://www.obin.ca/>

### Acknowledgement

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