

The urgent and worsening problem of household food insecurity

By Dr. Lisa Simon

Associate Medical Officer of Health Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit

In Simcoe Muskoka, one in five households is experiencing food insecurity, meaning they don't have enough money for adequate and secure access to food.

Household food insecurity is an urgent and worsening public health problem that touches the lives of many individuals and families in our community, as they are forced to cut their food budget in order to afford other essentials like housing, utilities, transportation, clothing, medical expenses and child care.

The experience of living with household food insecurity can range from being concerned about running out of food before there is money to buy more, to an inability to afford a nutritious diet, to going hungry, missing meals and in extreme cases, not eating for whole days because of a lack of food and money for food.

Household food insecurity is linked to a range of health problems. People living with food insecurity are at greater risk of experiencing mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety, as well as a number of chronic diseases such as diabetes and heart disease. They are also at greater risk of poor oral health, infections, and physical injuries. These health effects can be long lasting, particularly among children as they are most vulnerable. In turn, household food insecurity also takes a serious toll on healthcare resources and spending.

In 2023, Statistics Canada released data showing that household food insecurity in Canada and Ontario increased significantly over the past few years, during a period of unprecedented inflation. Household food insecurity is now at the highest rate in Canada in 17 years of monitoring. Further, the negative effects of rising prices due to inflation are not felt equally. People with fixed incomes, or the lowest income earners, are worse off as they do not have the resources to protect themselves from rapidly rising prices.

Reliance on food banks and charitable donations has grown rapidly in the past few years as more people than before have needed these services and current clients have needed them more often.

Although these programs are essential to bridge the gap for people who need food immediately, they are not designed to solve household food insecurity for individuals and research has shown that they have not improved household food insecurity rates in Canada.

However, there is a strong body of evidence from Canadian provinces and other countries showing that food insecurity can in fact be reduced through public policies that improve the incomes of low-income households. To meaningfully address the serious problem of household food insecurity, solution-based action is required by all levels of government in support of policies and programs that focus on poverty, income and employment.

The Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit participates in local food insecurity and poverty reduction strategies that are active in our communities. The health unit also works with municipalities and community partners to support actions to reduce household food insecurity through effective income and policy solutions.

As an individual, you can take action by:

Increasing your knowledge and awareness of household food insecurity by visiting the health unit's webpages;

Speaking up and talking about household food insecurity within personal or professional networks and sharing key information and

statistics on social media or elsewhere;

Getting involved in local poverty reduction coalitions or groups that address household food insecurity;

Sharing your concerns with the federal and provincial governments and encouraging effective policy solutions, such as: matching social assistance rates to the real cost of living; enhancing laws that support jobs with livable wages, regular hours and benefits; providing a basic income; and continuing to increase affordable and attainable housing.

While addressing household food insecurity is complex, we all share the real cost of unaffordable food, as it impacts the health of our whole community and adds more pressure to our over-burdened healthcare system. Together, health for all is within reach.

For more details about the issue of household food insecurity and how it can be addressed please visit the health unit's website at smdhu.org or call Health Connection at 705-721-7520 or 1-877-721-7520 weekdays from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

Dr. Lisa Simon is an Associate Medical Officer of Health at the Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit. Her interests and primary responsibilities are in the areas of substance use prevention and harm reduction, chronic disease and injury prevention, child health, and health equity.