



Services de santé du

**TIMISKAMING**  
Health Unit

**Putting Food on the Table:  
Stories about Food Insecurity  
in Timiskaming 2016**

November 2016

## **Acknowledgements**

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This report was prepared by Caroline McBride, Public Health Dietitian, August 2016.

<sup>E</sup> – Interpret with caution due to small sample size

## What is food insecurity and why does it matter?

Food insecurity is the inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints. Food insecurity is a serious problem in Canada that negatively impacts physical, mental, and social health and increases health care system costs.<sup>1</sup>

In a country such as Canada, it can be difficult to see that people in our communities are experiencing food insecurity and worrying about putting food on the table. This might cause you to wonder: is food insecurity an important issue in Timiskaming?

Yes. In Timiskaming, 7.3%<sup>E</sup> of residents report experiencing food insecurity and 16.6% of the population lives with low income.<sup>2</sup>

Living with low income can be a different experience for different people and may happen for a variety of reasons including having limited savings and access to funds, few work hours and unexpected job loss.<sup>4</sup> Living with a low income increases the risk of experiencing food insecurity. Research has shown that when people have limited incomes, they will often choose to use money from their food budget to pay for other basic necessities including rent, hydro, child care, medical expenses such as vision and dental, and other costs of living.<sup>3,4</sup> When the cost of food in Timiskaming is compared with other basic necessities, it is very clear that individuals and families earning minimum wage or receiving social assistance do not have enough money to buy nutritious food and other basic needs.<sup>5</sup>

*“I’ve definitely had to go without before. Stressing about food, where your next meal is going to be, only eating so much now and leaving the rest for later tonight is not fun.”*  
---A young Timiskaming woman

To begin to understand the experience of food insecurity in Timiskaming, it is important to ensure that we hear from the people who have, or are currently experiencing food insecurity. To learn more about these experiences, from December 2015 to March 2016, Timiskaming Health Unit interviewed 18 individuals who have experienced food insecurity and representatives from 9 social service organizations that provide support to these individuals, to explore the experience of food insecurity in Timiskaming. This report is a summary of those interviews.

## What is it like to live with low income?

One of the themes that arose through this project is that when individuals are living with low income, it’s not enough to cover the cost of basic needs. One individual shared their experience of the stigma related to receiving social assistance: “[There is a misconception that people abuse] ‘the system’ by spending money on things like drugs, cigarettes and alcohol. Even without spending money on [these types of] things, it is still hard to make ends meet.” This was echoed by another individual who shared: “Government transfers are not enough. Clients are choosing the roof, or the hydro or the food.”

*Everyone assumes that everything is easy, that you get it handed to you on a silver platter. It is so far from that. You really have to work for everything you want.*  
---A young Timiskaming woman

Living with low income is not a choice. One service provider

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shared their observations about the challenges their clients face. *“We look out and ahead all the time, almost everyone we deal with [is] living in today. They are dealing with all the emergencies that happen today. It’s really hard to move forward or plan anything. And that doesn’t change until you are secure in everything, I think. Once you’re food secure, house secure and all your basic needs are taken care of, your whole world view changes.*

*At times when I have had to go without I always feel worn out and get depressed. I slept all day to avoid feeling hungry and trying to pass time until the end of the month.*

*---A single Timiskaming man*

Several service providers shared that their clients feel as if they will be stigmatized if they disclose that they are struggling to make ends meet and afford food. As a result, their clients may not share if they are struggling. Social stigma can make it challenging to offer support and refer to other services that may be of benefit to the client.

### **How are people experiencing food insecurity supported?**

The importance of having social and personal support networks was another central theme throughout the interviews. Individuals with lived experience talked about the importance of personal support from parents, family, friends and acquaintances. Some of the individuals interviewed shared that when they were going without, food contributions from friends or family helped them until they were able to get their next cheque or make a plan for accessing food.

Some of those interviewed were also aware of social supports that are available, but shared that accessing services can be challenging. One individual commented that after planning transportation from one community to the next, an entire day would be used to get to one appointment. Another individual shared that they have to choose between education courses and going to the food bank, because the services are offered at the same time.

The experience of having fewer opportunities to access programs and services in smaller communities was of concern for each of the individuals and was associated with living in Northern Ontario. One individual shared that they feel there is a need for creative solutions to solve the problem in smaller communities. Another individual shared that they feel *“in big cities it’s easier because you have more resources than you do in a small town.”*

*I come here and they feed me too. Today they made a big pot of soup and I can take a huge container home because today my fridge is, like, bare empty.*

*---A young Timiskaming woman*

One other factor that was mentioned noted that not everyone will use social services. One service provider shared: *“even if we talk about the food bank, clients just don’t want to go there, they just don’t feel comfortable going there and sometimes they feel that they are not in need enough to go there.”* Even when clients do use a program or service, it was observed that *“one service is not enough to help”* demonstrating that a collaborative approach is needed to address the problem of food insecurity.

<sup>E</sup> – Interpret with caution due to small sample size

## How do people stretch their food budget?

Even with personal and social supports, having enough to eat is a lot of work for individuals experiencing food insecurity. This work, that may go unnoticed, requires extra planning and creative approaches to making food last longer.<sup>4</sup> All of the individuals interviewed shared that they use at least one coping strategy to stretch their food budget and make food last longer. In the most severe cases, individuals shared that they have gone without food. Below is a list of strategies the individuals with lived experience shared they have used to put food on the table.

Going without food	Eating smaller portion sizes, not by choice
Batch cooking	Stocking up on sale and non-perishable items
Joining community kitchens	Buying ½ price produce, cheaper cuts of meat
Taking classes to learn how to preserve food	Preparing cheaper recipes like stews
Volunteering at events where food is provided as compensation for time	Freezing leftovers from meals
Growing a garden	Only buying familiar food (e.g. food that the individual already knows how to prepare)
Canning and freezing food from the garden	

## How does transportation impact access to food?

Another notable theme that emerged from the interviews is the challenge of transportation. Almost every individual interviewed mentioned transportation as a concern. When individuals and families do not have access to a car, getting to and from the grocery store to buy food requires even more planning.<sup>4</sup> Many individuals felt that transportation has an impact on the ability to get to a grocery store and also the type of food purchased when shopping. The consequences of not having access to transportation were varied and included:

Not being able to purchase cheaper bulk items because they are too big to carry	Purchasing only what can be carried in their arms
Purchasing canned and boxed foods that last longer because of long periods of time between grocery trips	Using the food budget to pay for a ride to the grocery store (e.g. taxis, friends, family)
Avoiding travel during the winter	Using public transportation, where available (e.g. city transit, Ontario Northland)
Hitchhiking to the grocery store	

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## What can you do about this problem?

Food insecurity is a problem in Timiskaming that should not be overlooked. One service provider shared that they *“think food security is a big issue [and] we don’t really realize that people are food insecure.”*

Food insecurity is a complex issue that requires innovative solutions. Ultimately, an income solution is needed to address this problem, but there are still things that you, as an individual, can do to ensure that everyone has equal opportunities to be food secure.<sup>6</sup> Here are some of the ways that you can help address food insecurity:

- Challenge your own assumptions about the experience of living with low income.
- Use your votes to support candidates at the municipal, provincial and federal level who support reducing poverty, increasing social assistance rates and protecting individuals against unstable employment; all factors that are strongly related to the experience of food insecurity.
- Ask your elected officials to advocate for a basic income guarantee, increased social assistance rates and basic minimum employment standards to protect against unstable employment.<sup>6</sup>
- Support programs that help people access food, such as community kitchens and Good Food Box programs. Acknowledge that these programs have positive social impacts but are not a solution to food insecurity.
- Promote and support organizations and campaigns that work to reduce poverty in our communities across the country.

If you have questions about how this project was completed, please contact the Timiskaming Health Unit at 1-866-747-4305.

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<sup>1</sup> PROOF Food Insecurity Policy Research. Monitoring food insecurity in Canada. 2016.

<sup>2</sup>Statistics Canada. 2013. Timiskaming Health Unit (health Region), Ontario and Ontario (table). Health Profile. 2011 Census. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 82-228-XWE. Ottawa. Released December 12, 2013. <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/monitoring-factsheet.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup>Statistics Canada. Canadian Community Health Survey 2009/10, 2011/12. Statistics Canada, Share Files, Ontario Ministry of Health and long-Term Care.

<sup>4</sup>Dietitians of Canada. Prevalence, severity and impact of household food insecurity: A serious public health issue. Background Paper. 2016.

<sup>5</sup>Timiskaming Health Unit. The cost of eating well in Timiskaming 2015. 2015.

<sup>6</sup>Ontario Society of Nutrition Professionals in Public Health Food Security Workgroup. Income-related policy recommendations to address food insecurity. 2015.

<sup>E</sup> – Interpret with caution due to small sample size