

A Canadian Syndemic

Food Insecurity, Race, and COVID-19

COVID-19 & Society

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What is Food Insecurity?

According to the Government of Canada, food insecurity is "the inability to acquire or consume an adequate diet quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways, or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so" (Government of Canada, 2020).



Food Insecurity and COVID-19

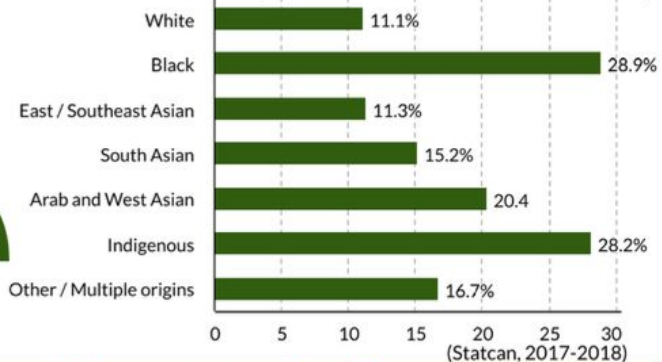
Food insecurity has been exacerbated due to COVID-19. Many individuals have become unemployed or experienced a loss of income, which directly affects their ability to afford a quality and sufficient food supply.

Food Insecurity and Race

Race is a significant factor that contributes to the likelihood of experiencing food insecurity in Canada. A study found that while **11% of White individuals** experience food insecurity, the percentage rises to **28% for Indigenous** and **29% for Black individuals** (PROOF, 2020).



Prevalence of Food Insecurity in Relation to Racial / Cultural Identity



Significance in Vancouver

Trends concerning food insecurity and race are evident in Vancouver. Roughly **1 in 10 households in Vancouver experience food insecurity** (bccdc, 2016). It has also been determined that "racialized groups are disproportionately more likely to be both food insecure and susceptible to COVID-19" (FSC, 2020).

Ways to Make a Change

- **Donate** surplus and/or unused food
- Give back to your community through **volunteer** work and fundraising
- **Research** (read, ask representatives, podcasts, etc) food insecurity and how it has been exacerbated since the pandemic, as well as what is being done to combat food insecurity and racism
- **Spread awareness** about food insecurity, race, and COVID-19

Introduction

Studies show that racialized groups are more likely to be affected by food insecurity than White individuals, and COVID-19 has exacerbated the impact felt by marginalized groups. Food insecurity is defined as “the inability to acquire or consume an adequate diet quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways, or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so” (Government of Canada, 2020).

“Why is it that the darker your skin, the more likely you have to rely on food charity?”, Food Share executive director, Paul Taylor, asked in one Toronto Life article (Yu, 2020). Those who identify as being Black, Indigenous, or People of Colour (BIPOC) have disproportionately been marginalized in society throughout history, which is evident through reports that examine factors related to socioeconomic status, such as food insecurity. A recent report by the PROOF research team at the University of Toronto found that while 11.1% of White individuals in Canada experience food insecurity, 28.2% of Indigenous Peoples and 28.9% of Black individuals are impacted (PROOF, 2020).

An important aspect of food insecurity is the ability of individuals to acquire “socially acceptable” (Government of Canada, 2020), and therefore culturally appropriate food. It is not hard to imagine that the BIPOC community may have a significantly harder time obtaining food that is representative of their own culture in many Canadian grocery stores. The closure of smaller mom-and-pop shops during COVID-19 likely exacerbated the inability to obtain socially acceptable food for many people.

During the COVID-19 crisis, societal issues related to individual and systemic racism have increased. In her article, Jamie Liew explains “how people perceive the spread of this virus

can place a disproportionate burden on racialized persons, and that racialized people will experience the pandemic differently” (2020). It has also been determined that racialized groups are more likely to die from COVID-19 than White individuals (Liew, 2020). Understanding how BIPOC communities have been affected differently by COVID-19 is significant in that we can spread awareness about how marginalized groups experience issues related to socioeconomic status and we can begin to address the underlying issues in society concerning systemic racism.

The prevalence of food insecurity and racism have been intensified since the COVID-19 pandemic (Statcan, 2020). This cycle of worsening conditions, which make being a person of colour extraordinarily difficult at this time, suggests that the combination of racism, food insecurity, and COVID-19 are a syndemic in today’s Canadian society.

Organizational Context

Food Stash is a Vancouver based organization whose mission is to “reduce the environmental impact of food waste and bridge the food insecurity gap within our community” (Food Stash, 2019). We chose this organization to research and make an infographic for because we passionately care about the earth and nutrition, as evident in our specializations in Earth and Ocean Science and Land and Food Systems at UBC. Additionally, we have found research that confirms how “adequate and good nutrition is directly linked to immunity” (FSC, 2020), and therefore is very relevant in regard to the current pandemic. Lastly, we both strongly support the Black Lives Matter and Indigenous Peoples movements and wanted to choose an organization that is looking to spread awareness about how BIPOC communities have experienced COVID-19 differently than White individuals and how race plays a role in food insecurity.

Food Stash plans to combat racism in Vancouver while maintaining their mission by spreading awareness about how food insecurity, racism, and COVID-19 intersect for all people in Vancouver. Our infographic has done this by briefly outlining what food insecurity is, how race plays a role in food insecurity, how COVID-19 has exacerbated food insecurity, and what can be done to help. It was designed to educate the general public about how food insecurity, racism, and COVID-19 intersect and why it is relevant, specifically in the Vancouver area. The infographic will likely be used on social media platforms of Food Stash, in the hopes of educating the general public about these issues.

Historical Context

Historically, racism in Canada has been practiced both at individual and institutional levels. The list of actions by the Government of Canada and other institutions includes forcing Indigenous children into Residential Schools, the Chinese Head Tax, enslavement of African people until 1834 (Henry, 2019), the internment of Japanese people during WW2, and the prevention / excessive barriers set up to non-White immigrants. These institutional practices, combined with individual racist acts and decisions, have prevented BIPoC communities from the benefits of being able to build generational wealth, gain a higher level of education, and enjoy full access to all rights and freedoms. This has led to these communities experiencing a disproportionately higher rate of poverty and therefore a higher rate of food insecurity in Canada today.

Food insecurity is a newly recognized societal issue in Canada. It was first examined in the 1980's, as the nation was in the midst of an economic recession, but has since carried over becoming a nationally studied topic through government surveys, research institutions, and

charitable organizations. Numerous reports on food insecurity, including one from PROOF, have highlighted low income / poverty as the primary reason behind this issue (PROOF, 2020). Due to historical and current forms of systemic racism, racialized peoples and communities are often found to have lower socio-economic status than White people in Canada, which puts these communities at greater risk for food insecurity. This is highlighted in a PROOF study which found that Black people are 3.56 times more likely to be food insecure than White people and “36% of Black kids live in food-insecure households, compared to just 12% of White kids”(PROOF, 2020). During this COVID-19 pandemic millions of Canadians have been pushed out of employment or suffered a loss of income. A greater number of Canadians are therefore at risk of experiencing food insecurity.

Analysis and Data Synthesis:

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting economic shutdown, the unemployment rate in Canada has risen to approximately 12.3% (Trading Economics, 2020). Because of this economic strain, 8.46 million people have applied for CERB payments and millions more are collecting EI or have no source of income (Government of Canada, 2020). With low-income and poverty being directly linked to food insecurity, it is expected that food-insecure homes will double in Canada by the end of the year (FSC, 2020). According to the interdisciplinary research team at PROOF, 69.5% of Canadian households reliant on social assistance (EI / CERB) are food insecure (PROOF, 2020). This percentage increases to 76% in British Columbia (CCHS, 2013/2014). It was found that as a result of the pandemic, food insecurity has jumped from 10.5% in 2017/2018 to 14.6% (Statcan, 2020). If this pandemic and

the economic problems it is causing persist, the amount of British Columbians and Canadians that experience food insecurity will increase dramatically.

Food banks and charitable organizations, like FoodStash, are part of the front line efforts to combat food insecurity. Government and philanthropic support of organizations are the most direct ways to improve the situation at a community level. To fight the problem on a larger scale, governments both local (ie City of Vancouver) and higher need to mandate a livable income floor that is unique to each city / area. This would ensure the root of the issue, poverty, is addressed. It is necessary to include communities that are disproportionately affected by food insecurity and COVID-19 (Indigenous, Black, and other racialized communities) in leading the effort to fight this issue in their communities, ensuring no one is left behind and marginalized voices are heard.

Conclusion

COVID-19 has exacerbated long standing social and economic issues in Canada. It has significantly impacted those with lower socioeconomic status, and it is projected that more households will become food insecure due to the ongoing pandemic. The impacts of food insecurity and COVID-19 have been especially significant towards BIPOC communities, in that culturally appropriate food might be even more limited than usual and these individuals have historically had lower socioeconomic status as a result of systemic racism.

Some significant limitations of the literature and infographic are that they do not cover, in depth, the second half of food insecurity concerning the availability of “socially acceptable” food to distinct and different cultures (Government of Canada, 2020). More research should be done on the significance of culturally appropriate food availability in Canada, and how closures of

smaller grocer's have exacerbated food insecurity for racialized groups during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Food insecurity is an ongoing issue in Canada that affects a substantial part of our population. BIPOC communities experience a disproportionate rate of food insecurity, due to historical and ongoing systemic racism. We argue that the intersection and worsening conditions of COVID-19, racism, and food insecurity have created a syndemic in Canadian society. In order to properly combat this issue, the link between food insecurity and racialized groups needs to be recognized and properly addressed. In the search for a solution, it is ultimately our leaders that need to take large scale action by implementing social policies that improve this syndemic, but it is first up to all Canadians to demand a change.

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