

Access and Affordability

Saskatchewan Food Banks Explore the Cost of Healthy Eating Executive Summary and Observations



Executive Summary

What is the purpose of this report?

The purpose of the food security research project was to achieve a better understanding of food insecurity within a local and provincial context. The Regina Food Bank serves food insecure clients on a daily basis, and an increase in demand over the past year posed the question, “Why are so many people requiring assistance at our food bank?” Using data obtained from the Regina Food Bank, the research sought to identify segments of the population who are accessing the food bank in greater numbers, and to determine what sources of income are available to them. Case scenarios were utilized to quantify the income these individuals and families had access to each month. In turn, these resources were compared to their average expenditures, including rents, and the cost of a healthy food basket, as determined by the 2009 Saskatchewan Food Costing Report. These case scenarios assisted the researcher in determining the financial barriers low income families regularly face in order to access healthy, nutritious food.

Additionally, the Steering Committee focused on conducting a literature review which would allow access to existing reports, journals, data, and statistics on food security/insecurity from a number of jurisdictions across Canada. A comprehensive literature review created a better understanding of what food security is, by identifying who is most vulnerable to food insecurity. It also outlined the various health costs associated with food insecurity, and confirmed the close relationship between food insecurity and poverty.

Why is food security important?

Having access to affordable nutritious food is an essential part of a healthy lifestyle, and an adequate family income is the key element in ensuring that individuals are able to obtain appropriate food to meet their dietary needs. In reality, when families are experiencing financial difficulty, they often must choose to use money from their food budget to cover other expenses such as rent, utilities, medications and other critical household needs.

Though food insecurity can affect all Canadians, certain segments of the population are more vulnerable than others. Social assistance recipients, lone parent households, off reserve aboriginal families, and those who do not own their own home experience food insecurity at higher rates (5). Throughout Canada, low income households clearly experience the highest rates of food insecurity. In Saskatchewan, those who require the services of a food bank are clearly represented in these categories.

The impact of food insecurity on an individual’s physical and mental health can be profound. Studies have shown that individuals in low-income households face a higher risk of chronic health conditions such as diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, and obesity (19, 20). They also suffer from a higher rate of mental health problems such as anxiety, stress, and depression (18). Particularly concerning is the impact of food insecurity to children in our community. Early childhood development is a critical stage in a person’s life, and improper nutrition and food insecurity can interfere with the growth and development of a child and lead to poor health outcomes that can continue into their adult lives (18).

Food Insecurity in Saskatchewan

It is important to recognize that food insecurity does exist in Saskatchewan, and that there are families and individuals across the province that do not have enough money to purchase healthy food. In order to better understand food insecurity within a local context, this report has used data from the Regina Food Bank, the 2009 Saskatchewan Food Costing Report, the Ministry of Social Services and INAC (Indian and Northern Affairs) to determine whether low-income families in Saskatchewan have sufficient financial resources to meet their basic daily nutritional needs.

Highlights from our Report

- Since 2002, food costs in Saskatchewan have increased by 22.2% and shelter costs have increased by 38.6% (10)
- The monthly cost of a nutritious food basket for a family of four in Saskatchewan in 2009 was \$887.75 (23)
- From January 2009 to January 2010 the Regina Food Bank has seen a 15% increase in clients requiring food bank services.
- 45% of clients who rely on the Regina Food Bank are children
- 63% of food bank clients in Saskatchewan identify themselves as Aboriginal
- 70% of Regina Food Bank clients list social assistance as their primary source of income
- A single man or woman receiving social assistance through the Saskatchewan Assistance Program (SAP) would spend approximately 97% of their monthly income on rent, leaving 3% to cover food, transportation, and other monthly expenses
- A single man or woman working full-time at a minimum wage job would spend approximately 73% of their monthly income on rent and food costs alone
- A single mother with a child receiving the Saskatchewan Assistance Program would spend 78% of her monthly income on rent and food
- A family of four receiving income through the Saskatchewan Assistance Program would spend approximately 83% of their monthly income on rent and food

Where do we go from here

Recognizing the gap between the financial resources available to low-income households and the cost of providing nutritious food is an important first step. However, food insecurity is a complex issue that requires comprehensive strategies at each level of the food security continuum. Collaboration between individuals, communities, non government organizations and governments is essential to help Saskatchewan move toward becoming a food secure province.

As this report has demonstrated, an adequate family income is a key component of food security. However, it is important to recognize that having financial access to healthy food is only one aspect of food security. Comprehensive strategies are needed in the short, medium, and long-term to deal with all aspects of food security, including access, utilization, and availability.

Our research suggests that a major stress on individual and family incomes results from the ever increasing housing costs, combined with low vacancy rates. This puts pressure on the amount of income available or designated for the purchase of nutritious foods. It would be beneficial to redevelop a separate food allowance category, as there has not been a specific one within income support programs for over 20 years.

Strategies to help create food security in Saskatchewan should include short-term relief, capacity/skill building, and system change. Currently, emergency assistance provided by organizations like the Regina Food Bank is a critical element in providing short-term relief to the hungry. Food Banks throughout Saskatchewan play an important role in the food security continuum. They assist a great number of individuals and families at risk in our communities. Each stage of the food security continuum is also required to address the underlying causes of food insecurity.

All individuals in Saskatchewan are affected by food insecurity, either directly or indirectly. Fortunately, each one of us can play a positive role in working to create a more food secure province.

Observations

The case scenarios provide us with a clearer picture as to why so many people are forced to turn to the food bank for support when their monthly income is not sufficient to cover their basic living expenses. While these scenarios looked at monthly shelter and food costs, they did not account for other normal household expenses such as child care, transportation, utilities, clothing, household furnishings, recreation and medication. If these other normal costs were taken into account, it can be expected that most families would have monthly expenses that far exceed their monthly income. The following is a list of observations from the case scenarios:

- Clearly a gap exists between the income available to food bank clients and the costs associated with ensuring healthy eating. All of the case scenarios saw families spending well beyond 30% of their monthly income on shelter, and more than 15% on food.
- Federal and Provincial government supplements such as the Canada Child Tax Benefit, and the National Child Benefit provide households with much needed additional income. However, even with these additional supplements, families are often unable to meet their basic needs.
- The income assistance programs (SAP and TEA) offered by the Provincial government provide many Food Bank clients with a general allowance and a shelter allowance.
- Clawbacks on earned income mean that a family's assistance rate is reduced when they gain employment. This often creates a real and undesirable barrier to individuals seeking employment.
- The Family Shelter Supplement, the Saskatchewan Employment Supplement and ASETS (Active Support for Education and Training Strategy-INAC) are valuable initiatives that can provide assistance to low-income families. However, the number of people accessing these supplements is surprisingly low. More research needs to be done to determine why people are not accessing these potentially beneficial employment supplements, as they encourage employment.

Overall, these case scenarios help us better understand the financial barriers that low-income families face in accessing healthy food. Given what we know about the importance of healthy eating in the physical growth, mental well-being and development of individuals, it is imperative that all sectors collaborate to make Saskatchewan a food secure province .

Where do we go from here?

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What can individuals and communities do?

- Share this report with other community-based organizations in Regina and throughout Saskatchewan.
- Examine *The Cost of Healthy Eating in Saskatchewan 2009: Impact on Food Security* report and share it with friends and neighbours.
- Support community-based organizations that are working towards increasing food security in the province and across Canada. This may include groups such as faith communities, the Regina Food Bank, Regina Education and Action on Child Hunger and the Public Health Nutritionists of Saskatchewan Working Group.
- Advocate for better nutrition policies and work to ensure that healthy food choices are available in schools, workplaces, and public recreation facilities.
- Volunteer for, or donate to the community based organization of your choice.

What can organizations do?

- Continue to advocate for vulnerable individuals and families across the province.
- Encourage neighbours to become engaged in projects such as collective kitchens, community gardens and other positive community-based programs.
- Encourage individuals in local communities to initiate their own projects that address food security concerns.
- Encourage individuals to volunteer for the organization of their choice.
- Encourage improved collaboration between agencies and organizations. Important social issues such as food security, affordable housing, and child care are all interrelated. Many organizations advocating for these issues have similar aims, and a unified voice can help influence system change.

What can Federal and Provincial governments do?

Federal, provincial, and municipal governments can all play an important role in helping reduce food insecurity.

Governments should consider:

- Creation of a comprehensive provincial Anti-Poverty Strategy that includes food security as a major component.
- An increased emphasis on food security to positively impact ever increasing health costs.
- Inclusion of a defined food allowance for social assistance recipients which adequately reflects the cost of healthy eating within the province.
- Removal or reduction of earned income clawbacks for social assistance recipients to encourage employment.
- An increase to the Canada Child Tax Benefit to help provide low-income families with a more adequate monthly income.
- An expansion of the Family Shelter Supplement Assets program, so that more people have access to these supports.

Investigations into the income and resources available to Food Bank recipients pointed to the suitability of the provincial Saskatchewan Employment Supplement program (SES), and the federal Active Support for Education and Training Strategy program (ASETS) as the most viable way of providing additional support to employables. The research indicated that more should be done to familiarize clientele with these two very beneficial support programs, as the number of families accessing both was surprisingly small. Part of what may need to be done rests in the realm of training. Increased staff familiarity with the benefits of these programs may ensure that they are more likely to refer our employable clientele to them.

For more information on how to get involved with your community Food Bank, please contact the location nearest you.

Battlefords District Food &
Resource Centre
PO Box 657
(1171-101st St)
North Battleford SK S9A 2Y9
Ph: (306) 937-5505
Fax: (306) 937-7063

Biggar & District Food for Thought
Inc.
PO Box 42
Biggar SK S0K 0M0
Ph: (306) 948-2283
Fax: (306) 948-2760

Carlyle & District Food Bank
PO Box 37
Arcola SK S0C 0G0
Ph: (306) 455-2553
Fax: (306) 455-2785

Meadow Lake Community Food
Bank
PO Box 1166
Meadow Lake SK S9X 1Y8
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Fax: (306) 236-2137

Humboldt Food Bank
PO Box 2406
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Humboldt SK S0K 2A0
Ph: (306) 231-9790

Kindersley Food Bank
PO Box 1642
Kindersley SK S0L 1S0
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Fax: (306) 463-3742

Lac La Ronge Food Bank
PO Box 785
Air Ronge SK S0J 3G0
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Fax: (306) 425-1216

Lanigan & District Food Bank Inc
PO Box 307
Lanigan SK S0K 2M0
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Fax: (306) 365-3244

Melfort & Area Food Bank
PO Box 3688
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Melfort SK S0E 1A0
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Melville Food Bank
PO Box 2342
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Melville SK S0A 2P0
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Moose Jaw & District Food Bank
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Outlook Food Bank
PO Box 1467
Outlook SK S0L 2N0
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Prince Albert Share A Meal Food
Bank Inc.
64 11 St E
Prince Albert SK S6V 0Z9
Ph: (306) 763-5040
Fax: (306) 763-8161

Regina & District Food Bank Inc.
445 Winnipeg Street
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Rosetown & District Food Bank
PO Box 2172
Rosetown SK S0L 2V0
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Fax: (306) 882-4251

Saskatoon Food Bank & Resource
Centre
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Saskatoon SK S7M 1N2
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Unity Food Bank
PO Box 789
Unity SK S0K 4L0
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Fax (306) 228 - 2281

Watrous Food Bank
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Watrous SK S0K 4T0
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Wynyard & District Food Bank
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