Athabasca University Master of Arts - Integrated Studies

FOOD INSECURITY: REASONS AND SOLUTIONS FOR VULNERABILITIES IN NUNAVUT

By

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ABSTRACT

How important is food to your life? Do you ever worry about not having enough? Would it surprise you to learn that communities in Northern Canada, specifically in Nunavut, are grappling with not having enough food? Food insecurity is a primary concern for Aboriginal Peoples in Canada's North. In this paper, I will examine the definition of food insecurity; why Northern Canada and Nunavut in particular is vulnerable to food insecurity; the colonial legacy in Nunavut, such as residential schools and resettlement, and the subsequent impact on northern food for the Inuit; climate change and its impact on food, as well as some potential solutions currently in practice to help alleviate the issue, both at the community and policy levels. I will establish the ways in which food insecurity is a complex problem that affects diet, health, well-being, culture and tradition, and why an interdisciplinary approach needed to address the issue in Canada.

1. Introduction

Food. How important is it? So important that many of us spend hours thinking about what we will eat, where we will shop, what we will buy, and rarely contemplate how it arrives in our grocery stores, restaurants or at other purveyors of food. We acknowledge, as a society, that for some accessing food is difficult and we may donate to food banks or help out at soup kitchens a few times a year. But, what would we do if choosing food over shelter was an actual reality for us? Or, if our going hungry meant that our children could eat? It seems impossible that these types of choices exist for some in Canada. In fact, nearly 1.1 million Canadian households experienced issues related to having or not having food in 2011-2012 (Shirin Roshanafshar and Emma Hawkins 3).

How can hunger happen in Canada – one of the world's wealthiest nations? And who is at risk of food insecurity? What are the factors that contribute to food insecurity? And, what are the solutions for those who are vulnerable to this issue? In this essay, I will explore the reasons that food insecurity exists in Canada. Issues of food security are complex, and drawing attention to them may help Canadians who are not concerned about food understand the need for their fellow countrymen to provide for themselves and their families. By establishing what food insecurity is, and who is affected, I will examine some of the reasons communities in Canada's newest and poorest territory, Nunavut, are the most vulnerable to food insecurity, as well as peripheral issues faced by other Aboriginal groups; the ways in which food insecurity affects health and wellbeing; and, potential solutions to food insecurity. The disciplines that will be examined throughout the essay include Canada's colonial and post-colonial history, climate change and affected food supplies, socioeconomics, health, and how the food landscape has

impacted cultural changes for the Inuit. Due to a variety of inter-related conditions, food insecurity has changed the culture, society, and ability to find food for people living in Canada's North.

2. What is food insecurity?

In 1996, the World Health Organization (WHO) held the first World Food Summit[1]. This forum was used to evaluate global efforts of increasing food security and also, to understand the contributing factors to food insecurity. At the event a definition of food insecurity was created and endorsed by the Government of Canada, who was a participant: "Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life" (Power 2). Canada's commitment to issues of food security evolved into 1998's *Canada's Action Plan for Food Security*[2] that built "…on a wide range of existing international commitments which affect food security, including agreements on international trade and environmental issues, conventions on human rights (including women's and children's rights), social development, education, housing and urban development" (Agr.gc.ca). Canada's pledge included a series of priorities and commitments that the government would action to ensure food security for all Canadians, including low income families, single mothers, and Aboriginal Peoples (First Nations, Métis, and Inuit). Food insecurity does not always mean that food is not available, but instead it recognizes that the means of acquiring food is a challenge, and that the food that could be acquired may not be healthy or nutritious.

[1] World Food Summit: http://www.fao.org/wfs/
[2] Canada's Action Plan for Food Security: http://www.agr.gc.ca/misb/fsec-seca/pdf/action_e.pdf

20 years after endorsing WHO's food security summit and forming an action plan, Canada, a first world country that contributes to the bread basket of North America, continues to struggle with issues of food insecurity for over one million Canadians. Roshanafshar and Hawkins state: "Food insecurity exists within a household when one or more members do not have access to the variety or quantity of food that they need due to lack of money" (3). According to the 2004 Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS), one in ten households in Canada were food insecure then (Sharon Kirkpatrick and Valerie Tarasuk 325), and every year between 2007 and 2012, five per cent of Canadian children and eight per cent of Canadian adults have lived in food insecure households (Roshanafshar and Hawkins 4). Depending on where one lives in Canada, those numbers can vary dramatically. For example, Canada's territories have more prevalence of food insecurity than the southern provinces, with the Yukon at 12.4 per cent insecurity in 2011 - 2012, the Northwest Territories at 13.7 per cent insecurity and Nunavut at 36.7 per cent insecurity, the highest rate in Canada (ibid. 4). The areas that are most food insecure in Canada are also areas that are more sparsely populated, often populated by Aboriginal peoples, are most difficult to ship food to, and/ or are difficult to grow food in due to climate. Noreen Williams et al., in their article on risk factors related to food security in Canada, state: "In a wealthy country such as Canada elevated rates of poverty persist among economically vulnerable groups, including Aboriginal groups. Food insecurity…is widespread in Aboriginal households in Canada" (1150). What does this mean, though, for Aboriginal peoples living in northern Canada? Food is shipped to the North, but why are people hungry? In exploring these questions further, one can see that the equation of simply shipping and buying food may not work in a region where a third

of the population does not get enough to eat (Bourne 76). Establishing why people in Northern Canada are lacking food and going hungry involves the study of the area and its challenges, which include food accessibility and affordability.

3. Nunavut: A case study in food insecurity

For the purpose of this paper and demonstrating Canada's challenges with food insecurity, I will examine the case of Nunavut[3], home to the majority of Canada's Inuit population. Around 60 or so years ago, the Canadian Inuit were a self-reliant people who depended mostly upon traditional or 'country' food for sustenance. While there may have been periods of food insecurity within the culture in the past, it was not documented by the government until more recently. The types of foods relied on by the Inuit were hunted or gathered from the land, typical to the climate in the area, including such things as narwhal, ringed seal, and fish (such as arctic char), caribou, and berries. This food allowed a connection to culture and land, as one Inuit woman noted: "Like when I go pick that mint, like I feel a connection with kind of how I was taught…" (Socha et al. 10). The Royal Commission on Aboriginal People noted in 1996: "Traditional foods and traditional means of obtaining and preparing them are part of a cultural heritage. Thus, food is holistically entwined with culture and personal identity, as well as physical health" (194). Market foods, those that could be purchased in stores have become more available in the last few decades, as the Inuit culture has changed, resettled and come to rely more on conveniences than act in the tradition of nomadic hunter-gatherers. As one Inuit Elder noted: "[t]here's some families that like even though they might stay here [in

[3] For more information on Nunavut: http://nunavuttourism.com/about-nunavut/welcome-to-nunavut

Nunavut], they still don't have the traditional ways, don't carry on the traditional part of it [of the Inuit]" (Ibid. 10).

Northern Canada is immense and filled with smaller communities that span from west to east and as high as the Arctic Circle. Nunavut itself is a vast region without a highway transportation infrastructure system connecting it to the rest of Canada. Nunavut is accessible only by plane, ship or by ice road in the winter months. Nunavut is home to approximately 33,000 people, 84 per cent of who are Inuit (nunavuttourism.com), and became a territory of Canada in 1999 (prior to 1999 it was part of the Northwest Territories). Its inhabitants live in some of the most northern communities in Canada, and in some of the harshest climates on earth.

To ship food to northern outposts in Nunavut is a massive and expensive undertaking. Some areas are only accessible by barge in the summers when the ice melts. Planes are also used to ship goods to northern communities, and are able to do so year round at high cost, considering fuel, labour, and maintenance. Some examples of the cost of food, according to the *Hunger in Nunavut* project, include a kilo of celery at a cost of ten dollars a bunch (Campbell et al.1). Or, as Sarah Shenker notes in her article on Nunavut and food prices, a head of cabbage may cost $28 and a pack of diapers may cost nearly $74 (Shenker 3), compared to $1.50 and $35 in southern Canada. Transportation is not the only reason that groceries are this highly priced. Shenker observes that the infrastructure in many communities in Nunavut is expensive to run, stating: "A typical store in the north will use $686, 000 worth of electricity in a year" (3). This is extremely high when compared to what stores in more southerly areas spend. For example, Shenker notes that in Winnipeg, electricity is about six cents a kWh, whereas in the Territory, it is

about sixty-eight cents. For store owners such as the North West Company[4] (which operates grocery and goods stores in many northern communities across Canada) between the cost of shipping goods and paying for the infrastructure to keep stores running, it is difficult to pass much savings along to the customer. The authors of the *Hunger in Nunavut* project state: "…on average, food prices were over 140 per cent higher in Nunavut than in the rest of Canada" (Campbell et al. 6). In addition, there is a lack of infrastructure to store extra goods and food. Lack of storage makes it difficult to anticipate changing needs over the course of the winter, and challenging to arrange for enough supplies to last until the summer ice melt, when less expensive shipping lines may open.

Another challenge faced by people in Nunavut, relating not only to the cost of food, but also to quality of life, is unemployment. According to Statistics Nunavut, the unemployment rate in Nunavut is about 15.1 per cent (stats.gov.nu.ca). Therefore, the high rate of unemployment, coupled with the high cost of food and the high cost of infrastructure means not only that stores are being forced to increase prices, but also inhabitants are being forced to choose between necessities like having electricity or having food in a territory that is freezing much of the year. For many adults, the choice is for them to go hungry so that their children may eat. Families may spend 500 to 600 dollars on food in a week (Shenker 3). However, recent developments in the mining sector are allowing for some of the people in Nunavut to find work and in certain communities: "…almost anyone who wants a job can find one" (Bourne 76). Mining, however, is a new type of work for the Inuit, and has also contributed to changing the culture in the territory. As a people who relied mainly on hunting and gathering for food

[4] The North West Company owns grocery stores serving Northern communities: http://www.northwest.ca/

and as well as for their occupations, mining and other new means of employment further contributes to the regression of their hunter/gatherer traditions. These changes have caused the Inuit to become more reliant on cash and less on bartering or more traditional occupations and tender. This is also leading to an increased dependency on market foods, as the old ways are lost, and new generations adapt to a more westernized culture. The cultural and societal changes experienced by the Inuit in the last hundred years have not only impacted their food security, but also what they eat and traditional hunting and gathering.

And so, Nunavut has several challenges in terms of food security: accessibility for shipping goods and food, expensive infrastructure, high costs of food and merchandise, and unemployment. However, this was not always the way for the Inuit. By examining the colonial history of the territory, the link to present issues of food insecurity emerge, which are different from the challenges other vulnerable groups are facing.

4. The colonial history of Nunavut: What has changed?

As with other Aboriginal groups, the Inuit have suffered in Canada under colonialism and the subsequent paternalistic government tendencies in today's post-colonial society. However, the case of the Inuit is different than other First Nations groups, primarily because the Inuit have lived in much more remote areas and less habitable climates, lessening the capabilities and desire of Europeans to colonize the areas now collectively known as Nunavut. Gordon Christie notes:

> "The Canadian government began to get serious about the administration of the North during and after World War II. Within the space of a generation,

> tremendous cultural shifts were affected: families were pulled into permanent settlements, children were put in schools, Indigenous languages began to slip, and the first lurch towards anomie was felt across the Inuit communities" (331).

Around the 1950s, government policies and agents began to enforce the resettlement of Inuit communities away from their traditional hunting and fishing grounds, as a means of 'protection' for this population during the cold war. Children were sent to residential schools[5] and forbidden to speak any language other than English or French. Livelihoods based on traditional hunting and fur trades were eliminated as resettlements were far from hunting grounds. The Inuit need for market food and goods rose dramatically. Rachel Thibeault states, "Forced through government policy to relinquish their nomadic lifestyle and abandon traditional occupations, the Inuit are being gradually engulfed in the Qallunaat (Western) cultural tide" (153). This impacted not only the traditions and culture of the Inuit, but also their health, well-being, opportunities, and development. At the same time, global industrialization and changes to the climate began to impact the environment. As described by Nicole Ives regarding the Inuit living in Nunavik, "Until the early years of the 20th Century, the Inuit…were a semi-nomadic people with subsistence based economy. Contact with the outside world and enforced settlement triggered epidemics and a decline in reliance on traditional food sources" (3). Ives goes on to note that colonization brought losses of identity, traditional ways of life and culture, and increased instances in substance abuse, violence, and child abuse and neglect (3) and Socha et al. point out, "Remote First Nations communities deal with many social problems, including food insecurity, which stem from colonization" (6). The Inuit face

[5] More on Canada's history regarding residential schools can be found here: http://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/home/government-policy/the-residential-school-system.html

social and health challenges, and require assistance in achieving an environment where food is healthy, nutritious and available. There are policies and programs in place that may help, though they may not be enough to help erase the damage that colonization has had on the Inuit's traditional culture and food, or the reliance on expensive market food.

5. How does food insecurity impact wellbeing for the Inuit?

Today, many of the Inuit in Nunavut suffer from physical and mental ailments, due to: "Dramatic changes with regards to traditional nutrition" (Thibeault 154). According to Noreen Willows, there is considerable evidence that many health problems experienced by Aboriginal peoples are related to diet; they include anemia, dental caries, obesity, heart disease and diabetes (3). In fact, Thibeault notes that the Inuit boast the highest rate of diabetes in the world (154). According to Diabetes Canada, people with the disease are at a very high risk for heart disease and stroke, kidney diseases and high blood pressure (diabetes.ca). The changes are due, as previously mentioned in this paper, to a relatively recent reliance on market food. These market-based foods are sugary, high in refined carbohydrates, fatty, and have low-nutrition value. They contribute to these aliments, but they are some of the easy to ship foods that are shelf-stable for transport to remote areas. Also, these types of food are those that the body craves. Processed foods also vary greatly from the traditional diet of nearly anyone, and especially for the Inuit, as traditional foods are largely protein-based. For some people in Nunavut, market foods may be the only option due to resettlement, time, inexperience with traditional food gathering and preservation, and other factors.

Another complication regarding Inuit wellbeing is the state of the arctic environment. Climate change has impacted the environment through warmer weather patterns, fewer extreme cold weather temperatures, increased rainfall, thinner ice, coastal erosion, decreased wildlife health and the arrival of new species (Wesche and Chan 364), all of which impact the Inuit's accessibility to country food. James Ford et al. note in their paper on climate change in the arctic: "Climate change is expected to have implications for the presence, abundance, distribution and migration of wildlife species, which are of cultural and economic importance to the Inuit…" (56). The changing arctic climate means that not only is there less country food available due to the previously noted colonial legacy in Nunavut, but that climate change will also impact the health of traditional food sources of the Inuit, through changing migration which impacts hunting and fishing sources.

In addition, recent testing reveals that there have been high levels of heavy metals and contaminants tested in some protein-based country foods (fish and seal meat), which make them dangerous to eat (Thibeault 155). These contaminants may be from distant pollution sources, including arctic oil fields and may make their way to Canada's North via ocean currents (Gordeev 89). Nunavut's own mining development is also contributing to damaging the arctic environment and traditional food sources. The animals consume contaminated water, fish or plants and pass the contaminants on to people through country food. Mothers can pass along these contaminants to their children through breast milk, and create additional health problems for them immediately, as well as later in life. Elaine Power, though, argues that in terms of availability, environmental contamination is a unique consideration for country food, and that the impact of global

climate changes on ecosystems that affect the availability, supply and safety of this food source (96).

The *Hunger in Nunavut* project still encourages the consumption of country food for wellbeing: “Research has established that a diet based exclusively on local food sources can provide adequate levels of vitamins and nutrients, and is an excellent source of protein, healthy fat, and energy” (Campbell et al. 8). The group also notes the benefits of hunting and gathering local food lead to outdoor exercise, inter-generational learning, and community building (ibid. 8), and that a lack of essential nutrients, such as those available from country food, can contribute to suicide, depression, attention deficit disorder, anxiety and learning difficulties (ibid. 8). For the wellbeing of the Inuit, there is a responsibility at all levels of government to protect the arctic environment in order to preserve these traditional food sources.

Many Inuit consider market food ‘bad’ and traditional food ‘good’, but it comes down to access. “The eating of traditional food is often associated with feelings of good health, whereas the eating of ‘non-traditional food’ is considered by some Aboriginal Peoples as polluting or weakening” (Willows 34). The other unique aspect to the Inuit and their relationship with market food is a lack of knowledge as to how to prepare it. A lack of inter-generational learning may not permit a shared knowledge of cooking or preparing techniques for either market or traditional foods. Roshanafshar and Hawkins note that for children, food insecurity is especially damaging to their health and wellbeing, and that living in a food insecure environment leaves them at risk for developmental abnormalities, obesity and a compromised immune system (6). In the case of market food, much of it is processed and preparation is either limited or foreign. In the

case of traditional foods, lack of access to traditional foods and loss of traditional cooking and preservation skills are problematic for contemporary Inuit peoples.

There are two main issues that exist in attempting to resolve or improve food security for the Inuit. The first issue is how to improve access to traditional foods. The second is how to make market foods more affordable, nutritious and available. The government and policy-makers have roles and responsibilities in creating a food secure Nunavut, along with private sector, other community members and the Inuit themselves.

6. Ideas and practices towards food security in Nunavut

There are programs that exist to help increase and support food security in Nunavut and northern Canada. Some are federally operated and funded, while others are grass-roots efforts, run by local people who know and understand the challenges in the region, and have developed programming for food access that supports Inuit tradition and culture.

A. Federal government: Nutrition North Canada

In 2011, the federal government redeveloped its food subsidy program. Nutrition North Canada has a similar ideology to the Food Mail program developed by the Government in the 1960s, but with different types of programming. It works with stores across Canada's North, as well as food suppliers, to ensure northerners have better access to perishable food (nutritionnorthcanada.gc.ca), such as fruit and vegetables, lean meats, and dairy products. The program provides a subsidy for the costs of bringing food to the North, offsetting some of the cost-related challenges mentioned in the case study section of this paper. The foods must be shipped by plane. Since 2011, the Government of

Canada has invested about $60 million in the program, including $2.9 million for community-based food education (nutritionnorthcanada.gc.ca). The government works directly with registered northern retailers, and reports saving a family of four about $137 per month on market food (nutritionorthcanada.gc.ca). The subsidies can also be applied against the cost of processing country food, such as fish or meat. This program is also responsible for the Northern Food Basket, a 52 kilogram box containing 67 standard food items which Inuit and First Nations peoples reported eating most often. The box is used to monitor the cost of healthy eating in isolated northern communities (nutritionnorthcanada.gc.ca).

Some of the items included in the food basket are processed cheese slices, fish sticks, bologna, juices, and frozen processed foods, all of which are not typically considered healthy and nutritious. However, the basket also contains fresh and frozen fruit and vegetables, whole grain products, and lean meats.

The program has been criticized by both community members and the media, namely due to:

> "…insufficient information available to prove whether retailers in the North actually pass on the full subsidy to their customers. The [Auditor General's] report notes that, '[Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada] has not required that compliance reviews of northern retailers include analysis of profit margins in order to verify that the full subsidy is being passed on.'
>
> This is a critical find. The Nutrition North Food Subsidy Program requires retailers to pass on the full subsidies to consumers and the fact that they are not

> sure proves that the structure of the program is inherently ineffectual" (Ashley Splawinski 2).

The implication is that the stores using the subsidy program are keeping the savings received through the subsidy for themselves. The prices and availability of food are not being shared with the consumer, who must still pay exorbitant prices for whatever food stuffs are available. The current Liberal government has committed to reviewing and revising the Nutrition North Canada program, and also, committed to making Aboriginal Peoples issues, including food security, a priority for Government policy. Federal funding has also gone towards supporting Inuit fisheries, northern agriculture and job creation in northern food industries.

B. Community activities toward food security

Some communities in northern Canada have attempted to take food security into their own hands. These acts have re-developed community spirit and communal interaction, important components of Inuit tradition, where food was hunted, prepared, and shared together. An interviewee in Skinner et al.'s article noted: "One way is to give food if other families can't afford to buy what they run out of" (7). These ideas are also contributing to the knowledge-sharing between generations about how to prepare both country and market foods. In addition, pooled resources by community members allows some of the costs of traveling to very remote hunting grounds by hunters, such as gas, snow machines, and ammunition.

The *Nunavut Food Security Coalition*[6] has developed six areas of focus for food security, including country food, market food, local food production, life skills, programs

[6] More information on the Nunavut Food Security Coalition is available here: http://www.nunavutfoodsecurity.ca/

and community initiatives, and policy and legislation (PPF summary report 4). There is a noted link between poverty and food insecurity, and communities that have banded together to reduce food insecurity have had some success. Ideas such as community food banks have helped those without money access food; there are soup kitchens open twice a week in certain northern communities to feed those in the most need; and, certain communities keep communal freezers where country food is stored safely and can be accessed by community members. Extended families in northern communities eat together, ensuring first that the children have enough food.

Community members note the importance of having their voices heard when it comes to food: “What made us go on an unhealthy path is completely dropping ours [traditional diet] and having to start with theirs [western diet]” (Socha et al. 11). Communities acknowledge the importance of country food to their diets and have a desire to increase consumption. In addition, acknowledging the connection that Aboriginal Peoples have to the land is an important element in tradition, culture and traditional food, as described by Socha et al.: “Food is described as a need that historically was met through connection to the land. The Aboriginals’ ancestors thrived on traditional foods; loss of connection to and knowledge about the land, and reliance on the food and medicines of white North American society now contribute to high rates of illness” (8).

For the Inuit, it may be too late to return to a diet completely based on country foods. The impact of colonization, including resettlement, has changed how the Inuit can access country food. Climate and environmental changes have changed the safety of country food, due to contamination, changes in migratory patterns, and even changes in

species available. Also, relying on a commercialized economy has increased the need for market foods, while decreasing knowledge of traditional food practices. All of these issues have impacted the Inuit diet.

However, lifting barriers to accessing traditional foods, applying subsidies to hunters and lifting restriction to hunts can help retain traditions and culture. The Inuit know best the means to increase food security in their communities. Some suggestions from community members include: “Start a garden” (Skinner et al. 9), “Get band council to get some hunters to go hunting for spring and fall. Supply the hunters with guns, shells, gas for their trip. Whatever game is killed it should be shared within the community” (Ibid. 9), and: “Maybe an all-season road will help to have more food in cupboards, like winter time” (Ibid. 9). The work that is being done to raise awareness of food insecurity in the North, and reduce costs of food for those living in Nunavut and other northern communities, will help. The *Hunger in Nunavut* group makes three recommendations for improving food security in Nunavut: Improving hunting capacity, improving food processing and distribution capacity and improving community awareness about local food (Campbell et al. 13).

7. Concluding thoughts

There has been recognition at both the national and community level that food insecurity is a real problem in Nunavut. Insecurity is related to people simply being hungry, but it is also so much more, as it impacts culture, traditions and wellbeing. However, there are actions being taken in an attempt to alleviate the issues, or at least bring some relief to the people living in remote communities in northern Canada. By

recognizing the issues facing the Inuit and drawing attention to it so that all Canadians might understand the importance of food security to the Inuit, lives and prospects for Northern Canadians can be improved.

Ultimately, living in such a way that hunger is part of the concern for oneself and one's family is not ethical or productive. Various circumstances beyond the control of the Inuit have made food insecurity a complex issue facing nearly all of Nunavut. Affordable, healthy and nutritious market food needs to be available to those who want it. Alongside market food, a restoration of traditional hunting grounds for accessing country food, and an acknowledgment of the importance of country food and tradition to the Inuit should be recognized. Further, a broader respect of Inuit culture and tradition towards food by those who deliver policy in Canada will help to ease, and hopefully one day, eradicate the serious issues of food insecurity in Canada.

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