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Food insecurity in Nunavut increased after Nutrition North Canada introduced

Almost half of households affected

Food insecurity, meaning inadequate or insecure access to food because of a lack of money, has worsened in Nunavut communities since the introduction of the federal government's Nutrition North Canada program in 2011, found research published in *CMAJ (Canadian Medical Association Journal)*.

Even before the introduction of Nutrition North Canada, food insecurity was a widespread problem in Nunavut communities, with some of the highest rates of food insecurity in Canada.

"Our study raises serious concerns about the federal government's continued focus on food subsidy initiatives to improve food access in the North," says lead author Andrée-Anne Fafard St-Germain, Department of Nutritional Sciences, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario.

Nutrition North Canada is a retail subsidy focused mainly on nutritious, perishable foods such as fruit and vegetables, milk and other food items. It is provided to food suppliers in southern Canada and retailers in the North, who are expected to pass on lower costs to shoppers.

"Food insecurity is an experience of material deprivation strongly influenced by household income, but high food prices are also considered an important contributor in Canada's North," says Fafard St-Germain, a doctoral candidate who works with Valerie Tarasuk, a University of Toronto professor and senior author on the paper.

The researchers used an 18-item Household Food Security Survey that asks about whether households worry about running out of food, eat less or have gone an entire day without eating because of a lack of money. In 2010, just before the program was launched, food insecurity in Nunavut communities affected 33% of households, and by 2014, when the program was fully implemented, food insecurity had increased to 46%. Even after accounting for changes in several household characteristics over time, the researchers found that food insecurity worsened.

"Food insecurity is an important determinant of health, and effective policy actions are urgently needed to address the high rates of food insecurity in Canada's North," says Fafard St-Germain.

Other factors, such as a reduction in traditional food harvesting, a population increase and harvest restrictions for wildlife species, may have contributed to the increase in food insecurity, suggest authors in a related commentary.

“Despite our more cautious interpretation of the result of the linked research, we share [the authors’] concerns over the effectiveness of Nutrition North Canada in improving food access in Nunavut,” writes Dr. James Ford, Priestley International Centre for Climate, University of Leeds, Leeds, Yorkshire, United Kingdom, with coauthors. “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.”

“Food insecurity in Nunavut following the introduction of Nutrition North Canada” is published May 21, 2019.

MEDIA NOTE: Please use the following public links after the embargo lift:

Research: <http://www.cmaj.ca/lookup/doi/10.1503/cmaj.181617>

Commentary: <http://www.cmaj.ca/lookup/doi/10.1503/cmaj.190497>

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