



NEWS LOCAL

One in 10 in Sudbury does not have enough to eat

By [Mary Katherine Keown](#), The Sudbury Star

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John Lappa/Sudbury Star Volunteer Patrick Noel sorts food at the Sudbury Food Bank in this file photo.

Imagine having to choose between paying the rent and buying food, or between medicines and food? Imagine worrying, perpetually, about where your next meal will come from, or the shame of relying on a food bank. Imagine grocery shopping when all you can afford is the no-name brand of mac-and-cheese. For millions of Canadians, many of whom are working, this is reality.

"The simple definition of (food insecurity) is people struggling to put food on the table because they lack money," Valerie Tarasuk, a professor of nutritional sciences at the University of Toronto, says. "That is a very big problem in Canada and the public face of that problem is food banks."

Tarasuk was presenting her research, much of which centres on food insecurity, at the Basic Income Guarantee (BIG) conference, hosted by the Northern Policy Institute.

"When we look more closely, the problem is actually way bigger," she says. "Typically, it's one in four or one in five food insecure people who will show up at a food bank."

That means nearly 75-80 per cent of people who are chronically hungry are not accessing food banks. But even those who do frequent the charities will likely go hungry, Tarasuk says.

"Most people who run food banks are going to tell you that they do their best, but at the end of the day, they're rationing their donations, they just don't have enough to go around," she says. "They're maybe giving three or four days worth of food. If the person's of high need, they try to give them a little more, but nobody is ever trying to fully meet the needs of a household."

As incomes fall, food scarcity grows. According to Tarasuk's research, two thirds of people who are food insecure are in the workforce - either as low-wage full-time employees or part-time workers.

"If they are working full-time, it could be one worker trying to feed three or four mouths," Tarasuk says. "If they've got children in the household, their chances of being food insecure are actually higher than if there were no children. The fact that's true means this whole child benefit system that we have, which is celebrated as a great Canadian success story, is not. The fact that having children is to be at elevated risk for food insecurity suggests that we aren't taking care of the needs of families and children well enough."

Not surprisingly, those on social assistance - a single person only receives about \$650 per month on Ontario Works - are also at higher risk for food insecurity.

"By our estimate, more than four million Canadians are living in households that are struggling with food insecurity," Tarasuk says. "In Ontario, more than one in six children under the age of 18 are living in a house that has some level of food insecurity. More than one in six. That's crazy."

There is also the problem of racialized poverty. Tarasuk says off-reserve Aboriginal people and black people in Ontario face much higher levels of food insecurity than do other communities, while immigrants tend to be more food secure than others. (She did not study the situation on reserves.)

In Sudbury, 11.5 per cent of all households identify as food insecure in some way. That means that on a regular basis, more than one in 10 people in this city do not have enough to eat. Tarasuk says that if researchers had examined households with children, those on Ontario Works or those comprised of Indigenous people, the number would be much higher.

"We have no level below which we will not let people fall," Tarasuk says. "The people who are using a soup kitchen, if they're on Ontario Works, that may be a best-case scenario. But they may not even be."

One of the problems with food insecurity is that it has major consequences for the health care system, which costs all taxpayers more money. A food secure individual will cost the system about \$1,600 per year, while a severely food insecure person will cost the system more than \$3,900 annually. Moderately insecure individuals also cost the health care system more than they would otherwise.

"We can't afford to carry on with this story," Tarasuk says. "It's costing us money. But also, these people are in terrible condition. Their ability to be productive members of society, their ability to be good parents, their ability to look forward in the future is horribly diminished by these circumstances. It's lost potential and it's wasted health care money."

Tarasuk said he believes a basic income that would meet needs for food, shelter, education and medicines would be \$10,000 to \$20,000, depending on factors such as where one lives and with whom one lives.

"If you think about the potential for a basic income, we're going to take those people who are really marginalized and very, very vulnerable, we're going to give them an income floor. We're going to say, 'we're going to give you this

much money at least, it's not going to make you rich, but we're going to make sure you can have a decent roof over your head and you can put food on the table'," she says. "Some of them will go back to school or start businesses of their own. There could be women, who, rather than exhausting themselves traipsing around doing little hours here and there, for a while the family will be able to afford for them to stay home and look after the kids."

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