

Food insecurity in Nunavut: Are we going from bad to worse?

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Access to adequate food is a major challenge for communities across the Inuit Nunangat.¹ In Nunavut, food insecurity has been identified to be at crisis level, with 46.8% of households categorized as food insecure in the most recent Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS) in 2014.² Such a high rate of food insecurity documented in a high-income nation, with all its related health and societal implications, is concerning.¹ As such, food security has become a political and public priority in Nunavut, and in 2011 the federal government launched the Nutrition North Canada program to improve the affordability and accessibility of perishable, nutritious store foods. Nutrition North Canada has been controversial since its inception, and now a linked research paper by Fafard St-Germain and colleagues³ provides evidence that rates of food insecurity in the territory have actually increased by 13.2 percentage points since the program's launch.

The authors of the linked study use a novel design to examine CCHS data from before (2007–2010) and after (2014–2016) the implementation of Nutrition North Canada. Finding that reported food insecurity has increased in remote communities in Nunavut, they question the effectiveness of Nutrition North Canada. However, this policy forms part of a whole suite of actions by government, civil society and communities targeted at strengthening food systems.⁴ The degree of contribution of Nutrition North Canada to increased food insecurity needs further investigation.

Policy evaluation is notoriously difficult. Standard food surveys such as the one used in the CCHS can be misleading in the absence of qualitative research to consider how Inuit access both store foods and traditional foods. Standardized surveys have been critiqued for lacking cultural appropriateness, and they provide only a snapshot on the state of food systems at a particular point in time.^{5,6} The authors of the linked research acknowledge some of these limitations, but in the absence of a more comprehensive suite of evaluation methods, the work paints only half a picture.

Furthermore, while Fafard St-Germain and colleagues controlled for several socioeconomic and sociodemographic characteristics in their study, several other important confounders were not considered. This raises the question of the counterfactual: even

KEY POINTS

- Tackling food insecurity is a political and public priority in Nunavut.
- The effectiveness of the current food policy is questioned by increasing rates of food insecurity in the territory.
- Complex interactions between availability of and access to store and traditional foods will determine policy effectiveness, in ways not yet fully understood.
- Cross-cutting systemic action rooted in Inuit values and knowledge must be central to policies aimed at strengthening food systems.

without Nutrition North Canada, would rates of food insecurity have increased? Other lines of evidence suggest they might have.

First, social changes rooted in the impacts of colonialism and its legacy continue to affect Inuit food systems in diverse ways. Reduced participation in harvesting among younger generations and diminished intergenerational transfer of traditional ecological knowledge have been identified as potential factors exacerbating food insecurity by reducing access to traditional foods.¹ Coinciding with Nutrition North Canada, there has also been a growing commercialization of traditional foods (e.g., “pop-up” markets and sales on Facebook), a controversial development that some see as disrupting food-sharing networks and increasing food insecurity among poorer households by increasing reliance on store foods.⁷

Second, demographic change across Nunavut, and in the 10 communities that form the population of the linked research, may be contributing to food insecurity. The population of Nunavut increased by 8.7% from 2011 to 2016, and 20.8% from 2006 to 2016. Although demographic factors including household type and the presence of a child younger than 18 years are controlled for in the linked study, household size and crowding are not. In the Inuit Health Survey (2007–2008) the prevalence of household food insecurity in Nunavut was shown to be associated with household crowding,⁸ and research has documented that population growth can dilute traditional food-sharing networks, with

implications for food security.⁹ An analysis of census data available from Statistics Canada would seem to indicate that the number of crowded households increased by 4% between 2006 and 2016.¹⁰

Third, over the last decade, harvest restrictions have been implemented in Nunavut for various wildlife species. Caribou, in particular, is fundamental to Inuit food systems, ranking as the top dietary source of protein in Nunavut.¹¹ Substantial population declines for several caribou herds have been documented, with total allowable harvest designations applied to herds on Southampton Island since 2012, and for the 3 Baffin Island herds since 2015.¹¹ Harvest restrictions and declining wildlife abundance have the potential to exacerbate food insecurity by increasing reliance on store foods, reducing income-earning opportunities, disrupting sharing networks, and limiting opportunities for youth to acquire harvesting knowledge and skills.

Lastly, Nunavut's climate is changing rapidly, affecting access to and availability of traditional foods. Although we found few changes in access to trails used for hunting and fishing when applying Ford and colleagues¹² data set to the communities included in the linked research for the period 2006–2016, declining caribou populations and increasing stress on other species consumed by Inuit have been linked to climate change.¹¹

Examining these alternative explanations of rising food insecurity underlines the need for qualitative ethnographies of the pathways through which policies affect Inuit food systems. Such work needs to consider both store and traditional foods, and the complex interlinkages between the two.

Despite our more cautious interpretation of the result of the linked research, we share Fafard St-Germain and colleagues' concerns over the effectiveness of Nutrition North Canada in improving food access in Nunavut. The absence of price caps, program accountability and transparency, and limited responsiveness to community needs, have been noted to undermine the ability of the program to meet its goals, along with a neglect of traditional foods and their cultural significance in Nutrition North Canada's support mechanisms.¹³ Even if these concerns were to be addressed, however, food subsidization is just one of many actions needed to tackle the complex problem of food insecurity. Policy changes are required to strengthen harvester support programs (e.g., funding for hunter and trapper organizations), invest in infrastructure and skills development, and support community wellness programs, and must accom-

pany broader efforts focused on poverty reduction, community development, and reconciliation and healing. Recognizing the need for such cross-cutting systemic action, the Nunavut Food Security Strategy (2014, www.nunavutfoodsecurity.ca) proposes a collective vision and common agenda for impact rooted in Inuit values and knowledge. If we are to avoid going “from bad to worse,” such a vision needs to underpin all our efforts.

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