



# Food insecurity

*Dr Paul Martiquet, Medical Health Officer*

*For food-insecure families, putting food on the table is a constant struggle, forcing anxiety about food, food deprivation, and managing household expenses to the forefront of daily living.*

So opens the Dietitians of Canada's (DC) description of families' management strategies for dealing with food insecurity. DC are even more clear in describing food security as "a basic right for all Canadians." The Community Nutritionists' council of BC is equally clear with their definition: Food security... exists when all people at all times are empowered to have control over the decisions about their access to and supply of the food required for an active, healthy life.

From this base comes an approach to food security that is based on population health, as a social determinant of health.

Social determinants of health reflect that our health is affected by many factors including where we live, our educational status, income and of course, whether we can get enough affordable quality food. Along the continuum of society, the poorest among us generally suffer the worst health.

We have found that for food-insecure families, putting food on the table is a constant struggle which causes anxiety about food deprivation and managing expenses. The food budget is the most flexible and can be adjusted to account for other costs and emergencies. The implications are clear. For example, a US study found that during cold snaps, poor adults consumed 7.9% fewer calories; poor adults with kids, 11.6% fewer.

The responses to food insecurity have tended to start with 'the food bank', something we can all feel good about supporting two or three times a year, especially at Christmas! Unfortunately, food banks, though helpful, are not a solution. In fact, as early as 1990 food banks were starting to be seen as integral to Canada's social safety net, an inferior response compared to effective policies and action.

One of the strategies in support of food security is based on the effective use of community resources. Vancouver Coastal Health has built partnerships with each community in its region to address food security issues. There are eight local Community Food Action Initiative (CFAI) committees including Sea-to-Sky, Sunshine Coast, Powell River, Bella Bella and Bella

Coola. To date, each group has completed an environmental scan, a food system assessment and gap analysis, and a three-year action plan for their community.

Since food security is a determinant of health, the solution is easy enough to describe: reduce poverty and food insecurity will recede. Simple, isn't it? Our role as individuals must be to support local efforts, and even more importantly, to advocate and lobby for policies and actions that reduce poverty. If you have enough food on your table, and it is nutritious and varied, and you had no problem getting it (you can afford it and it's easy to find and buy), then you especially well placed to help those who are not so secure.

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