

Sustaining Food Security in Niagara

By Joanne Heritz

INTRODUCTION

Historically, religious orders and charities provided social assistance to Canadians in the form of health care, lodging, and food. The welfare state emerging in the post-war era increasingly shifted responsibility for health care to the government, culminating in universal health insurance in Canada in the 1960s. The federal government's responsibility for community housing shifted to the provinces in the 1980s, which Ontario then shifted to its municipalities in the 1990s.

However, food security remains the one social service, for the most part, still under the purview of charities. In Niagara, charities have a long history of providing food security but have never faced the challenges they are experiencing today. Once thought to provide temporary relief for a small group of residents falling on tough times, they now serve a growing number of food-insecure residents.

There is an alarming growth in the number of residents in Niagara who are relying on food banks and food programs and this trend does not show any signs of slowing down. Against the background of growing food insecurity in Niagara, and Canada more generally, this policy brief investigates Niagara's response to the increase in demand for food security. Its purpose is to outline the magnitude of the problem at a local level and initiatives that have been implemented thus far to help combat the problem. However, much more needs to be done and this policy brief should be seen as a catalyst to beginning that conversation at all levels of government.

First, this policy brief outlines the extent of the problem of food security at a national, provincial, and local level, followed by the methodology that frames the research questions. It then provides context that addresses the question of why there is an increasing reliance on food banks by more residents in Niagara. Next, is an analysis of the federal, provincial, and local response to food insecurity, including a review of initiatives in Niagara that might utilize the abundance of produce harvested in the region. The policy brief concludes with recommendations aimed to reduce food insecurity in Niagara.

Growing Our Community Beyond Hunger



Community Care West Niagara

Terms and Definitions

Food insecurity is the inability to afford adequate food to meet a household's basic needs.

"Food security programs are considered the 'canary in the coal mine' ... The food banks are the point of entry for people in need—you cannot exist without food. Once you access a food security program, they can connect you with other supports and services that you need."

—Betty-Lou Souter, CEO Community Care St. Catharines & Thorold.

Food bank is the common term that refers to community food acquisition and distribution centres. The term itself may not be preferred by the organizations, because it falls short of adequately describing the varied services provided, such as housing help, counselling, supports, and seasonal programs such as back-to-school supplies, and holiday food and toy drives.

THE POLICY PROBLEM: Helping people meet their basic needs

Food insecurity is widespread, but not evenly spread in terms of demographics. In 2021, almost one in six households in Canada were food insecure, amounting to 5.8 million people including almost 1.4 million children, or one in five (Tarasuk et al. 2022, 28). By 2022, the number of households experiencing food insecurity rose to 6.9 million, including almost 1.8 million children, or one in four (Li et al. 2023, 14).

There are a disproportionate number of Indigenous Peoples and Black people living in food-insecure households in Canada and that gap is growing. In 2022, Black people accounted for 39.2 per cent of all food-insecure households in Canada—up from 22.1 per cent the previous year—and Indigenous Peoples accounted for 33.4 per cent, up from 30.7 per cent (Li et al. 2023, 28).

Current forecasts indicate that food insecurity is going to get worse (PROOF 2024). Canada's Food Price Report (CFPR) tracks increases in annual food expenditures for a family of four. In 2022, the food expenditure was tracked at \$15,222.80. In 2023, it was tracked slightly lower at \$14,595.41. The prediction for 2024 is that the family food expenditure will be \$16,297.20, a seven-per-cent increase over two years.

The increase in annual food expenditures does not totally reflect the sticker shock at the grocery store due to consumer behaviour. For example, consumers are choosing to focus more on promotions, and use coupons and loyalty programs more often (CFPR 2024).

Due to rising food prices, 20 per cent of Canadians reported they would be likely to get food from food banks or other community organizations and 47 per cent said that they've purchased cheaper alternatives to lower their food costs (CFPR 2022, 23).

In Ontario, between 2021 and 2022, some 587,000 people accessed a food bank, an increase of 15 per cent over the last three years. While it was thought that food-bank visits were related to the pandemic, food-bank usage continues to increase. From January to September 2022, Ontarians accessing food banks increased 24 per cent over the previous year and one in three of them were first-time visitors (Feed Ontario 2022, 5). Between April 2022 and March 2023, the number of Ontarians relying on food banks increased 38 per cent (Feed Ontario 2023, 7).

In Niagara, almost 75,000 of Niagara's 484,840 residents, or just over 15 per cent, are experiencing food insecurity (United Way, 2023a).

Living with Food Insecurity

The Niagara Food Security Network (NFSN 2024) published a report on the lived experiences of mostly women in Niagara who experience food insecurity, once they've spent their money paying rent and bills.

One participant reflected on living with constant worry and anxiety:

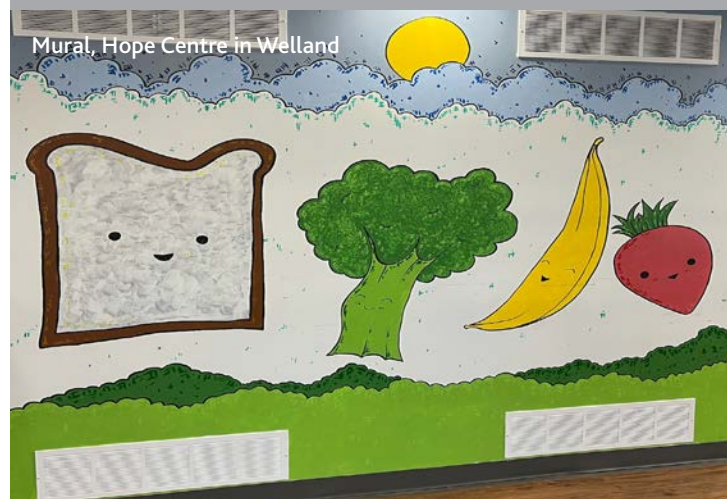
"I am filled with anxiety and sadness when I cannot afford to feed my daughter. I have bills that are large enough to not allow me to keep food in my house (White 2021, 9)."

Another participant shared:

"Unfortunately, almost everyone I know, and in my family, can't feed themselves even one meal a day. I personally spent all my extra money after my rent and bills and go to community kitchens for my meals. This causes me health problems not just due to inadequate nutrition but exacerbates my mental health issues (White 2021, 10)."

A third participant expressed frustration regarding feeding their children:

"The children are lucky to have a single sandwich, not meat, just jam. This is every day, all the time, if they have anything at all, some days they have nothing. This is painful for both the starving children and the embarrassed, guilt-ridden, stressed-out parents (White 2021, 12)."



METHODOLOGY

A qualitative descriptive approach was used to provide an environmental scan of food security in Niagara. Information was gathered through the summer and fall of 2023 from 24 interviews with representatives of food acquisition and distribution organizations that serve residents in all Niagara's 12 municipalities. Priority was placed on obtaining information from the distribution centres that serve each municipality in Niagara and that are part of Feed Niagara. Also interviewed were organizations whose mandate is to serve increasing vulnerable groups including children, asylum seekers, and students. Interviews took place at community food banks, community gardens, food processing facilities and were also conducted by telephone, or virtually.

The shorter time frame of the research did not allow for an exhaustive study of all the food distribution organizations in Niagara. However, the data collected from the prioritized sources indicate there is sufficient evidence to provide substantive answers to the research questions.

Data collected from the interviews addressed the following:

1. What is the nature and severity of food security in Niagara?
2. What are the mechanisms of supply and distribution of food resources in the region?
3. Are these supply and distribution mechanisms adequately meeting food-security needs in Niagara?
4. If food-security demands are outpacing supply and distribution, what are the factors causing the current gaps in service provision, and how could they be addressed?

FINDINGS

Why Are More People Relying on Food Banks?

Unaffordable housing, precarious employment, and inadequate social assistance are the primary contributors to food-bank use in Ontario. Across the province, 86 per cent of food-bank visitors are renters or tenants in social housing. Over 50 per cent of them report that their inability to pay for their housing is the primary reason for using food banks (Feed Ontario 2021, 10). For example, the cost of rent for a bachelor apartment in Niagara increased 20.8 per cent between 2018 and 2021 (Feed Ontario 2022, 17).

Some explanations for the rising cost of rent include the decreasing availability of affordable rental units (Heritz

2020; Heritz et al. 2022), rental units built after 2018 that are no longer protected by provincial rent controls (Ontario 2006), and the "financialization" of housing where landlords rely on rent increases as an investment asset (Crosby 2023, 69). The financialization of housing is associated with increasing housing costs that are de-linked from wage growth, which intensifies inequality (August 2022, 6).

More people are earning lower wages over time. In 1998, students working part-time occupied most minimum-wage positions. Today almost 50 per cent of minimum-wage workers are over 25 years old and one in three have a post-secondary education (Feed Ontario 2022, 12).

Inadequate social benefits in Ontario are responsible for the increase in food-bank visits according to Feed Ontario (2022, 15):

The insufficient support provided by Ontario Works (OW) and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) are longstanding drivers of food bank use in the province. This is exemplified in food bank data, which shows that almost 2 out of 3 people who access food banks are social assistance recipients, with 32.5 percent citing ODSP and 26 percent citing OW as their primary source of income.

A recent study of social assistance recipients in Ontario reported their income went to their rent and inadequately met their food needs (Collins et al. 2020).

Meanwhile, the cost of food is rising for everyone, including shelter providers who are also feeling its effects. The YWCA Niagara Region is the largest shelter provider for women and their families in Niagara. It provides meals for its shelters in St. Catharines and Niagara Falls, including its men's shelters, most of whom have children in their care. Altogether it provides over 100,000 meals per year. The YWCA responded to the 50-per-cent increase in its food costs (that rose to \$120,000 in 2022 from \$80,000 in 2020) by holding its first annual food drive in August 2022, raising \$4,000-worth of food in both 2022 and 2023.

The dramatic increase in people in need of food security is not always offset by donations. Food-bank directors have observed that people who once donated to food banks are now receiving assistance. For example, in Port Colborne, Port Cares had 2,933 residents registered in 2023 which was a 60-per-cent increase from 2022. The Port Colborne Lions annual food drive for non-perishable goods fell between 30- to 35-per-cent below its target of recent years, as did its monetary donations (Johnson 2023).

What Are We Doing About Food Insecurity?

No one level of government has constitutional responsibility for food security in Canada. However, various levels of government are responsible for policies that impact on how people provide for themselves and their daily needs, such as wages and housing. This section reports on policy development at the federal, provincial, and local level that impacts food security.

Federal Response to Food Insecurity

In the wake of food-cost inflation, the federal government implemented a one-time grocery rebate that was distributed through the GST program in July 2023. The rebate was aimed to compensate for the increase in the cost of food between 2022 and 2023 (Canada 2023a). The program has several critiques. While the rebate may be a welcome short-term solution for some, it does not come close to addressing additional food costs (Li & Talbot 2023). The grocery rebate was too small and too short-lived to impact food insecurity (PROOF 2023) and it falls short of providing a long-term solution to income inequality and increasing food insecurity (CFCC 2023). Some questioned the eligibility of the rebate, which was calculated based on filing a 2021 income tax return, and not based on how many children people have or where they live (Senoran 2023).

The federal government has been negotiating with the heads of Costco, Loblaws, Metro, Sobeys, and Walmart regarding their concentration of the grocery supply chain and how it impacts increasing food costs. In September 2023, the Minister of Finance introduced Bill C-56, the *Affordable Housing and Groceries Act* that would amend the *Competition Act* to give the Competition Bureau more power to investigate and act on price fixing or price gouging and to end anti-competitive mergers that raise the prices of goods (Canada 2023b).¹

COVID-19 Response

As we move away from the pandemic, the inequalities revealed by the economic response to COVID-19 still linger. The message that “we are all in this together” failed to convey that some people were harder hit by the pandemic than others. At the beginning of the pandemic there was a groundswell of support for previously undervalued members of the community like supermarket workers and personal support workers (PSW) who received some temporary pay bonuses.

¹ At the time of publication, the federal government had just announced a five-year, \$1-billion national school food program to supply meals to 400,000 children per year.

The federal government introduced the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) which paid \$2,000 conditional on \$5,000 of earned income in the previous year, which disqualified most people who relied on provincial income assistance or disability support (Forget & Owczar 2021, 10).

Provincial Response to Food Insecurity

Regulating minimum wages is a significant provincial responsibility that impacts on food insecurity. The minimum wage in Ontario increased on Oct. 1, 2023, to \$16.55 per hour from \$15.50 on Oct. 1, 2022. Despite the six-per-cent wage increase, the consensus among food security providers is that minimum wage fails to provide working people with the financial resources to look after their basic needs. Based on the actual cost of living in Niagara, a living wage of \$20.35 per hour for 2023 to 2024 is required to meet a resident’s basic expenses within their community. Niagara’s living wage is \$3.80 more per hour than minimum wage (Living Wage Niagara 2024) and \$13,037 more per year than what was offered through CERB.

COVID-19 Response

Meanwhile, Feed Niagara food banks reported that they received funding from the Ontario government during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, that acute funding has not continued despite the increasing numbers of people relying on food security.

Local Response: Feed Niagara

Feed Niagara is a collaborative of 10 Niagara food banks, who are also members of Feed Ontario, a network of 1,200 food banks that provide support and programming to more than half a million people annually across the province.

United Way Niagara Garden Hub



Table 1: Feed Niagara Increases in Food Bank Visits 2021–2023

Municipality	Organization	Increases in Food Bank Use
Lincoln	Community Care, West Niagara	755 people monthly in 2023 20 % increase from 2021 to 2023
Fort Erie	Salvation Army	200–300 people monthly in 2023 35% increase from 2022 to 2023
Grimsby*	GBF (Grimsby Benevolent Fund)	765 people in 2022, 515 in 2021 50% increase from 2021 to 2022
Niagara Falls**	Project Share	6,844 people in 2022, 11,670 people in 2023 65% increase from 2022 to 2023
NOTL ***	Newark Neighbours	64 people in 2021, 140 people in 2023 118% increase from 2021 to 2023
Pelham	Pelham Cares	1,586 visits 2022, 2,481 in 2023 56% increase from 2022 to 2023
Port Colborne & Wainfleet	Port Cares	1,762 people in 2022, 2,825 in 2023 60% increase from 2022 to 2023
St. Catharines & Thorold****	Community Care	57,679 visits in 2022, 104,000 visits in 2023 82% increase from 2022 to 2023
Welland	The Hope Centre	3,286 people in 2022, 4865 in 2023 48% increase from 2022 to 2023
West Lincoln	West Lincoln Community Care	3,770 people in 2022, 4582 in 2023 22% increase from 2022 to 2023

*(GBF 2021; 2022) **(Project Share 2021–2022; 2022–2023) *** (Werner 2024) **** (Barker 2024)

Affiliation to Feed Ontario provides Feed Niagara with food security resources and grants. Affiliation also involves adhering to strict food and safety standards (Feed Niagara 2024), such as forbidding the distribution of expired food as well as staff and volunteer training in compliance with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act.

Feed Niagara facilitates the coordination and distribution of food to 10 community food banks across Niagara. They have access to a central warehouse in St. David’s (Niagara-on-the-Lake) that has the capacity to accept and store significantly large donations, such as a truck load of produce, for example. Food is then distributed to the 10 local food banks based on their shelf space and need. This provides a welcome solution to food banks who may have declined large donations in the past, due to limited space.

Feed Niagara food banks now distribute more than non-perishable food. The nutritional needs of more people struggling with food insecurity require perishables including dairy, meat and produce. Food banks are increasingly installing walk-in refrigerators and freezers on their premises for perishable food.

Table 1 shows the alarming increases in the number of people and their visits to food banks in Niagara between 2021 and 2023. The data were obtained from annual

reports, interviews, and media reports. All 10 food banks had increases in visits, with Community Care West Niagara and West Lincoln Community Care at the lower end with approximately 20-per-cent increases and Fort Erie’s Salvation Army at 35 per cent.

Niagara-on-the-Lake had the highest increase, doubling the number of people served. The remaining six food banks had increases of approximately 50 per cent or more with Community Care St. Catharines & Thorold almost doubling the number of visits from 57,679 to 104,000.

The number of people on fixed incomes, such as ODSP and OW, who are accessing food banks increased 50 per cent at Community Care in St. Catharines in the last year (Barker 2023a). Niagara’s food banks indicated that there are people working three or four jobs who had not relied on food banks before. Some Feed Niagara food banks adjusted to later hours of operation to accommodate people who work during the day. The dramatic increases in visits from people who work, along with those who are not able to work, in the last year alone, clearly demonstrate that there is a growing number of residents who are not receiving adequate wages or benefits to meet their everyday needs.

In St. Catharines, Thorold and Welland, one in 10 residents, and in Niagara Falls, Port Colborne and Wainfleet, one in eight residents, visited a food bank in 2023 (Barker 2024).

Getting back to the canary-in-the-coalmine metaphor, food banks in Niagara recognize that food insecurity brings people through their doors, but once there, they may be in desperate need of additional support. Each of Feed Niagara's 10 food banks have various programs and services that they provide or are in the process of providing that may include: clothing; rent and utility payment assistance; eviction prevention; counselling services; and ID Clinics that help with applications for new and replacement government identification.

Meal Programs

Regular meal programs are all run by charities and the number of visitors has increased significantly since the pandemic. Some of the meal programs in Niagara include three community meal programs in St. Catharines, a breakfast program in Niagara Falls and a lunch program in Welland.

- The Community Breakfast Program started at St. George's Church in St. Catharines in 1996 and continues to serve a hot meal 365 days a year. In 2022, St. George's volunteers served an average of 80 breakfasts daily. That increased to between 90 and 100 breakfasts daily by Fall 2023. The program operates solely on food and cash donations, which cost \$73,275 to run in 2023, and is expected to increase to \$100,000 in 2024.
- The Ozanam Centre serves lunch on weekdays and Start Me Up Niagara takes over on weekends. Like St. George's, Ozanam relies on local organizations and volunteers for donations and food preparation. Prior to the pandemic, Ozanam served lunch to about 50 people a day and it now serves about 140 people a day. In 2022, Ozanam served 2,194 meals per month and in 2023 that number increased to 2,450 meals per month.
- Since 1996, Out of the Cold in St. Catharines has provided hot suppers from the beginning of November to the end of March. Food is distributed from a different downtown church each night of the week. Over the winter of 2022/2023, 19,000 meals were served, which was a significant increase from 13,000 meals served in winter 2021/2022 (Barker 2023b).
- The Niagara Falls breakfast program at Bridge Church started in 2020 and has seen the average number of people increase from approximately 40 to 70 between 2022 and 2023 (Forsyth 2023).
- The Hope Centre in Welland provides a take-out lunch program to visitors (registration is not required) on weekdays, except holidays. An average of 450 healthy meals a week were served in 2022 (Hope Centre 2024).

Meeting Nutritional Needs in Niagara

There are various initiatives in Niagara that are linking the region's abundant agricultural output to the nutritional needs of its residents. Niagara Food Security Network (NFSN), formed in 2020, has four strategies that include: accessing; growing, harvesting, and securing; logistics, distribution and storage; and preparing and eating. Addressing these strategies includes, for example, developing seed libraries, supporting community gardens, strengthening food literacy, and improving food security throughout Niagara (United Way 2023b).

United Way Niagara Garden Hub supports two community gardens, one at the Niagara College's Niagara-on-the-Lake campus and one in Lincoln (Vineland), that harvested 9,000 pounds (4,082 kilograms) of produce in 2023. The produce is distributed to 14 locations across Niagara including Bethlehem Housing, Feeding Fort Erie and Niagara Regional Housing communities (Howarth 2022).

Niagara Christian Gleaners (NCG) (2024) in West Lincoln is a volunteer organization in operation since 2018. It intercepts produce from transportation partners that serve 80 big growers. Based on the premise that Canadians waste one-third of purchased food in part due to expiration and best-before dates, NCG gives growers the option of donating their surplus produce to various locations around the world, including Haiti, Kenya, Namibia, and most recently war-torn Ukraine.

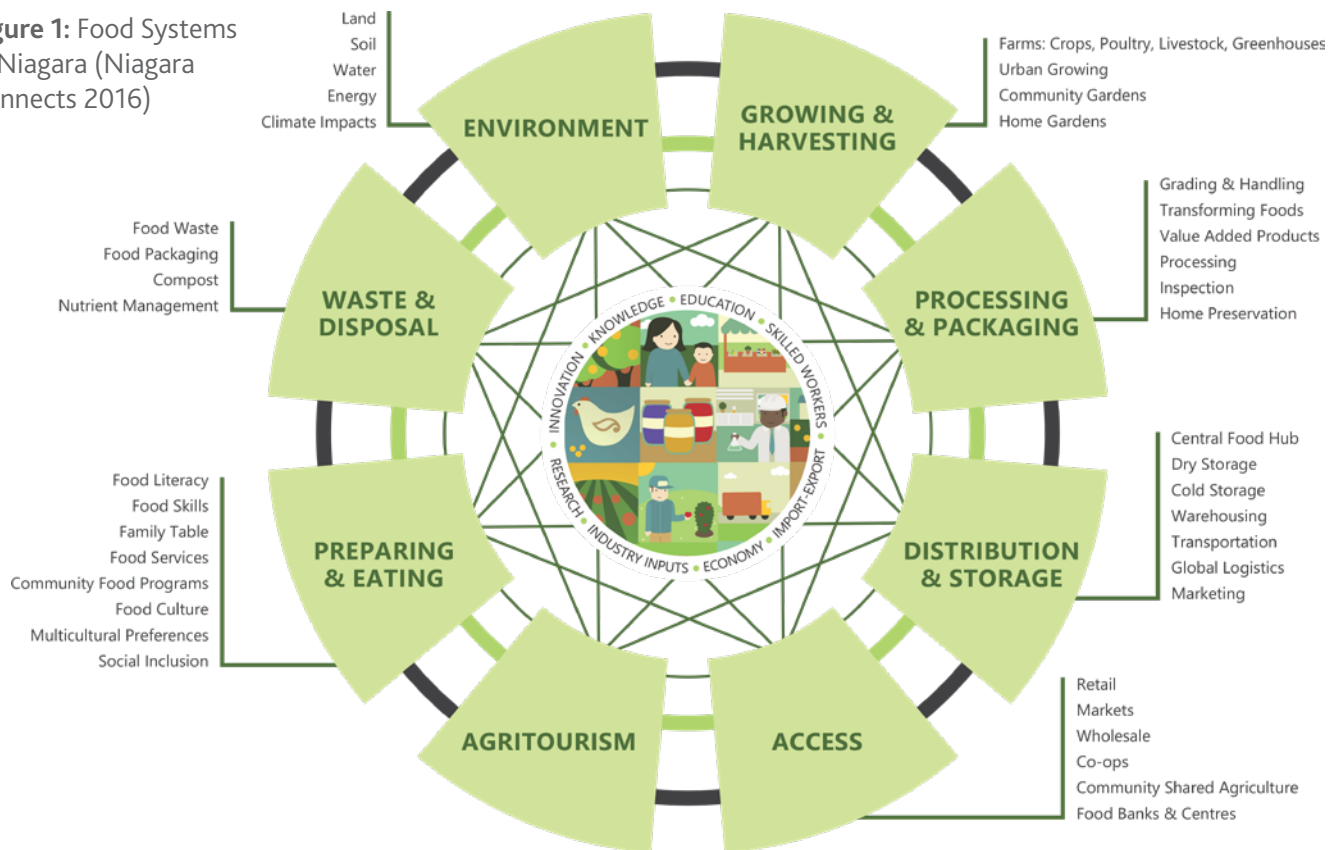
Volunteers peel/prepare the produce for the dehydration machines in the Smithville facility, then fill four-cup bags with the dried product that provides 27 servings. After labelling with the production date and a caution that the donated produce is "Not For Sale," 20 bags are packed in each box for shipping, bringing a total of 540 servings of produce per box, or 30,000 servings for each palette. Distribution is based on need.

Figure 1 is a map of the Food Systems in Niagara representing the interconnections of growing, distributing, eating and recycling of food. It was developed by people working in all aspects of food in Niagara with the intent to describe "how a healthy, secure, sustainable food landscape contributes to Niagara's social, political and economic vitality" (Niagara Connects 2016).

Targeted Food Initiatives

In response to increasing food insecurity, initiatives have been created to target specific groups in Niagara with the goal of addressing their unique vulnerabilities and needs.

Figure 1: Food Systems in Niagara (Niagara Connects 2016)



Children

Food insecurity has effects that are particularly felt by children. Food insecurity is more prevalent in households with children (White 2021). Over 40 per cent of people relying on Feed Niagara-based food banks are children (feedniagara.ca). Besides having poorer diets (Hutchinson & Tarasuk 2021), children living in food-insecure households are more likely to also experience hyperactivity, inattention, and have lower academic achievement (Faught et al. 2017).

Children exposed to severe food insecurity are more likely to develop serious mental health problems. (McIntyre et al. 2017).

The health disadvantages are evident almost from birth, as food-insecure mothers are unable to follow recommendations for optimal infant nutrition (Orr et al. 2018). Children and adolescents living in food-insecure households in Ontario require health-care services for mental or substance-use disorders at a 74-per-cent prevalence rate compared to those living in food-secure households (Anderson et al. 2023).

Niagara is not immune from childhood food insecurity. Food banks in Niagara are serving an increasing number of children. Thirty-five per cent of the individuals served at Project Share in Niagara Falls are 19 years old or younger

(Project Share 2023). Against this background, organizations in Niagara are responding to severe food insecurity with programs targeting children’s food-access needs.

- Food4Kids Niagara, an affiliate of Food4Kids Ontario, provides transportable food packs for 500 severely food-insecure elementary students in the District School Board of Niagara and the Niagara Catholic District School Board, and has 1,000 students on its wait list. Its 120 volunteers meet once a week to assemble the food packs that are then distributed to 30 schools across Niagara and delivered to the students who take the food home in their backpacks. The program continues during the summer months when volunteers deliver food packs and gift cards to children’s homes.
- Niagara Nutrition Partners provides nutrition programs in elementary and secondary schools across Niagara. Currently, more than 24,000 students are served daily by over 1,000 volunteers through more than 200 school programs (NNP 2023).
- Since 2015, Community Crew has provided healthy lunches to children in need in 30 schools across Niagara located in neighbourhoods with the highest percentages of poverty (Nicolau 2024).

Asylum Seekers & Newcomers

Just short of 3,000 asylum seekers were transferred to Niagara between June 2022 and March 2023 by Immigration Refugees and Immigration Canada. As a world tourist destination, Niagara Falls has more than 16,000 hotel rooms that provide a quick fix to accommodating asylum seekers. Though the federal government now makes provision for their food security while staying in hotels, their dependence on food banks indicates a shortfall in services. Project Share, Niagara Falls' food bank, observed that out of the 150 people it served one day in early 2023, 60 identified as asylum seekers (Hayes 2023).

Asylum seekers and newcomers face several challenges when they arrive in Canada, all which impact on their ability to provide for their nutritional needs. The challenges they face may include the lack of language proficiency, unemployment, and access to transportation (Wood et al. 2021).

Also, they are not receiving adequate benefits as they transition to employment. Refugees applying for work permits take an average of two months to get jobs, depending on their language proficiency. During this time, they are only eligible for OW which, for many, barely covers the cost of rent. Families with children are not eligible for the Canada Child Benefit until their refugee claims are processed, which can take over a year.

Interviews with organizations that assist newcomers revealed that their nutritional needs are different than most Canadians. Newcomers are more accustomed to cooking with perishable foods, such as fresh fruit and vegetables, rice, and legumes. They are often unaccustomed to cooking canned and processed foods and may not feed formula or baby food to their infants.

Post-Secondary Students

In 2020, there were 640,000 international post-secondary students studying in Canada, contributing \$22 billion annually to the economy (Hanbazaza et al. 2021, 34). International students face tuition costs that are up to five times higher compared to tuition for Canadian students, and international tuition increased eight per cent in the last year (CFS 2024).

A study of international post-secondary students revealed several issues related to food security, including a lack of time for food preparation, limited family support, limited food preparation skills, a lack of knowledge about support services, and challenges in sourcing affordable culturally appropriate food. Their food insecurity negatively affected their studies, reducing class and exam attendance that

ultimately impacted on their physical and mental well-being (Hanbazaza et al. 2021, 33).

Brock University Students' Union (BUSU) introduced the Food First Program in 2016 to address student food and health insecurities and has since been joined by the Graduate Students Association (GSA) and Brock University. During the 2022/2023 school year, over \$47,000 in grocery gift cards were distributed to students (BUSU 2023), a significant increase compared to \$16,000 distributed in the previous school year (Nicolaou 2023). Other free-food options available to students on campus during the semester include Grab-and-Go Breakfasts (granola bars and fruit) available three mornings a week; and the Free Hot Breakfast provided monthly.

A Fresh Produce Market was created in association with the United Way's Links for Greener Learning in Fall 2023. Students are asked to pay \$5, but there is a strong emphasis on pay-what-you-can, if at all, to fill a basket with produce. A dietitian from Brock's Food Services provides meal planning cards that assist with preparing the produce. The September 2023 market expected 30 to 40 students and 80 attended. That number grew to 100 students for the October market.

In response to the disproportionate number of Indigenous Peoples facing food insecurity, Brock's CUPE 4207 Academic Contract Workers recently donated a fridge and made a commitment to supply food monthly during the fall and winter terms to the Hadiya'dagénhahs First Nations, Métis and Inuit Student Centre.

The Niagara College Student Administrative Council's Nourishing Minds Programs includes two food security programs. The Rise and Shine Breakfast Program is available three days a week and served 70,160 breakfasts between 2015 and 2020. The Grocery Gift Card Program has distributed \$192,190 in gift cards between 2017 and 2021 (NCSAC 2024).

The Niagara College's School of Culinary Arts is also contributing to addressing food insecurity in the region through the program called Feeding the Community. Students have the opportunity to volunteer their time creating meals that are delivered to charities including Gillian's Place and the Boys and Girls Club each week. The program uses unused groceries and leftover produce to make meals which helps reduce waste and provide opportunities for students to develop their skills (Edwards 2023).

Since 2022, Niagara College has provided the land for 40 raised-bed plots in the community garden at its Niagara-On-The-Lake campus.

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS: What Can Be Done?

We can see that there has been an alarming increase in the number of people, including children, who are relying on food banks in Niagara and this trend shows no signs of slowing down. There does not appear to be any change to the drivers of food insecurity; wages are not increasing in response to inflation, and neither are ODSP and OW. The housing currently built falls short of accommodating people who are in the lower deciles of income (Heritz et al. 2022).

We are living in a region where people who work full time or receive benefits such as ODSP and OW do not have the financial resources to meet their basic needs. The inability to access affordable housing impacts significantly on the ability of Niagara residents to provide food security for themselves and their children.

Food insecurity is related to stagnant wages and assistance programs that are not meeting the rising costs of living in Niagara. There is an increasing number of advocates, including directors of food banks, calling for a basic income in Canada. A basic income is an income-tested benefit: “as income from other sources increases, the size of the benefit is gradually reduced so that it disappears altogether for middle- and upper-income earners” (Forget 2023, 87). While there are skeptics about the cost of providing a basic income (Green et al. 2023), there is a tendency to overlook the increasing number of people who are working full time or on social assistance who are unable to provide for their lodging and food needs.

Niagara harvests an abundance of fruits and vegetables. There are several initiatives taking place in Niagara to bring awareness of the value of nutritious produce to grow and distribute to those most in need through community gardens, pop-up produce markets, nutrition programs and seed banks.

Access to basic nutrition, however, is a persistent and increasing problem that disproportionately affects Indigenous Peoples, Black people, children, asylum seekers, and students. There is no indication that the number of residents accessing food banks will diminish in the short term and the trajectories indicate that numbers may continue to rise. Increasing food supply may help in the short term to assist people relying on food banks. However, systemic changes are required to assist people in Niagara to move out of poverty and they are included in the recommendations that follow.

Federal Government

- Provide a Basic Income for low-income households.
- Prevent the financialization of housing. Regulate Real Estate Investment Trusts (REIT) that are reducing the availability of affordable housing which drives up housing costs and contributes to food insecurity.
- Expediate processing claims for federal supports for asylum seekers in Canada including processing Settlement Claims and Canada Child Benefit claims.

Provincial Government

- Raise minimum wage, disability benefits, and social assistance rates to align with a living wage. As an example, the minimum wage in Ontario is currently \$16.55 an hour, but it has been calculated that a full-time employed Niagara resident needs an hourly wage of \$20.35 to meet their basic needs in 2024.
- Financially assist food banks. Reinstate the COVID-19 funding to food banks now that they are facing an unprecedented increase in the number of households facing food insecurity.

Niagara Region

- Increase the supply of community housing in response to the growing number of residents on the wait list.
- All municipalities must support Niagara Region in securing federal and provincial funding for affordable housing.
- Investigate the long-term impacts of severe food insecurity facing the growing number of children in Niagara.



Brock University Students'
Union Grab-and-Go
Breakfast table

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Members of the research team included author Joanne Heritz, PhD, and research assistant Rebecca Van Massenhoven, MA. This report draws on research supported by the Council for Research in the Social Sciences (CRISS) at Brock University.

The Niagara Community Observatory (NCO) at Brock University is a public-policy think-tank working in partnership with the Niagara community to foster, produce, and disseminate research on current and emerging local issues. More information on the NCO office, and an electronic copy of this report, can be found on its website www.brocku.ca/nco

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