



Food security

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That food is a key determinant of health sounds over-simplified, but there is more to it.

The quantity and quality of food we eat affects our health, and in turn, our health is crucial to our productivity and prosperity, and to the health of our families. Unfortunately, not everyone has access to enough healthy, nutritious food.

Food security can be described as when we all have access to sufficient safe and nutritious food for an active and healthy life. Access is meant to include both physical access and economic access. To achieve “food security” four conditions have to be met: availability of food in quantity for a given population; stability and reliability of food supply over time; accessibility of food, or the ease with which a population may obtain available food; and how the food is used, including cultural and culinary acceptability as well as people’s skills to properly use the food.

We know that people with lower than average income typically spend a greater percentage of their income on housing, having less left over for food. For these low-income earners, both the cost and availability of nutritious foods can be a barrier to healthy eating. As household income drops, the likelihood of food insecurity increases dramatically.

Food insecurity extends across all lower income groups, but three are over-represented in the data. They are (no always mutually exclusive): single parent families headed by women; aboriginal peoples, especially those living on reserves; and the marginally housed and homeless population.

Within food-insecure families, the quality and quantity of food eaten drops as household resources dwindle. Individuals in these households are more likely to report poor or fair health, poor functional health, restricted activity, multiple chronic conditions, major depression and distress.

Food security is affected by a wide array of other factors, including the built environment.

The “built environment” can be described as including “a range of physical and social elements that make up the structure of a community including housing, roads and footpaths, transport networks, stores, markets, parks and other public amenities.

One of the persistent issues regarding built environments is the distance between homes and retail food outlets. Add in transportation challenges and insecurity increases. There are implications for health in certain

neighbourhoods based on the unavailability of good foods. One example surveyed in Edmonton found that low wealth, renter-occupied and lone-parent neighbourhoods had greater exposure to fast food outlets that was not offset by better supermarket access.

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One part of the solution is using urban land for small growing plots. Many communities have introduced these public garden spaces along with food sharing programs. Some communities have even introduced back yard chicken coops. Rooftop and back yard gardens, greenhouses and community plots all help improve our food security.

Educating people on eating healthy is important, but so is removing barriers to healthy eating, whether financial or physical. We all deserve it.