

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

NORTHERN AND REMOTE FOOD INSECURITY

FORGING A PATH TOWARD BRIGHTER DAYS

Northern food insecurity remains a significant concern for Food Banks Canada. Due to the increased cost of housing and food, along with the ongoing impacts of climate change, the issue of northern food insecurity will likely worsen over the coming months and years. Already, food banks are seeing highly concerning increases in the number of Indigenous people visiting food banks – making up 15.3 per cent of visitors compared to 8 per cent last year. With a majority of northern and remote communities being home to largely Indigenous peoples, this increase is indicative of a growing issue in the remote North. While consecutive federal governments have attempted to address this problem with various targeted programs and initiatives, it is clear that the current approach is failing.

Food Banks Canada has worked over the last few years to suggest ways to improve the Nutrition North program and northern food insecurity in general. However, we remain concerned that food costs in the North have remained largely unchanged since the beginning of the Nutrition North program in 2011. For example, in Iqaluit, Nunavut, the cost of a nutritious food basket to feed a family of four in March 2018 was approximately \$1,721.56. The same basket of food would cost about \$868 in Ottawa.¹¹⁰

Recent data released by Statistics Canada shows that the Nutrition North subsidy has not had the impact on food costs that many hoped for when the program was first introduced almost a decade ago. As shown in the most recent numbers released by Nutrition North Canada, the average cost of the Revised Northern Food Basket in March 2018 was actually over 2 per cent higher than it was in March of the previous year, and only 1 per cent lower than in March 2011, prior to the launch of the Nutrition North program.¹¹¹

Measures announced by the program in 2018, such as new supports for traditional hunting and gathering programs (a measure that Food Banks Canada has advocated for), and a new Inuit-Crown working group to address future challenges, are welcomed, but they are unlikely to be adequate to address the multiple challenges facing the North. This is all made worse by the recent surge in food inflation and the cost of living.

Beyond Nutrition North, household food insecurity in the North has grown rampant. In the Yukon, the Northwest Territories and Nunavut, food insecurity rates reach 17, 22 and 57 per cent, respectively.¹¹² In 2020, the federal government recognized this challenge in a report on northern food insecurity by saying that “due to several factors, Northerners – in particular, women, children and Indigenous peoples – are more at risk of experiencing food insecurity than other Canadians.”¹¹³

These high food insecurity rates can be explained by consistently lower wages among those living in the North, high housing and energy costs, and devastating impacts from colonialism, systemic racism and climate change that are preventing the gathering of traditional and reliable food sources.¹¹⁴

With household food insecurity levels still unacceptably high in the territories and social assistance income that has decreased in real terms, it is time for the federal government, in collaboration with the territories, to review their food security strategies in the North.

Food Banks Canada, along with many food banks in the food banking network, are doing what they can to support struggling northern communities, but high shipping costs are stretching already limited funding to its limit, especially with recent inflationary pressures.

Addressing food prices and implementing food-driven solutions can only do so much. The federal government must also review its entire approach to the long-term root causes of food insecurity in the North if significant progress is to be achieved.

¹¹⁰ Ottawa Public Health. (2018). *Nutritious food basket: The price of eating well in Ottawa*. https://www.ottawapublichealth.ca/en/public-health-topics/resources/Documents/2018_NFB-Report_EN.pdf

¹¹¹ Government of Canada. (2019). *Cost of the revised Northern food basket*. <https://www.nutritionnorthcanada.gc.ca/eng/1548078467819/1548078497301>

¹¹² Leblanc-Laurendeau, O. (2020, March 01). *Food insecurity in Northern Canada: An overview*. Library of Parliament. https://lop.parl.ca/sites/PublicWebsite/default/en_CA/ResearchPublications/202047E

¹¹³ Leblanc-Laurendeau, O. *Food insecurity in Northern Canada*.

¹¹⁴ Bratina, B. *Food security in northern and isolated communities: Ensuring equitable access to adequate and healthy food for all report of the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs*. House of Commons. <https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/432/INAN/Reports/RP11420916/inanrp10/inanrp10-e.pdf>

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We recommend that the government:

1

Immediately start working toward a Minimum Income Floor (see recommendation #2 in the Minimum Income Floor section above) and away from the current broken social assistance system that keeps far too many northern Canadians in a cycle of poverty and food insecurity.

2

In collaboration with Indigenous communities and organizations, initiate a comprehensive review of Nutrition North Canada to determine why the program is only minimally achieving its objectives of reducing the cost of food in the North.

3

Working in partnership with local groups, create a Canada-wide Northern Development and Revitalization Plan that is focused on the research and development of regional programs that aim to train workers and grow commerce in strategic economic sectors like tourism, natural resources, and local/regional business.

4

Develop funding for a national program of community-based representatives whose focus is on connecting their communities to funds and resources that are available to northern communities, yet too often go unused for lack of awareness. These representatives will provide an opportunity for knowledge sharing across communities from coast to coast to coast.

5

Develop incentives and strategies to keep capital in the North and work to reduce temporary workers coming into communities for work and leaving without contributing to the local economies.

6

Expand access to Internet for all communities above the 50th parallel so that communities may capitalize on the growing remote workforce.

A) Offer additional training for remote work skills and funding for the procurement of work-from-home supplies.