

How the COVID-19 Pandemic Affected Food Security in Saskatoon: Condensed Version

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By

Sadie Childs, BA, MSs

Project Advisor: Dr. Rachel Engler-Stringer, BSc, PhD, Associate Professor Community Health and
Epidemiology

Project Co-Advisor: Gord Androsoff, Executive Director, CHEP Good Food Inc.

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INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Committee on World Food Security defines food security as “all people, at all times, having physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their food preferences and dietary needs for an active and healthy life” (International Food Policy Research Institute, 2021). Food insecurity refers to “the inability to access a sufficient quantity or variety of food because of financial constraints” (Polsky & Gilmour, 2020).

A review of current literature and public articles has shown it is evident that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated food security in households across Canada and Saskatoon, through economic downturns and weaknesses and vulnerabilities in our modern food system. There is a gap in literature recognizing how organizations who provide services to mitigate food insecurity in Saskatoon have been affected. These community-based organizations have experienced many challenges while still providing food security for the city during this critical time. However, there is a lack of data from the perspective of community-based organizations on the changes that have occurred to their work since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

A study was conducted via semi-structured one-on-one interviews of staff of community-based organizations in Saskatoon. The following six organizations – Saskatoon Foodbank and Learning Centre, the Saskatoon Friendship Inn, Inclusion Saskatchewan, Core Neighbourhood Youth Co-op (CNYC), CHEP Good Food Inc., and the Saskatchewan Health Authority (SHA)/Saskatoon Inter-Agency Response to COVID-19 (SIRC) – were asked to participate. This was based on their work in mitigating food insecurity in the city or their high-level of involvement with food-based organizations in the city during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study aims to give a perspective of community-based organizations in Saskatoon, while also highlighting key policy issues and gaps that were apparent during the pandemic and provides recommendations on how to approach these issues in current policy or future emergency situations.

FINDINGS

The results of the study are described within six key themes: collaboration, community support, funding, government support, organization restructuring, and uptake of programming.

Collaboration

Collaboration between community-based food organizations in Saskatoon was evident prior to the pandemic, but COVID-19 formalized many of these interactions due to the urgency of the situation. When there was need for a service as a result of the pandemic, such as food delivery and the provision of water, organizations collaborated to fill these gaps. Organizations not as food-focused, such as CNYC and Inclusion Saskatchewan, relied on donations from other community-based organizations to meet their client’s increased need for food during the pandemic.

Community Support

All organizations felt the community of Saskatoon provided increased or equivalent support during the COVID-19 pandemic, compared to pre-pandemic support. To support feelings of solidarity and connection to people’s struggles during the pandemic, the community stepped up with food and monetary donations for many of the community-based organizations in the city. The increased support from the general public, as well as faith-based organizations, provided community-based organizations with some security during a time of crisis.

Funding

Although all six organizations interviewed had funding concerns at the onset of the pandemic, they all felt funding was sufficient. Many emergency food grants were available that helped offset the costs of program changes that organizations were experiencing. Most funding came from the federal government, which was redirected to community-based organizations through local agencies, such as United Way Saskatoon and the Saskatoon Community Foundation. Organizations also received funding through SIRC and the City of Saskatoon, but no funding from the provincial government was provided to organizations during the emergency.

Government Support

Similar to funding, organizations generally felt supported by the municipal and federal levels of government. The City of Saskatoon was very responsive to the needs of the organizations and the community, assisting through the secondment of staff to priority places such as SIRC and providing support and updated information on a consistent basis. On a federal level, the government introduced programs that increased food security for marginalized populations, such as the Surplus Food Rescue Program (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2021). There was no new assistance from the provincial government despite requests.

Organization Restructuring

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March 2020, each organization faced challenges related to program restructuring to ensure client and staff safety, while still meeting the needs of the community. Within the first weeks of the pandemic, most organizations faced their biggest shifts. They had to alter existing programs to fit the parameters of COVID-19 health guidelines, put programs on hold including volunteer programs, and build new programs, such as food delivery services. Although challenging, the pandemic forced organizations to be creative to ensure their programs were successful, often with less material and human resources. The ability to quickly and successfully shift staff, programming, and clients into pandemic-mode highlighted the resilience of community-based organizations. This increased workload came at the cost of staff mental health who were in constant crisis-mode. Generally, organizations are shifting back into pre-pandemic programs. To ensure they are taking into account the positive changes they experienced during this time, they are making these shifts slowly.

Uptake of Programming

When the global pandemic arrived, organizations expected a dramatic increase in the need for food security assistance, and were surprised they did not experience an increase in the uptake of their programming that was COVID-19 specific. Laurie, the representative interviewed for the Saskatoon Foodbank and Learning Centre, said that she “does not believe the decline in usage of the Foodbank [or other food-focused organizations] was a decline in community need”, but extenuating circumstances, such as CERB (Canada Emergency Response Benefit), more people staying home as per public health guidelines, or an increase in emergency food services resulted in this phenomenon.

POLICY ISSUES

The pandemic did not necessarily introduce new policy issues to organizations, but highlighted ones that already existed:

- *Access to Technology*: Limited access to technology for marginalized populations enhances the issue of access to data surrounding the pandemic that is imperative to maintain safety and follow public health orders.
- *Access to Public Washrooms*: For over 100 days, public washrooms were closed during the COVID-19 pandemic. For many marginalized populations in Saskatoon, public washrooms are their only access to toilets, personal hygiene, and drinking water.
- *Universal Basic Income*: During the pandemic, the federal government's CERB program was essentially a trial of universal basic income. The CERB payment proved that \$2000 a month is what the population of Saskatoon needs to live and be well, which raised the question of why there are still shortfalls in provincial support in this policy area.

DISCUSSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

To ensure the health and wellbeing of marginalized populations in Saskatoon, community-based organizations collaborated to address the specific needs of this population that did not exist prior to the pandemic. These needs included access to public washrooms and potable drinking water, which were taken away for over 100 days when the pandemic began. In Vancouver, public washrooms and showers were deemed essential services despite the ongoing pandemic (Vancouver Coastal Health, 2020). They outlined simple solutions to keeping these facilities safe and clean, a policy overlooked by the City of Saskatoon. According to the United Nations (UN), access to water and sanitation is a basic human right, which was violated by the City of Saskatoon when making the decision to close public washrooms (United Nations, n.d.).

This research shows that throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, it was clear community-based organizations felt supported by their municipal and federal governments, but a lack of support from the provincial government. Requests from the provincial government for support for community-based food organizations were denied. The federal government filled this gap left by the provincial government through programs such as the Surplus Food Rescue Program and Emergency Food Security Fund, which was a tremendous support, especially for the Saskatoon Foodbank (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2021; Men & Tarasuk, 2021). The unemployment rate in Saskatchewan was comparable to the rest of Canada in June 2020 (Statistics Canada, 2021). Therefore, there was no reason the provincial government should have denied funding to food-focused organizations given the correlation between employment loss and food insecurity rates (Men & Tarasuk, 2021).

A common topic of discussion among the interview stages of this research was the "trial run" of universal basic income. The federal government spent \$74.08 billion on their CERB program between March 15th, 2020, and October 3rd, 2020 (Government of Canada, 2021). Many organizations felt this was a major contributing factor that resulted in the lack of expected surge in the use of their programming. CERB increased income for many marginalized populations who regularly use these services. A common speculation of researchers is that households in the lowest income quintile benefited the most from CERB, and are among those who suffer from the highest rates of food insecurity (Men & Tarasuk, 2021). Although more research is needed to prove CERB influenced food security among households in Saskatoon, there is high probability it played a role among low-income households' access to food during the COVID-19 pandemic. CERB provided individuals with \$500 per week, and this should be a starting point for the discussion of universal basic income in Canada (Government of Canada, 2021).

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