



Food Cafes: Beginning to Understand the Food Landscape in Brandon



Final Report



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Introduction

A substantial increase in housing costs over the past several years in Brandon has resulted in many residents directing more of their household income towards housing. For a significant proportion of the population, this trend has created insecurity in accessing healthy foods in quantities required to maintain their health. While there are many programs in place to address food insecurity, service providers have identified the need for a multifaceted approach, addressing availability of affordable foodstuffs, accessibility to healthy foods, issues related to food production, the necessary skills with food preparation and budgeting to meet household needs to effectively resolve food insecurity.

There are many agencies and organizations in Brandon that offer specific programming to address some of the needs related to food insecurity however there has never been a study that compiles the current efforts of these agencies and organizations with the intent to identify overlap in services or gaps in the existing network.

Food Cafes provide the opportunity to bring community residents together to talk about their experiences with food – not just what they eat, but also where they purchase their food, why they choose the foods they do, how easily they are able to prepare meals and various related challenges.

Background

In light of the compelling evidence that food security is an issue for many residents in Brandon, the intent of a comprehensive food assessment is to examine the current situation related to food security and develop a coordinated strategy for Brandon. There are two phases of the community food assessment project; Food Cafes, which are focused discussions with residents in the community, will uncover core themes that require further investigation, based on the experiences of citizens. The second phase will involve a more comprehensive examination of the food related to the themes identified through the Food Cafes, creation of a profile of local resources and current programming, as well as a geo-spatial map of median household incomes in relation to distance to a grocery store.

The researchers acknowledge the Brandon University Ethics Committee for their review of this project, which is aligned with the Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans. Ethics approval was received in April 2013, certificate #21436 (2013).

Process

A total of seven Food Cafes, or focus groups, were conducted with community residents between June and August 2013. Two focus groups were held for the general public as well as a focus group targeted to specific populations of interest including newcomers to Brandon, individuals and families self-identified as living within low income levels, military members and their families, and various service providers. Overall, 46 individuals participated in the focus groups with slightly more women participating than men. Participants were recruited through word-of-mouth, advertising throughout the community and natural connections with service providers. An information letter was provided to the participants and signed consent was obtained.

Using an open-ended interview guide (see Appendix A), participants shared their experiences within five established categories including access to food, range of local food options, alternative food sources, food choices/sensitivities, and knowledge and skills regarding food preparation. A summary question related to recommendations for change was also presented to the participants.

Findings

I. Access to Food

Overall, household finances drive decisions regarding access to food, both in terms of where they shop and what foods they purchase. The majority of participants buy their food at the larger grocery chains throughout the community. Smaller local stores are accessed for culturally specific foods and other unique foodstuffs. An exception to the participants' usual pattern of purchasing food was seen in relation to meat. Many participants described deliberately selecting a specific store for the purchase of meat because they felt it was fresher or a better cut than what they could purchase at their primary grocery store. When questioned about their grocery stores of choice, the majority of respondents base their decisions on the price of food and location of the store in proximity to where they live or work.

One participant spoke to the recent increase in provincial sales tax and the negative impact that it has had on her household budget; she stated, "The recent 1% increase in PST removes 12% of my family food budget". The individual explained that the increase in provincial sales tax applies to many aspects of the household expenses such as electricity and water bills which are fixed costs. The proportion of her household budget that is allocated to food is the only discretionary fund available and, as a result, there is less money for food purchase once the other amenities are accounted for.

Other reasons for selecting specific grocery stores include:

- checking flyers and seeking items that are on sale
- continuing with the tradition of where parents shop
- accessing stores that are less busy
- hours of operation
- availability of delivery service
- one stop shopping options
- availability of coffee and food samples throughout the store to supplement meals at home

Several participants described spending significant amounts of time going from store to store to get the discount through sale items. This process was particularly time consuming for individuals who rely on public transportation. As one participant stated, “[it] feels like hunting and gathering.”

When questioned about how long it takes to get to the store(s) of choice, there was a range of responses between five and 30 minutes, depending on the mode of transportation used by the participant. For example, those with a vehicle had quicker access to a grocery store in comparison to those who walk or rely on public transportation. The bigger issue is getting home with groceries. Participants who have access to a vehicle are not limited by the volume of groceries that they are able to manage, whereas participants who walk or rely on public transit are limited by the amount of bags they are able to carry. Some participants described walking to the store and then taking a bus or taxi to get home because they were not able to manage their groceries on foot and/or with a stroller.

When questioned about how often they shop for food, participant responses ranged from daily to every two months for their major food purchase. The majority of participants identified perishable items such as fruits and vegetables as the primary influence on their shopping patterns as they prefer fresh foodstuffs. Other influences also include the volume they are able to carry, the cycle of pay periods, a lack of storage space for bulk items and a lack of freezer capacity to store items.

Participants were also asked about barriers in accessing the type of food they prefer to purchase. Many participants identified the price of many [healthy] foods as being prohibitive for them to purchase. As one participant stated, “Chips are cheaper than vegetables and pop is cheaper than milk.” Others identified a lack of bus service on Sundays and a lack of social supports in terms of getting help with transportation as barriers to purchasing foods of choice.

II. Range of Local Food Options

Participants were asked to describe the range of food options that currently exist in the Brandon community. The importance of context was highlighted in the responses to this question. Perceptions varied between the groups of participants and their knowledge levels seemed largely influenced by their previous experiences and current financial situation. For example, one Food Café comprised participants who are not from Brandon, have secure employment and have lived in much larger cities with easy access to high end cuisine. From their perspective, “Brandon is doing pretty well. No one is starving in the street” and they noted the absence of a “super high end restaurants like Hy’s”.

Conversely, those living with limited finances described a broad range of local food options including the local food bank, availability of food hampers and free meals as well as free access to specific items such as bread through many different agencies and churches. Participants were able to provide very detailed information about what foods they can access through specific community agencies on specific days and times of the week. They were able to outline a very detailed calendar of food supports that are available in the community for a full week and/or month.

Participants were asked about their experience with a meal service such as Meals on Wheels or drop-in lunches at agencies supporting seniors. None of the participants had experience with a meal service and few had experience with a drop-in lunch program at a senior’s agency. One participant described accessing free milk through the prenatal support program at a local community agency.

The use of ‘take out’ or home delivery was also explored during the focused discussions. There was a significant range of responses from once or twice a week to once per year. Several participants described ‘take out’ as a treat whereas others described it as a stop gap measure. The vast majority of participants from all Food Cafes identified a preference to eat proper meals at home. However, many of the challenges previously identified make that difficult on a daily basis.

Most participants reported that they were not able to access the types of food they prefer at community events. Several individuals identified the frequency that hotdogs are served at community events as a problem while another group of participants commented that they were able to access what they would expect – “fair food at a fair”. Pancake breakfasts were identified as a positive option while finding bannock was identified as a challenge. A couple of participants reported that they cannot afford to purchase food at community events and now bring their own sandwiches.

III. Alternative Food Sources

Participants were asked about their experiences with gardening, hunting and fishing as alternative food sources. Very few individuals had experience with hunting although two individuals reported getting meat from relatives who hunt wildlife. Some participants reported fishing and/or maintaining a small garden.

The concept of community gardens generated considerable discussion amongst the participants. Although few individuals are actively involved in gardening, many participants expressed an interest. Two challenges with gardening include lack of space associated with apartment living and a limited number of plots available at community gardens that are close to where the participants live.

Across the Food Cafes overall, several individuals described accessing local producers including Hutterite colonies for specific foods such as chicken, beef, pork and eggs. Local butchers were identified as a good source for specialty meats such as rabbit, goat and oxtail as well as speciality cuts such as cow tongue, tripe and chicken feet. Others identified produce through local farmer's markets as well as vegetables from local trucks situated in parking lots around the city.

IV. Food Choices/Sensitivities

Food sensitivities were identified as a concern in every Food Cafe with the exception of the discussion with newcomers. New immigrants were not familiar with food allergies until they arrived in Canada. As one individual commented, "That doesn't happen in my country." Amongst other participants, food sensitivity and/or allergies include lactose intolerance, celiac disease, diabetes, allergy to peanut butter.

Several newcomers spoke to the challenges of eating in Canada. For example, fruits and vegetables are much more expensive than in their home country and they are not as fresh or succulent. Many newcomers were also not familiar with processed foods – as one individual asked, "How is the orange powder cheese?"

Although one individual did not experience a physical sensitivity to foods, the individual described significant limitations in being able to purchase ethically sound foodstuffs. There was an extensive discussion about the definition of organic and free-range and the possibility of misinformation about the ethical process of producing such foods.

Several participants spoke to the high cost of a gluten-free diet and others spoke of the challenges with foodstuffs found in hampers. They described food hampers containing large volumes of carbohydrates, specifically bread and pastries, which are particularly challenging for diabetic clients.

V. Knowledge and Skills regarding Food Preparation

In terms of knowledge and skills related to food preparation, participants were almost equally divided between typically making meals from scratch and those buying processed foods. One individual identified the lack of a microwave as a significant barrier to preparing meals. Many participants self-reported having both the knowledge and skills but a lack of time often prevented them from preparing ‘home cooked’ meals. An exception to this response was noted in one Food Café whereby participants described their home situation with traditional gender roles. These participants typically have meals made from scratch because one spouse is responsible for meal preparation and their employment allows the individual to manage the demands of running the household including meal preparation.

For others who self-reported making meals from scratch, the impetus is a love of cooking and baking and “doing it the way I was raised”.

Several newcomers also spoke to the social element of meal preparation and the enjoyment they experienced in cooking for their families and friends. Participants in only one Food Cafe reported a commitment to canning or freezing their food and almost no one was actively involved in composting. One individual identified apartment living as a significant barrier to composting while another identified issues with fruit flies.

Participants were asked a closing question about potential changes to the food landscape in Brandon. Their responses are summarized by theme below:

If you could change one thing about your food experience in Brandon, what would it be?

1. Develop weekend coverage for emergency food support.
2. Food Hampers:
 - Healthier food in food hampers
 - People need to be taught about what to donate
 - Increase size of food hampers as the current size does not last two weeks
 - Allow folks to select food items from a stock room and take what they need rather than have a pre-set list of hamper items
 - Prefer gift cards to be able to buy fresh foods
3. Implement a Good Food Box program
4. Cost of Food
 - Junk food is often cheaper than healthy food, especially gluten free options
 - Bulk buying is the most cost-effective but difficult to have the necessary finances
5. Community Kitchens could provide a capacity building opportunity for local residents
6. Food Production and Labelling

- Public education/awareness related to organic food production, use of preservatives
- Label reading and interpretation in a variety of languages
- Required GMO labelling

7. Social Aspect of Food

- For many newcomers, lunch is the most important meal of the day and requires more time than the standard lunch break
- Saturday morning shopping is a traditional that many newcomers bring from shopping at markets in their home country

Appendix A

Food Cafes: Beginning to Understand the Food Landscape in Brandon

Research Questions for Food Cafes

I. Access to Food

1. Where do you usually buy your food?
(Probe: large grocery store, neighbourhood grocery store, 24-hour convenience store)
2. Why do you shop there?
(Probe: price, food quality, quantity, location, other___)
3. How do you get to the grocery store?
4. How long does it take you to get to the store?
5. How often do you shop for food?
6. When you think about what you have to do to get your groceries, what is working well?
What isn't working well?

II. Range of Local food Options

1. How would you describe the range of food options in your community?
(Probe: soup kitchen, food bank, community kitchen, restaurants, grocery stores, etc)
2. Do you or a family member use a Meal Service? If so, how often?
(Probe: Meals on Wheels, drop-in lunch at Seniors for Seniors)
3. Do you or your family access a community-based food support system? If yes, how often?
(Probe: Breakfast in School program, local Soup Kitchen, food hampers, etc)
4. How often do you and your family have Take Out or Home Delivery?
(e.g.) drive-through, pizza delivery
5. Are you able to access the types of food that you prefer at local community events?
6. What are the gaps that exist within the range of food options in our community?

III. Alternative Food Sources

1. Do you garden, hunt or fish for some of your food? If yes, please describe where food comes from and how it is obtained.
2. Are there community gardens in your neighbourhood? If yes, do you participate in a community garden?
3. Do you purchase food from a local producer? If yes, please describe how you connected with that producer.
(Probe: Farmer's Market, downtown Global Market, beef/lamb producer)

IV. Food Choices/Sensitivities

1. Are you able to access vegetarian or vegan options easily in the community?
2. Do you or anyone in your household have food sensitivities that affect your food purchases?

(Probe: Celiac disease: gluten-free, Diabetes: sugar-free, Allergies, etc)

V. Knowledge and Skills regarding Food Preparation

1. Do you usually prepare your meals from scratch? If not, why not?
2. How do you manage left-overs at the end of meal?
3. Do you do any canning or freezing of food?
4. Is your household involved in composting?

VI. Summary Question

1. If you could change one thing about your food experience in Brandon, what would it be?