

Household Food Insecurity in Canada

2021



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Executive Summary

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PROOF is a research program at the University of Toronto, launched in 2011 with funding from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research to identify effective policy interventions to address household food insecurity.

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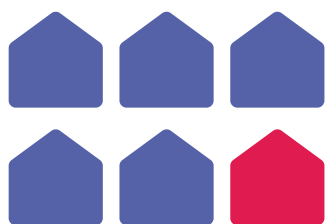
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Executive Summary

Drawing on data for 54,000 households from Statistics Canada's Canadian Income Survey (CIS) conducted in 2021, we found a disturbingly high rate of household food insecurity. By food insecurity we mean inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints.

The prevalence of household food insecurity in Canada matters because food insecurity is such a potent social determinant of health. Food-insecure people are much more likely than others to suffer from chronic physical and mental health problems and infectious and non-communicable diseases.

Almost 1 in 6 households were food insecure.



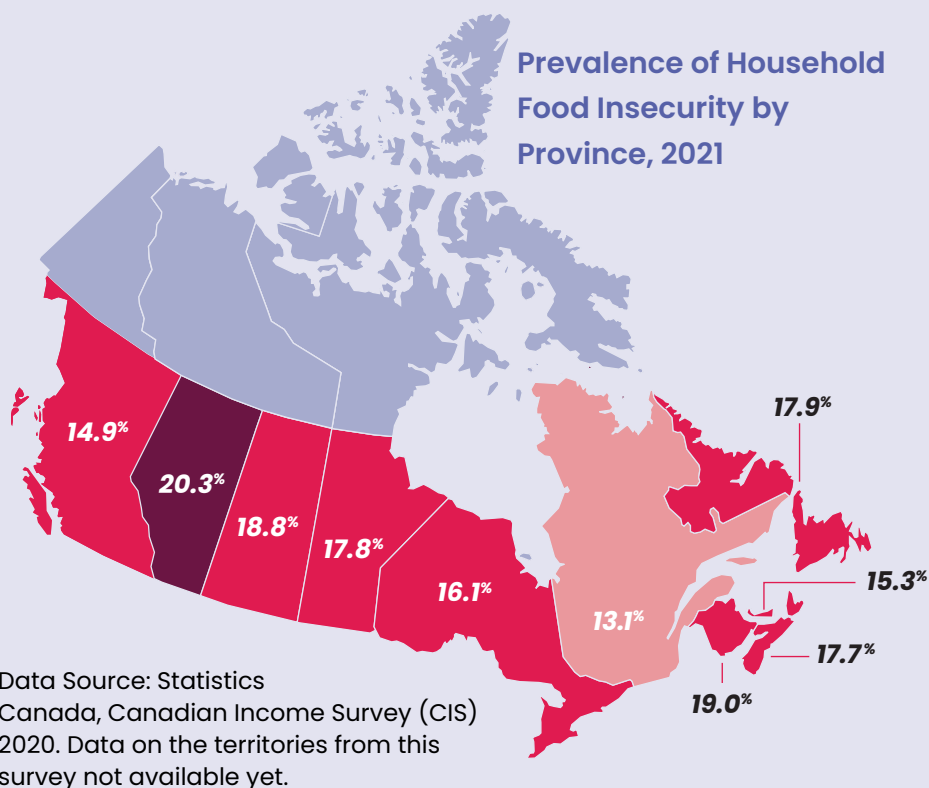
In 2021, 15.9% of households in the ten provinces experienced some level of food insecurity in the previous 12 months.

That amounts to 5.8 million people, including almost 1.4 million children under the age of 18, living in food-insecure households. These estimates do not even include people living in the territories or on Indigenous reserves, who are known to experience high vulnerability to food insecurity.

This high rate of household food insecurity has persisted through the past three years, with little change from 2019 to 2021. Despite the systematic monitoring of food insecurity since 2005, this problem has not gotten any better.

The prevalence of food insecurity differs markedly across the provinces, ranging from 13.1% in Quebec to 20.3% in Alberta.

Quebec has had the lowest prevalence of household food insecurity in Canada for several years now. Differences in the rates of household food insecurity across the provinces point to the important roles that provincial governments play in protecting their populations from this problem.



Household food insecurity is a marker of material deprivation, tightly linked to other indicators of social and economic disadvantage. Households with lower incomes are more likely to be food-insecure.

We can also see the importance of financial assets and debts through our examination of homeownership. Renters are more vulnerable to food insecurity than homeowners. However, housing debt matters and homeowners with a mortgage are more vulnerable than those without.

As a marker of material deprivation, household food insecurity tells us how people have fared through the pandemic. In 2021, one in seven households relying on employment income was food insecure, and households relying on employment incomes made up 51.9% of food-insecure households.

Food insecurity was highly prevalent among households on social assistance and those who faced job disruptions and had to rely on Employment Insurance (EI) or pandemic-related benefits like the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB). Relying on any form of public income support except public pensions meant being very vulnerable to food insecurity.

Household food insecurity is racialized. Indigenous Peoples face extraordinary vulnerability, with almost a third (30.7%) of off-reserve Indigenous Peoples in the ten provinces food-insecure in 2021.

With the record inflation since 2021, we can expect the prevalence and severity of food insecurity to worsen if measures aren't taken to address the socioeconomic circumstances that give rise to it and to ensure that the incomes of vulnerable households can keep up with the rising costs of living.

The persistently high prevalence of household food insecurity across Canada and the patterns of vulnerability documented in this report spotlight the need for more effective, evidence-based policy responses by federal and provincial governments. They must:

- 1. Address the vulnerability of households reliant on employment incomes but still unable to make ends meet.**
- 2. Ensure that working-aged adults not in the workforce also have sufficient incomes to meet basic needs.**

63% of households relying on **social assistance** were food-insecure.

42% of households relying on **COVID-19 benefits** were food-insecure.

39% of households relying on **Employment Insurance** were food-insecure.