

A REPORT BY: THE DUFFERIN LIVED
EXPERIENCE COLLECTIVE

FOOD INSECURITY IN FARM COUNTRY

HOUSING, FOOD ACCESS, AND POVERTY IN DUFFERIN COUNTY, ON



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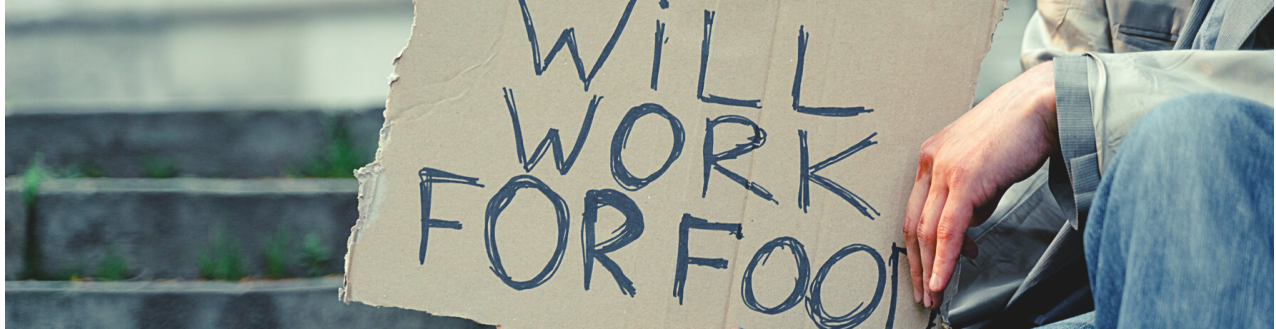
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BEYOND THE CITY
HOUSING IN RURAL URBAN SPACES

www.dufferinchange.ca

FOOD INSECURITY IN FARM COUNTRY



About This Project

Dufferin County is a unique place where rural and urban life collide. To put this another way, Dufferin County is located beyond the city in a rural-urban space. Because of Dufferin County's unique situatedness, the people who live there face specific housing challenges that are often neglected in government housing policies due to an urban-centric national conversation about housing and homelessness in Canada.

Beyond the City: Housing in a Rural-Urban Space is a community-engaged project of the Dufferin Anti-Poverty Collective that responds to an urgent need for knowledge exchange concerning homelessness in Ontario's rapidly growing rural-urban spaces. By highlighting local knowledge and experience from Dufferin County, ON, this project shares strategies and resources for addressing homelessness in communities located at the rural-urban nexus.

The project reports summarize key issues facing people living with economic poverty in Dufferin. These reports are based on findings from surveys with 81 people with lived experience of homelessness in the county between 2017 to 2019, four follow-up focus groups with 23 participants, and one community feedback session. The report has been reviewed by a community advisory committee.

Toronto Metropolitan

This project is supported by University, the Community-Engaged Scholarship Institute (CESI) at the University of Guelph, and received funding from the Social Sciences and Research Council of Canada. More information about this project can be found at www.dufferinchange.ca

We dedicate this project to M and all those who have been harmed or killed by economic poverty.

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Introduction and Scope

Food insecurity here is defined as “the inability to acquire or consume an adequate diet quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways, or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so.”¹ Food insecurity is determined by four components: stability (“will food be available tomorrow, next week, next month?”), access (“can I get to food easily?”), utilization (“will this food contribute to my health and well-being?”), and availability (“does food exist near me?”).² When one of these components is not met, it is considered food insecurity.

In Canada, food insecurity is strongly associated with economic insecurity.³ The most recent Canadian Community Health Survey (2017-2018) demonstrates that 13.3% of households in Ontario are experiencing food insecurity.⁴ A recent systematic review suggests that rates of food insecurity may have increased during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵ The data presented in this report predates the pandemic but captures some of the specific landscape of food insecurity in Dufferin County, raising the need for unique policy interventions to improve food security in rural-urban spaces.

This report examines how people with lived experience of homelessness and near homelessness experience food insecurity in Dufferin County. Before delving into the specific experiences, we have provided a quick snapshot of food-related experiences among survey respondents and focus groups participants.

Food insecurity was a key theme in surveys and focus groups with people experiencing homelessness and near homelessness. When survey respondents were asked an open-ended question about whether they had any unmet needs in addition to housing, food was the most common answer (see Figure 1). Unsurprisingly, 89% of respondents had accessed a food program (food bank, soup kitchen, or similar) in the past six months, reporting an average of 22 visits over that time frame.

1 Tarasuk V, Mitchell A. (2020) Household food insecurity in Canada, 2017-18. Toronto: Research to identify policy options to reduce food insecurity (PROOF). Retrieved from <https://proof.utoronto.ca/>

2 United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization (2008). “Food Security Concepts and Frameworks: An Introduction to the Basic Concepts of Food Security”, EC-FAO Food Security Programme. <https://www.fao.org/3/al936e/al936e.pdf>

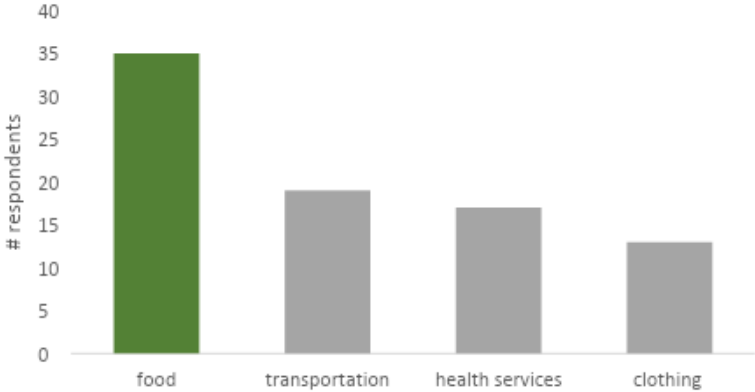
3 Government of Canada. (n.d.). Household food insecurity in Canada: Overview, <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/food-nutrition/food-nutrition-surveillance/health-nutrition-surveys/canadian-community-health-survey-cchs/household-food-insecurity-canada-overview.html>

4 Tarasuk V, Mitchell A. (2020) Household food insecurity in Canada, 2017-18. Toronto: Research to identify policy options to reduce food insecurity (PROOF). Retrieved from <https://proof.utoronto.ca/>

5 Idzerda L, Gariépy G, Corrin T, Tarasuk V, McIntyre L, Neil-Sztramko S, Dobbins M, Snelling S, Jaramillo Garcia A. What is known about the prevalence of household food insecurity in Canada during the COVID-19 pandemic: a systematic review. *Health Promot Chronic Dis Prev Can.* 2022;42(5). <https://doi.org/10.24095/hpcdp.42.5.01>

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Figure 1: Non-Housing Related Needs Among Survey Respondents (n=80)

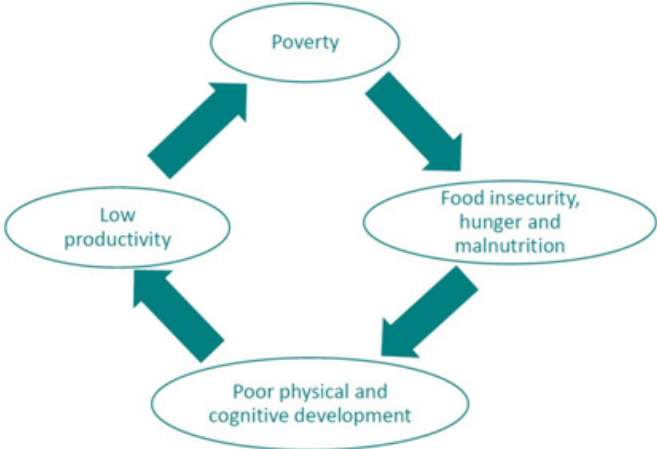


Conversations about food security also featured prominently in the focus groups with respondents commenting on difficulty accessing nutritious food, difficulty accessing a place to cook, and a lack of money to purchase their own food. The next section of the report expands on these issues of food insecurity in Dufferin County.

Food Insecurity in Dufferin County

The following diagram from the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization (see Figure 2) shows the perpetuating cycle of “extended periods of poverty, lack of assets and inadequate access to productive or financial resources.”⁶ The most common risk factors to food insecurity from the focus group data were food affordability, food quality or suitability, and food access.

Figure 2: The relationship between food insecurity and poverty



6 United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization (2008). “Food Security Concepts and Frameworks: An Introduction to the Basic Concepts of Food Security”, EC-FAO Food Security Programme. <https://www.fao.org/3/al936e/al936e.pdf>

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A Lack of Affordability

Affordability of food for healthy living is a key component of access to food and food stability. Focus group participants found affording sufficient food to be difficult, let alone affording food that they found “healthy” and/or appropriate for dietary preferences or needs. Participants sometimes described choosing between paying rent and purchasing food. One individual described this scenario as follows: “I did pay my rent, and now I have nothing left for food. And food is so expensive”. Several participants who relied on social assistance as their primary income source recounted running out of funds for food, particularly towards the end of the month:

“

The food selection might be slightly better at the beginning of the month because you just got your [social assistance] check and you can navigate what’s been on sale...but then, as the month goes on, and that food is gone, then selection worsens, and there’s just, like, less nutritional food to choose from. And you’re back to more of the canned soup.

At least [at the beginning of the month] you could pick three things out of your fridge. Which one do you want today, do you want a burger, do you want a soup—where, by the end of the month it comes down to—this is all I can eat tonight.

”

The inability of people experiencing homelessness or near homelessness to afford food also contributed to experiences of social exclusion. As one participant explained,

“

I know this is about homelessness, but it all contributes to that feeling of never being able to participate in your own life. Whether it’s housing, or getting places, or being able to afford to go out for lunch once in a while, it’s very difficult.

”

Indeed, food affordability was a major barrier to food security for people experiencing homelessness or near homelessness, limiting access to healthy food, as well as the ability participate in food-related social activities.



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Food Quality and Suitability

Food utilization is the ability to obtain food that contributes to an individual's health and wellbeing. Food utilization is closely related to the availability of food choice and the overall quality of food available. As focus group participants noted, not all food is equal. Being unable to afford food limited many people experiencing homelessness and near homelessness to the options available at local food banks and/or free meal programs. Food banks become a substitute for grocery stores, but they are often limited to a single visit per month. Participants generally preferred those food banks where they had more choice over the selection of products. Explained one participant,

“

It's a little more dignity and being able to choose what you like as opposed to getting beans or whatever—something you maybe don't like.

”

Sometimes the mismatch between individual dietary needs and food options available at the foodbank led to feelings of self-blame among focus group participants. For example, one participant said, “maybe I'm too picky but I don't really eat bread and stuff.” Other participants described how a limited food budget led to negative health impacts, stating, “[due to] not having the money, I lost a lot of weight and [that] has health implications because I was not getting enough red meat—protein.”



Caregivers for young children faced unique challenges, particularly if those children had dietary needs that took up a large portion of the family food budget. Sometimes this led to parents skipping meals so their child could eat and/or creating what participants described as a “concoction” for themselves out of whatever was leftover after their children's needs had been met.

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Food Access: Transportation

Access to food includes the proximity of grocery stores and the ability to access groceries which are not within walking distance. Those living in rural areas have the greatest difficulty accessing food if they do not own a vehicle or do not have access to a ride to shop for groceries or visit a local food bank. One participant explained,

“

If [you] don't have the transportation available to them, some people don't have the resources to call a friend and say, "can you take me to the food bank," so they stay there and starve...it'll put more strain on the system, at the end of the day, by not having that.

”

Participants described how personal support networks were necessary in the absence of public transportation options for participants to access grocery stores and food banks. Other participants described how their rural or small-town location, combined with limited transportation, led to increased expenses and reduced quality of food. One participant explained,

“

In this town⁷ we only have a small supermarket, and it's extremely expensive, and all the food is rotten... if I'm going to be spending that much on produce I want fresh.

”

Another participant described limitations in selection and quality of the small grocery store near their home, adding, "There's a large grocery store here too but that's hard. I don't live on that side of town." Transportation barriers in rural and small-town areas contribute to food insecurity by restricting the available food choices to community members, particularly those with limited access to a private vehicle.

⁷ In this discussion we've removed specific grocery store names and town names to protect participant confidentiality.

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Food Surveillance

Food programs, such as food banks, play an important role in addressing the immediate effects of food insecurity in the county. However, these programs often require clients to provide personal financial information and histories of food bank usage to be assessed for and potentially gain access to the service. Focus group participants reported this was the case in at least some of the food programs in Dufferin County. One participant, referencing food banks specifically, shared their experience, saying,

“ Well, you have to show need. So, you bring in your statement of income. They want to see your banking—and they want to see your lease, and what bills your paying—very intrusive. ”

Across the focus groups, participants generally agreed that the surveillance of food program usage in Dufferin County makes accessing food difficult. **It was noted that:**

“ ...going to the food bank is really difficult. It's difficult. I would never go if didn't absolutely have to. So the fact that people are going, when they don't need to, is sort of foreign to my brain, but it's difficult. There's not a lot of dignity in it, I'll say that. If someone's coming to the food bank, they're there because they need food. I don't get the criteria—it's like here, you got to fit in here. If I'm there I need. ”

This passage raises the importance of dignity in relation to food security. When people seeking food are asked to prove their need, it can imply that they may not deserve the assistance that an organization is providing. As the quote above noted, food bank users only access services from food banks because they need them. When a person's worthiness comes into question, stigma associated with the cycle of poverty is deepened.

When participants were asked what happens if they do not provide this information to food banks, the consensus was that people are turned away. Considering that food is one of life's necessities, this finding was concerning, and points out a significant flaw in the systems existing to support those facing food insecurity which has likely intensified in the county during the pandemic and with inflation. Indeed, since the focus groups took place, a quarter of food banks across Canada have seen jumps in usage over 25%.⁸ Greater access to low barrier food programs are needed.

⁸ Food Banks Canada. (2020). A snapshot of food banks in Canada and the COVID-19 crisis. Food Banks Canada. https://www.foodbankscanada.ca/FoodBanks/MediaLibrary/COVID-Report_2020/A-Snapshot-of-Food-Banks-in-Canada-and-the-COVID-19-Crisis_EN.pdf

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Food Strategies

Residents of Dufferin County experiencing food insecurity have developed numerous strategies to access food for themselves, their families, and their friends. These food strategies are crucial survival tactics that highlight the depth of food needs in the county and the unique landscapes of food insecurity in rural-urban spaces. Food strategies included accessing local food programs, sharing, hunting and gardening.

Local Food Programs

Participants mentioned two food banks in the county, one in Orangeville and another in Shelburne that provide access to food and hygiene products (for example, soap, toilet paper and menstruation products). To access food banks, residents of the county reported needing to provide documentation in the form of identification and proof of income. At least one of these food banks operated, that the time of interviews, on a monthly point system that many participants felt did not offer enough support. Often the food banks are difficult to get to underscoring, as stated in the food insecurity section, the importance of transportation in food security.

While participants were very thankful for the food banks, many were concerned about the lack of healthy and fresh options to support good health and well-being. For those with underlying health concerns, such as diabetes, the lack of food choice was especially challenging:

“ You get a lot of things [at the food bank] that, realistically, people don't eat. So, beans, chickpeas, pasta sauces, Kraft dinners, soups in a can, they've all been modified to taste pretty much awful. Even my kids won't eat them anymore. And it's the worst food for you. So, in general, how fair is it that we are forcing for people who cannot afford food to eat the food that the majority of people are not going to be eating this evening.

”

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Accessing culturally appropriate foods was also a challenge within the food bank system. Two participants shared the following concerns:

“

A lot of the food [at the food bank] was just not what I eat—I'm Middle Eastern, and I eat very Middle Eastern, and I don't eat noodles, or potatoes—I eat rice. You know, beggars can't be choosers type thing, but that's not what I eat.

I can't feed my son tuna every day. With our background—we're West Indian... all the stuff we used to eat—I use to make roti at home...we don't have access to our food at all.

”

In a county like Dufferin where racial discrimination was experienced regularly by racialized focus group members, the lack of access to culturally appropriate food not only creates additional barriers to health and well being but can deepen feelings of alienation. In addition to food banks, numerous participants reported accessing church-based food cupboards and soup kitchens. These food sources do not require the same documentation and assessment processes and are, therefore, more accessible providing essential supports when food supplies run low at the end of the month.



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Hunting and Gardening

Other focus group participants shared hunting and gardening as food strategies. These practices, especially hunting, are unique to more rural areas where game and space allow for these specific strategies. As one participant, who was clear that they had the appropriate permits, noted:

“ Yeah, I started to [hunt] out of—I wanted to eat. And then I just kind of became—and I don't have a lot of equipment... I literally go out in and my hoodie and my winter jacket—and I have a fishing rod and have a crossbow—it's a means to survive for me—it's a means to eat. ”

Another two participants spoke about gardening providing access to fresh vegetables. Across the discussions of food security and sourcing fresh food, the desire for a community garden was raised regularly, as was the frustration of experiencing food security in farmland where fresh produce is grown nearby.

Sharing

In addition to accessing food programs, and sourcing food through hunting and gardening, focus groups participants talked about food sharing as strategy for combating food deprivation. One participant noted:

“ You know, it's just really, really hard—the last week of every month it's so hard because everyone around you—like I'm in housing and everyone else's on ODSP [Ontario Disability Support Program]—I get people coming to me for just tins of tuna, you know, coming to me for just a bit of food, and I'm always like, “yeah, I'll share food, I don't mind, we all need to eat”. ”

There is a clear sense of community among those in Dufferin County who are facing food insecurity. Knowledge is also shared within these communities, through informal networks that communicate information detailing where people who need food can find it, including those with specific dietary or household needs. However, these informal knowledge networks and broader food strategies have developed as survival tactics in the absence of food security. They must not be seen solutions to the food insecurity problem in the county.

In addition to food, community members share knowledge of food sources with others and during one focus group participants even crowdsourced a resource outlining which food programs were open each day.

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Potential Solutions

Project data demonstrates the adversities faced by individuals experiencing homelessness and near homelessness regarding all dimensions of food security. Individuals experience a lack of food security, in terms of quality and suitability, access to food on a weekly and month basis, and affordable food to ensure personal health and well-being. Individuals receiving social assistance or disability support (for example, though ODSP) suffer from a chronic inability to afford food. Survey and focus group data from community members experiencing homelessness and near homelessness demonstrate that many individuals suffer from multiple dimensions of food insecurity, which are repeated each month.

Several potential solutions were offered by those directly impacted by food insecurity. Focus group participants not only outlined problems with food security, but also demonstrated thoughtful thinking about potential solutions which could reduce harm related to food insecurity for community members. The following potential solutions are provided from the focus group data.

1. Pay- What- You- Can Produce Bank or Community Fridge. Several participants focused on access to fresh fruits and vegetables in discussing ideas to improve food security. One participant suggested establishing a community fridge or produce bank might assist local community members who had difficulty affording fruits and vegetables, while reducing waste from grocery stores:

“

Imagine if there was a produce bank, because grocery stores are throwing out countless things—even bananas, so what they're brown, freeze them and give them to somebody.

”

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Another participant described a pay-what-you-can (PWYC) produce program they had a positive experience with while living in another town:

“

There's a greenhouse where I was in another town, you could go there and get bags of cucumbers for like 25 cents, whatever change in your pocket - throw them a penny and you can get a whole bunch of produce like that, but we don't really have that here, right? There needs to be fruits and vegetables, you need that stuff.

”

2. Food Bank Deliveries. One participant suggested regular food bank deliveries for people who have difficulty physically travelling to the food banks in the county:

“

Well I know Choices Youth Shelter got a van donated to them, right? And they'd use the van to get kids places and stuff like that? So, what if Dufferin County got a van, let's say on Tuesdays, you have food bank runs?

”

Several participants responded enthusiastically to this suggestion in focus group discussion. While limited foodbank delivery options may have been implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic, the group interest in this option speaks to the need for permanent delivery options.

3. Mid-Month Grocery Cards. Another idea that came-up was regular, systemic food support for low-income people, especially mid-month when many individuals receiving social assistance begin to run out of income for food:

“

What if the government did something for the middle of the month, where... let's say you got a food allowance where it was a grocery gift card for \$100 - which ever grocery store—so the government's not giving you cash, there just giving you a handout—literally—for the necessities of life. You know, just something right—\$50 worth of groceries can go a long way. I can do a lot with \$50, I can get five bags of groceries for \$50.

”

Having a regular program in place to provide a mid-month boost to the food budget of low-income people would alleviate the cyclical food insecurity experienced towards the end of the month.

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Conclusion

Food security is a challenge for millions of Canadian households. Dufferin County is no exception. Aside from housing, food was the most common unmet need referenced by participants in the research project. In addition to struggling with the cost of food, access to the transportation necessary to physically get to grocery stores and food programs was a common challenge. Moreover, the assessment processes involved in accessing food programs, as well as limits of program use, often presented barriers to meeting food needs. In response to this food insecurity, Dufferin County residents engage in hunting and gardening and food sharing and have made numerous suggestions for improving food security.

