Cost of Eating in British Columbia 2011
Executive Summary

The Cost of Eating in BC has been published for over a decade to detail how much it costs for individuals and families in BC to access an adequate amount of food, to relate this cost to income, and to consider the reasons why many people cannot meet this basic need.

In 2011, the provincial average cost of the nutritious food basket for a family of four is $868.43 per month. Those earning minimum wage, receiving income assistance, or facing other challenges (high rents, child care, or transportation costs, for example) struggle to find ways to purchase food as well as meet their other basic needs.

In the ten years that the Cost of Eating in BC Report has been published, the situation has only gotten worse for individuals and families earning low wages or receiving government assistance.

In short, food security is having nutritious food that is readily accessible in sufficient amounts and that each person finds acceptable. The absence of food security, termed food insecurity, can lead to negative physical and mental health effects whose consequences ripple out to affect all British Columbians.

Ensuring that individuals and families are food secure is more than addressing the immediate need to feed our hungry citizens. The solution rests in addressing the underlying factors that cause food insecurity, specifically poverty and the food system. Recommendations for change outlined in this report:

1. Establish a provincial poverty reduction strategy
2. Build affordable housing
3. Update income assistance to reflect the cost of living
4. Enact a living wage policy
5. Work toward sustainable food systems that no longer require food banks

Individuals, communities, and all levels of government need to be involved to make British Columbians food secure. This report provides many ways that individual British Columbians can create change.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

British Columbia (BC) is a truly beautiful and unique province, with much to offer both citizens and visitors alike. It is also home to a staggeringly high poverty rate: the highest in Canada with 12% of British Columbians unable to meet basic needs.1 The right to food is recognized in the United Nations’ (UN) Universal Declaration of Human Rights.2 Despite this fact, many individuals and families in BC struggle to access food.

Food insecurity, or the lack of adequate food, is prevalent in many communities in BC. The BC Community Nutritionists’ Council and, now, Dietitians of Canada have been researching the economic cost of accessing a basic, healthy diet based on a defined “nutritious food basket” for over a decade.3 These costs, as well as the contributing social and systemic factors, speak volumes as to why so many people go without enough food.

What many of us fail to realize is that society as a whole suffers when our neighbours and friends face food insecurity and poverty. Whether directly or indirectly, these issues affect each and every one of us.

The purpose of this report is to detail how much it currently costs for individuals and families in BC to access an adequate amount of food, to relate this cost to income, and to consider the reasons why many people cannot meet this basic need. To this end, this report provides a snapshot of the factors that allow food insecurity to continue and suggests solutions to which individuals, communities, and governments can lend support.
Who faces food insecurity and how it affects the province

DEFINITION
The definition of food security encompasses many elements. In 2002, The UN Food and Agriculture Organization defined food security as

“... a situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.”

The Ryerson Centre for Studies in Food Security refined this definition by adding that the food should be produced and obtained in environmentally sustainable ways that do not compromise the dignity, self-respect, or human rights of both producers and consumers and, further, that policies and processes be put into place to achieve food security.

In short, food security is having nutritious food that is readily accessible in sufficient amounts and that each person finds acceptable. Food energizes mind, body, and spirit, and plays a role in the health and productivity of all British Columbians. It is surprising, then, that 7.7% of British Columbians are considered food insecure, with disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intakes.

Barriers that British Columbians face to accessing food include:
- income level,
- purchasing power,
- proximity to places where food is sold (especially those in remote locations),
- mobility, and
- lack of knowledge or space for food preparation and storage.

The goal of food security is to eliminate these barriers for every single individual in the province.

Prolonged food insecurity can lead to:
- poor pregnancy outcomes,
- poor growth and development in children,
- learning deficits,
- poor school performance,
- increased illness and susceptibility to disease for people of all ages,
- increased medical costs, and
- decreased life expectancy.

Mental anguish also troubles food insecure individuals and families.
A wide variety of people suffer from food insecurity, most prominently women, Aboriginal peoples, the working poor, seniors, the homeless population, and those with mental or physical health issues. Food insecurity affects different people in different ways, depending on the extent to which they face barriers to access.

MEET OUR REFERENCE FAMILY OF FOUR

Bruno works full-time in Vancouver for $11 an hour. With limited transit options at his disposal, he commutes from his family’s home in the suburban town of Aldergrove for at least two hours each day. They recently moved from Langley to a home they could better afford. Bruno’s wife, Maria, stays home with their four-year-old daughter, Ana, as they are unable to pay for childcare costs. Their son, Alexander, is 14 years old, and attends public school in Langley. Despite the fact that Bruno works, the family still struggles with money. After they pay for housing and food, they only have $867 leftover to cover other costs including transportation, clothing, and school supplies. Maria stresses about finances and the items they cannot afford. When it comes to buying groceries, there is not much available in their neighbourhood. They must drive to the nearest large grocery store, where they purchase cheaper, processed foods and rarely have enough money for fresh fruits and vegetables. They also go to their local food bank but are not guaranteed to take home items of high nutritional value or quality. Because of his poor eating habits, Bruno is often lethargic during his long days at his labour-intensive job. On his next trip to the doctor, he will be informed that he has been diagnosed with diabetes. He does not receive extended health benefits at work to help cover the medications and testing strips needed to manage diabetes, although he may be eligible for some coverage under the Pharmacare program. Maria often skips meals so that her children have enough to eat. Alexander struggles to concentrate on his schoolwork as he does not eat a substantial breakfast or lunch regularly. He is in danger of being held back a grade. In a few years, he will likely drop out of school and continue the cycle of poverty as an adult.

This is just one example of how a family may be affected by food insecurity.

How food insecurity affects us all

When individuals like Bruno and Maria and their family are food insecure, all British Columbians suffer in one way or another. While price is certainly a factor in accessing food, the cost of food is only a symptom of a much larger problem. Individual or household food security is part of the larger context that ... “includes the economic, social and food systems, food policies, food culture, and the engagement of community in shaping the context.” Our communities as a whole experience higher health care costs, lost economic activity, and increased crime and policing costs, which can largely be attributed to the overall condition of poverty.

Actions taken to deal with food insecurity are better framed from a community perspective rather than an individual one. To maintain the status quo of poverty, the cost to the province is an overwhelming $8.1–9.2 billion per year. The implementation of a poverty reduction strategy would cost just half that, at roughly $4 billion. By not addressing the issue of poverty, governments and citizens are losing money and lives are negatively affected.
Determining the cost of the nutritious food basket

Among all of the needs that British Columbians must meet to survive, food almost always takes a backseat. Health Canada’s National Nutritious Food Basket (NNFB)\(^1\) is a tool used to monitor the cost and affordability of healthy eating. It was first introduced in Canada in 1974 and was most recently updated in 2008 based on current healthy dietary guidelines and data on foods consumed. The NNFB describes the quantity and purchase units of about 60 foods that represent a basic nutritious diet for people of different ages and sexes.

There are six health authorities in British Columbia. Five of the health authorities serve geographic regions in BC as shown in Figure 1. The sixth health authority is the Provincial Health Services Authority (PHSA), ensuring that BC residents have access to a coordinated network of high-quality specialized health care services. In May 2011, public health dietitians/community nutritionists, health authority staff, and volunteers compiled the costs of the foods in stores within each of the five regional health authorities. The stores in each region were randomly drawn from a list of all grocery stores in the province. The population of the regional health authority and the variation in food costs among stores in the previous year determined the number of stores sampled in each region. In total, costing of food for 2011 was carried out in 133 stores throughout the province. The data was then analyzed by PHSA to determine the monthly cost.

Figure 1

The foods in the nutritious food basket are foods that require preparation.

The basket does not include:
- take-out, restaurant foods, or pre-packaged meals;
- any non-food items that can be purchased at grocery stores like personal care items and household supplies; or
- additional items essential for food preparation such as cooking equipment and utensils, spices and condiments, and proper storage facilities.

The basket does not take into account any special dietary needs, cultural or other food preferences that may influence food choices nor the additional costs that are associated with food purchase. These additional costs include travel costs that can significantly affect the total cost. For people in urban settings, grocery stores are more accessible and public transit is available, keeping these costs to a minimum. In more remote areas, significant travel costs can exist because these populations are further removed from places to access the foods contained in the nutritious food basket. People drive for hours to get to, and home from, a grocery store.

The cost of a healthy food basket.

The 2011 average monthly cost of the nutritious food basket for a family of four in BC is **$868.43**.

The cost of the food basket in BC is the average cost, weighted by population, of the basket in each geographic health region as shown in Figure 1. The actual cost of food varies from community to community within each region. Vancouver Coastal Health (VCH) has the highest monthly food cost for a family of four at $944.16, while Interior Health (IH) has the lowest cost at $832.82.
Accessing basic food needs in BC

Table 1 lists the cost of food and the cost of housing as a proportion of disposable income for several different households in BC, including our reference family (family 6). This table illustrates that, once families or individuals receiving income assistance (commonly known as ‘welfare’) have paid for housing and food, they have virtually nothing left for other living costs. In some instances, once they have paid their rent, they are unable to afford the healthy food basket. They must choose between having a roof over their heads and eating enough food.

Families and individuals on income assistance in BC require anywhere from 34% to 49% of their disposable income to pay for food.

A low-income family of four where one parent makes $11.00 per hour, such as Bruno and Maria’s family, must use 34% of their monthly disposable income to purchase the nutritious food basket. The chosen low-income wage of $11.00 is more than the minimum wage in BC, which currently sits at $9.50 per hour and is scheduled to increase to $10.25 in May of 2012. Median income, as opposed to low income, is the amount that divides the overall income distribution into two equal groups – half having income above that amount, and half having income below that amount.' A family with one median income earner spends just 15% of their income on food.

As seen in Table 2, the cost of the healthy food basket in BC has not changed significantly since the 2009 Cost of Eating in BC Report. Income assistance rates continue to remain virtually unchanged, even with a substantial increase in the cost of living over the past few years. The reference family of four living on income assistance was receiving $401 in support allowance (non-shelter allowance) in 2001 and is still receiving the same amount in 2011. This clearly illustrates that the support allowance provided is inadequate to cover the cost of healthy food and that the cost of food has risen substantially since 2001, now taking 216% of the support allowance as compared to 156% in 2001. This leaves nothing for other costs, meaning people are left in a negative balance without having yet purchased any other essentials.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monthly Income and costs</th>
<th>Family of 4, income assistance</th>
<th>Single parent, 2 children, income assistance</th>
<th>Single older, woman income assistance</th>
<th>Young, pregnant woman income assistance</th>
<th>Single man, disability assistance</th>
<th>Family of 4, low–earned income</th>
<th>Family of 4, median income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disposable income</td>
<td>$1,851</td>
<td>$1,786</td>
<td>$663</td>
<td>$708</td>
<td>$959</td>
<td>$2,530</td>
<td>$5,621</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost of housing</td>
<td>$1,107</td>
<td>$1,107</td>
<td>$732</td>
<td>$732</td>
<td>$732</td>
<td>$795</td>
<td>$1,491</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of income required for housing</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>110%</td>
<td>103%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost of food</td>
<td>$868</td>
<td>$689</td>
<td>$218</td>
<td>$273</td>
<td>$322</td>
<td>$868</td>
<td>$868</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of income required for food</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What’s left after housing and food</td>
<td>– $124</td>
<td>– $10</td>
<td>– $287</td>
<td>– $297</td>
<td>– $95</td>
<td>$867</td>
<td>$3,262</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3 shows the details of how the disposable income and the housing costs of the different family scenarios were determined.

### TABLE 3: Food as a proportion of disposable income for seven family scenarios – the details

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Net income (after payroll deductions)</td>
<td>$1,101</td>
<td>$1,036</td>
<td>$610</td>
<td>$610</td>
<td>$906</td>
<td>$1,793</td>
<td>$5,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child/family benefits</td>
<td>$726</td>
<td>$726</td>
<td>$50</td>
<td>$50</td>
<td>$50</td>
<td>$737</td>
<td>$142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional benefits</td>
<td>$24</td>
<td>$24</td>
<td>$3</td>
<td>$48</td>
<td>$3</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical services plan</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>$121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disposable income</td>
<td>$1,851</td>
<td>$1,786</td>
<td>$663</td>
<td>$708</td>
<td>$959</td>
<td>$2,530</td>
<td>$5,621</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>$1,107</td>
<td>$1,107</td>
<td>$732</td>
<td>$732</td>
<td>$732</td>
<td>$732</td>
<td>$1,491</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% disposable income required for housing</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>110%</td>
<td>103%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
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<td>Cost of food</td>
<td>$868</td>
<td>$689</td>
<td>$218</td>
<td>$273</td>
<td>$322</td>
<td>$868</td>
<td>$868</td>
</tr>
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<td>% disposable income required to purchase food</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What’s left for all other costs</td>
<td>$124</td>
<td>$10</td>
<td>$287</td>
<td>$297</td>
<td>$95</td>
<td>$867</td>
<td>$3,262</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** All dollars and numbers rounded to the nearest whole number.

1. **Reference Family:** mother and father, 31 – 50 years; boy 14 years; girl 4 years
2. Family 1: reference family, income assistance. Shelter allowance $700.00; support allowance $401.06
3. Family 2: one parent family, mother 31 – 50 years; boy 14 years; girl 8 years; income assistance. Shelter allowance $660.00; support allowance $375.05
4. Family 3: single older female, 60 years; income assistance. Shelter allowance $375.00; support allowance $235.00
5. Family 4: single pregnant woman, 19 years; income assistance. Shelter allowance $375.00; support allowance $235.00
6. Family 5: single male, 25 years; disability assistance. Shelter allowance $375.00; support allowance $331.42
7. Family 6: reference family, one low–income earner, $11.00/hour, before tax yearly income $22,880.00. After payroll deductions: (CPP of 960.32 and EI of 407.34 – no income taxes payable) = $21,512.34 (yearly)
8. Family 7: reference family, one earner, median income after tax yearly income $67,200.00

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**TABLE 2:** Cost of food as a proportion of the support allowance for the reference family of four, 2001 – 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Support income</td>
<td>$401</td>
<td>$401</td>
<td>$401</td>
<td>$401</td>
<td>$401</td>
<td>$401</td>
<td>$401</td>
<td>$401</td>
<td>$401</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost of food</td>
<td>$868</td>
<td>$872</td>
<td>$715</td>
<td>$653</td>
<td>$654</td>
<td>$632</td>
<td>$648</td>
<td>$629</td>
<td>$626</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost of food as % of support allowance</td>
<td>216%</td>
<td>217%</td>
<td>178%</td>
<td>163%</td>
<td>163%</td>
<td>158%</td>
<td>162%</td>
<td>157%</td>
<td>156%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4 illustrates the cost of the nutritious food basket for different individuals and families based on the 2011 data. This data can be used to calculate the cost of a nutritious food basket for any individual or family unit.

**TABLE 4: Average monthly cost of the food basket in BC 2011**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age/gender groups</th>
<th>Monthly Cost*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family of Four</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>woman 31–50; man 31–50; boy 14–18; girl 4–8</td>
<td>$ 868.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family of Three</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>woman 31–50; boy 14–18; girl 4–8</td>
<td>$ 688.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Boy</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2–3 years</td>
<td>$ 114.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4–8 years</td>
<td>$ 148.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9–13 years</td>
<td>$ 195.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14–18 years</td>
<td>$ 275.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Girl</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2–3 years</td>
<td>$ 112.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4–8 years</td>
<td>$ 143.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9–13 years</td>
<td>$ 168.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14–18 years</td>
<td>$ 200.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Man</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19–30 years</td>
<td>$ 268.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31–50 years</td>
<td>$ 243.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51–70 years</td>
<td>$ 234.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 70 years</td>
<td>$ 231.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Woman</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19–30 years</td>
<td>$ 208.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31–50 years</td>
<td>$ 206.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51–70 years</td>
<td>$ 181.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 70 years</td>
<td>$ 178.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pregnancy</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Younger than 18 years</td>
<td>$ 223.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19–30 years</td>
<td>$ 227.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31–50 years</td>
<td>$ 221.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Breastfeeding</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Younger than 18 years</td>
<td>$ 232.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19–30 years</td>
<td>$ 240.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31–50 years</td>
<td>$ 234.90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Food costs reported are based on living in a family of four. It costs more per person to feed smaller families and less to feed larger families. To calculate the monthly cost for families of different sizes, see the table below.

**Household Size Adjustment Factor**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Size</th>
<th>Adjustment Factor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Multiply by 1.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two people</td>
<td>Multiply by 1.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three people</td>
<td>Multiply by 1.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four people</td>
<td>Multiply by 1.0 (no change)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five to six people</td>
<td>Multiply by 0.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seven people or more</td>
<td>Multiply by 0.90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Nothing is improving

Despite all of the research, statistics, and policy suggestions available, very little has changed in terms of legislated food security and poverty reduction initiatives. Child poverty in BC remains the highest in Canada for eight years straight, food bank usage is at an all-time high, income assistance has not been changed to coincide with inflation, and BC is one of the few remaining provinces without a poverty reduction strategy in place. To compound this, a food supply chain that, at times, is inefficient and unsustainable can complicate a person’s ability to access food.

Food banks, which began in Canada in 1989 as a temporary measure, are one avenue to which those who are food insecure continue to turn. Now, more than ever, many British Columbians depend on food banks to survive. These charitable institutions take on the responsibility of feeding citizens when they often do not have the capacity to do so. Reliant on donations from the public and corporations, food banks and other services cannot always provide the items required for a healthy, balanced diet and struggle to keep up with demand.

Those assisted by British Columbia’s 91 food banks, in numbers:
- 90,193 individuals used food banks from 2010–2011; this is a 15.5% increase in use since 2008;
- 31.8% were children and youth;
- 45.1% were women;
- 16.4% of households receiving food had income from current or recent employment;
- 14.7% of food bank users identified as Aboriginal; and
- 76.1% of food bank users are market housing renters (not subsidized by government).

These statistics indicate that there are underlying contributors adding to the plight of our food insecure population. The lack of other basic rights, such as adequate housing and education, often undermines one’s right to food. For example, the fact that the majority of food bank users are market housing renters attests to the clear lack of affordable housing in BC. The cost of living in BC is one of the highest in Canada, which means that families on even median incomes must depend on charities to feed themselves. That so many individuals use food banks despite current or recent employment speaks to the need to update wage structures and income assistance.

Many of the reasons why British Columbians live in poverty have to do with the outdated policies in place. Food banks have always been a band-aid solution to the larger problem of poverty in BC. On the surface, it may look as if those who are hungry have options but free food from the food bank alone does not relieve food insecurity. It is a concern that as long as people are fed, action to address the root causes of poverty will be delayed. While food banks are necessary to feed people today, long-term solutions must be found to end poverty. Our governments need to be held accountable for taking such little action in terms of reducing hunger and poverty. British Columbians have the power to make this possible.

To achieve food security, it is best to view it as a continuum. This continuum illustrates how communities can transition toward long-term solutions while still filling short-term needs.

### Stage 1
**Short-term Relief (efficiency)**
Short-term relief includes emergency/charitable food programs such as food banks and soup kitchens that primarily address immediate hunger.

### Stage 2
**Capacity-building (transitional)**
Capacity-building food programs, such as community kitchens and community gardens, have the potential to empower participants through education and training, and help raise awareness of food issues.

### Stage 3
**Redesign (systemic)**
Redesign of the food system, through food policy councils, implementation of food policies, social enterprises, and social advocacy to address poverty, deals with the shortcomings of both the short-term relief and capacity-building programs and is aimed at improving the economic, ecological and social sustainability of the food system.
Best practices for reducing hunger and poverty

POVERTY REDUCTION STRATEGIES

While British Columbia is still without a poverty reduction strategy in place, other provinces have made excellent headway in their own efforts. Ontario introduced a Poverty Reduction Act in 2009, which pledged to invest in education and early learning, foster positive local initiatives, and review income assistance programs. To date, Ontario has reduced their child poverty rate from 15.2% to 14.6%. Quebec and Newfoundland & Labrador have been exemplary in terms of their strategies. In 5 years, the number of individuals and families using income assistance in Quebec dropped nearly 3%, from 12% to 9.4%. Their government invested in training and supporting access to employment, improved disposable income for low-income earners, increased access to social housing, and have implemented a Child Assistance and Work Program and a new five-year plan (2010 – 2015). Newfoundland & Labrador once surpassed BC as the province with the highest poverty rate in Canada. After using community consultation to establish their strategy in 2006, poverty dropped from 12% to 7% by 2009. This was in part due to the fact that their government indexed welfare rates in accordance with inflation, something the provincial government in BC has yet to do. The BC Poverty Reduction Coalition suggests that BC has much to learn from strategies such as the one in place in Newfoundland.

LIVING WAGE POLICY

The City of New Westminster became the first municipality in BC to introduce a Living Wage policy in April of 2010. The public showed overwhelming support for the initiative through their votes: city councillors in the November 2011 elections who backed the policy saw a substantial increase in their popularity.

LOCAL FOOD INITIATIVES

The root cause of hunger is not a lack of food, but a lack of access to available food, whether that is due to purchasing power, food prices, or other factors. Growing food locally and regionally alleviates some of these issues with accessibility.

BC has embraced the local food movement already. Many cities and municipalities are creating policies and councils to speak to food security issues. Metro Vancouver, for example, has already developed a Regional Food System Strategy. The Kamloops Food Policy Council (KFPC), established in 1995, was one of the first councils of its kind in Canada. In 2006, the KFPC published their Food Action Plan, which detailed their initiatives for a food secure community. Goals and actions included:

- amending bylaws in higher density, urban areas to allow for food production;
- promoting opportunities for Aboriginal people to maintain connections to land, traditions, communities, and identities;
- establishing an alternative currency for food purchases to ensure dollars stay in the community;
- acknowledging that local food can boost economic development; and
- increasing public awareness and education not only about food security but also on food-skills.

“A ‘living wage’ is meant to reflect the actual income required for a two-earner, two-child household to live above the poverty line. ... The living wage policy passed unanimously by New Westminster council last year will see workers paid at least $16.74 per hour. ... Esquimalt passed a similar policy, and the municipalities of Cowichan, Williams Lake, and Cranbrook are considering it.”
Most recently, the KFPC has been working on an Urban Agriculture Plan to encourage community gardening (with a goal of 4 to 5 spaces for every 1000 residents) and edible landscaping.

Schools are now seeing the need to implement programs that start children on a lifelong path of healthy eating by connecting them with their food early in life. A number of programs in BC work towards this goal, such as the Farm to School Salad Bar program run by the Public Health Association of BC. The Farm to School Salad Bar program objectives include increasing student knowledge about local food systems and nutrition, enhancing student skills in the food sector, and strengthening partnerships and the local economy. 19

Recommendations

Ensuring that communities are food secure is more than addressing the immediate need to feed our hungry citizens. The larger issues leading to food insecurity demonstrate a need for system change; no single solution will solve this problem.

The following are recommendations that may begin to alleviate some of the barriers to accessing food:

Establish a provincial poverty reduction strategy

A common misconception is that a poverty reduction strategy will cost more than the good it will do. The reality is that such legislation will save billions of dollars per year. As previously stated, creating a strategy would cost about $4 billion, whereas maintaining the status quo costs taxpayers $8 billion or more through higher public health care costs, increased policing and crime costs, lost productivity, and foregone economic activity. 40 Other provinces have already demonstrated that a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy can be truly effective. The issues at hand, unique to British Columbia and otherwise, must be acknowledged and the provincial government must work with other levels of government to make the lives of impoverished British Columbians better.

Build affordable housing

Land and real estate are at a premium in BC. Space for housing is becoming increasingly limited due to restrictions caused by topographical elements such as water and mountains. The demand for housing, especially single family homes, and the lack of land create a strong seller’s market, putting an exorbitant price tag on most available housing options whether buying or renting. No individual or family should have to make a choice between housing and food.

Affordable housing, which includes both social and market housing, must be included in community planning initiatives. Social housing developments need to take into consideration the needs of tenants, including food access, preparation, and storage. Social housing designed to meet the needs of tenants may help empower impoverished individuals and families to elevate themselves out of their situation.

Update income assistance to reflect the cost of living

As mentioned, many people suffering from food insecurity receive income assistance from the BC Ministry of Social Development. These income assistance amounts have increased very little since 2001. The costs of housing, food, and other expenses have increased greatly, yet those on assistance are expected to survive with what little allowance they receive. This is unrealistic. Like affordable housing, government services such as income assistance should provide the help needed to propel a person out of poverty in a dignified manner, not extend the constant struggle to balance priorities. An adequate amount of income assistance to cover basic expenses would help achieve this goal.
Enact a living wage policy

Food insecurity also strikes those who are employed. Even with the minimum wage in BC rising, there remains a gap between this and the estimated living wage in BC, which ranges from $14.16 per hour (Cranbrook) to $18.81 (Metro Vancouver). A living wage would cover the bare bones living expenses, including food, clothing, shelter, medical services/other health care, transportation, and child care (if necessary). A living wage benefits employers by reducing employee turnover, improving job quality and efficiency, and lowering absenteeism. More importantly, quality of life improves for employees. Individuals earning a living wage are able to make better food choices, can more actively contribute to the community, and are not forced to choose one basic need over another.

Work toward sustainable food systems that no longer require food banks

Working toward change in our food systems will be a long process requiring collaborative efforts from food producers, consumers, and governments of all levels (municipal, provincial, federal, and First Nations). This would require a shift in consumer attitude, policies, and community planning, making it a fairly complicated but necessary recommendation.

One way that the province could work toward food security is by streamlining and localizing the food supply chain as much as possible. Research has shown that “growing, producing, and processing more local, healthy, safe food can contribute to a more food secure province by reducing BC’s dependence on imported food and improving access to healthy foods in those communities and neighbourhoods in which it may be limited.” By doing so, it is possible to prevent the immense loss of resources and edible food that occurs right now – one-third of food that is produced in North America is wasted. The cost of such waste is expected by producers and is factored into the cost to the consumer, raising the price of food.

A change in the food system may save consumers money eventually but it is also about connecting consumers with what they eat, being less intrusive on the environment, and boosting the local economy. In fact, BC’s agricultural sector generates more than $22 billion in sales from only 3% of our province’s land base. This can only increase with more suitable land used for food production. To facilitate the transition in the food systems, farmers and consumers can work together, establishing an adequate number of farmers markets, co-operatives, community gardens, and food share programs. Local food should be made more readily available through the three most dominant sectors: retail, restaurant/industry, and institutions (schools, hospitals, etc). Educational and interactive food programs in schools are important to start children on the path to healthy eating through local food.

A more productive, efficient food supply chain combined with other policy changes such as an increase in wages and income assistance could mean a possible end for emergency food aid. These recommendations must occur in conjunction to ensure individuals and families access their food in a dignified manner and through their own means.

Many Canadians seem to be concerned that reducing poverty means more spending on people living in poverty, leaving others worse off. The growing body of research and experience, however, tells a very different story. It shows that investing to reduce poverty improves wellbeing for everyone.

John Rook, chairperson of the National Council of Welfare, in the Council’s 2011 Report The Dollars and Sense of Solving Poverty
How can you help?

Fighting poverty and social exclusion is a collective responsibility.  

Individuals, communities, and all levels of government need to be involved to make this happen for BC. It may seem daunting but, as an individual who is concerned that people in BC do not have enough to eat, there are ways you can help.

Some suggestions to get you started include:

- Log onto the BC Poverty Reduction Coalition website at [http://bcpovertyreduction.ca](http://bcpovertyreduction.ca). This site is a wealth of information on
  - the cost of poverty in BC (watch the videos at [http://bcpovertyreduction.ca/category/video](http://bcpovertyreduction.ca/category/video) to find out more)
  - how to take action (email the Premier and add your voice to the call to the Government of British Columbia to reduce poverty and homelessness in our province at [http://bcpovertyreduction.ca/take-action-2](http://bcpovertyreduction.ca/take-action-2)).

- Contact your local MLA (find out who represents your area at [www.leg.bc.ca/mla/index.htm](http://www.leg.bc.ca/mla/index.htm)) and enlist his or her help.

- Support the Living Wage for Families campaign in BC (find out more at [http://livingwagefamilies.ca](http://livingwagefamilies.ca)) Suggest to your local government officials that your community support this initiative. Find out how your company can benefit from this campaign.

- Volunteer your time and skills at an organization that supports poverty reduction at your local and regional level. Raise the Rates is a good place to learn more ([wwwraisetheratesorg/home2html](http://wwwraisetheratesorg/home2html)).

- Volunteer at and support your local food bank knowing that we must help in the short-term, while working to find long-term solutions that may eliminate the need for food banks.

- Check out the BC Food Security Gateway at [www.bcfoodsecuritygateway.ca](http://www.bcfoodsecuritygateway.ca). The Gateway will inform and link you to projects, initiatives, and organizations in BC so that you can contribute to building a healthy BC.

- Help to build a strong market for local food by demanding it at restaurants, grocery stores, and other institutions (get started at [www.getlocalbc.org](http://www.getlocalbc.org)).

- Help the next generation learn about healthy eating and transitioning to local, sustainable food systems by suggesting a Farm to School program be implemented in the curriculum of your child’s school or one in your neighbourhood. Find out more at [www.phabc.org/modules.php?name=Farmtoschool](http://www.phabc.org/modules.php?name=Farmtoschool).

- Get involved in your local food policy council or start one. Check out the councils in your area for how to do so. Look to the Kamloops Food Policy Council for exceptional ideas that could be implemented at [http://kamloopsfoodpolicycouncil.com](http://kamloopsfoodpolicycouncil.com).


- Engage in conversations with family, friends and neighbours about food security initiatives and possible solutions.

- Share this report with family, friends, co-workers, neighbours, and others.
References


13. ibid


17. ibid


ibid


ibid


