

# Healthy food affordability

Policy lab report

Wellesley Institute advances population health and reduces health inequities by driving change on the social determinants of health through applied research, effective policy solutions, knowledge mobilization and innovation.

### **About this document**

In December 2024, Wellesley Institute invited partners, collaborators and colleagues who are key voices on food insecurity to participate in a Wellesley Institute policy lab. The objective of the lab was to further develop an idea Wellesley had published in a policy brief that proposed governments consider how they could ensure that the items in Canada's Nutritious Food Basket be available at a price that everyone could afford. The brief proposed requiring grocers ensure that at least one of each item from the Basket is available at a cost the lowest income families in each region can afford. This document is the outcome of that discussion.

The participants in the policy lab were Carole L. Chatalalsingh, Director of Professional Practice, College of Dietitians of Ontario | Debbie Field, Coordinator, Coalition for Healthy School Food | Sue Lewis, Vice President, Marketing & Events, Canadian Produce Marketing Association | Richard Matern, Director of Research, Food Banks Canada | Dr. Kwame McKenzie, CEO, Wellesley Institute | Jesse Rosenberg, Director of Policy, Wellesley Institute | Nick Saul, CEO, Community Food Centres Canada | Anita Stellinga, VP Corporate Communications & Public Policy and Corporate Secretary, United Way Greater Toronto | Sarah Stern, Executive Director, Maple Leaf Centre for Food Security | Alexi White, Director of Systems Change, Maytree.

### **Acknowledgment of Traditional Land**

We wish to acknowledge this land on which Wellesley Institute operates. For thousands of years, it has been the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca and the Mississaugas of the Credit. Today, this meeting place is still the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work on this land.

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## Introduction

Food is essential for good health. Unfortunately, there are barriers to, and disparities in, the accessibility of healthy, nutritious food. Food insecurity is a growing issue and is greatly exacerbated by increased housing costs, insufficient and stagnant wages and income supports, and inflation. Statistics Canada data revealed [22.9 per cent](#) of residents in the 10 provinces lived in a food-insecure household in 2023. In Toronto, one in 10 people reported relying on a food bank in 2023. These are concerning numbers, and it is clear a new approach must be taken to ensure healthy food is available and affordable for everyone.

In the face of a rising food insecurity crisis, and with food insecurity affecting more and more people in Canada, Wellesley Institute published a [policy brief](#) in 2024 that proposed governments consider how they could ensure the items in Canada's [Nutritious Food Basket](#) be available at a price everyone could afford. The brief proposed requiring grocers to ensure at least one of each item from the Basket is available at a cost the lowest income families in each region can afford.

On December 9, 2024, Wellesley Institute invited partners, collaborators and colleagues who are key voices on food insecurity to participate in a Wellesley Institute Lab to further develop this idea and share other work and ideas that support advancing food security.

## Methodology

Attendees included representatives of food producers, food insecurity experts, poverty experts and food and dieticians from a regulatory college. Invited guests from the grocery and retail sector were unfortunately unable to attend due to conflicts. The session was conducted under [Chatham House Rules](#) to ensure broad attendance and candid participation.

Following introductions and a roundtable discussion of what participants are working on in the food insecurity space, participants were engaged in a three-part exercise on Wellesley's food insecurity proposal.

Inspired by [Tim Hurson's "GPS" model](#), participants were asked to discuss first what the good aspects of the proposal were, then what concerns they had, and then possible solutions they saw. We concluded with a discussion of other ideas participants had for next steps on food insecurity.

The following brings together themes we heard in the discussion. Participants were contacted to ensure there were no significant errors in this report.

## Results

### What participants were working on

We heard about important projects participants were focused on, or thinking about. This included the federal expansion to school food funding, and the importance of ensuring every child has at least one healthy meal a day, five days a week, 10 months a year. This topic was returned to in later segments of the session, with mention of a U.S. National Bureau of Economic Research working paper that noted school food programs reduce food prices at grocery stores, and that school food can have significant local economic development impact.

Social assistance policy was discussed, including the importance of action to support working-age adults due to the high level of poverty and dearth of supports for those individuals. Relatedly, we heard about the importance of financial stability work including specifically community hubs in York and Peel regions that are including an emphasis on food security. Participants mentioned the importance of advocating for a living wage for workers and income security for all. This could include expanding existing federal benefits such as the Canada Child Benefit, Canada Disability Benefit, and the HST Credit. They also mentioned work advancing on having health professionals be able to prescribe healthy food to improve health outcomes and possibly also reduce food insecurity.

Participants also work on advancing public protection and health advocacy, including food security, including working to ensure food insecurity is recognized as a social determinant of health.

### What are *good* aspects of the Wellesley proposal?

Participants were asked to first discuss positive aspects of Wellesley's proposal. The approach is intended to "shake up" thinking through a creative limitation. It also focusses discussion and lets participants know they will have an opportunity later in the process to raise their concerns.

A first positive was that there was a connection between Wellesley's "healthy food basket as a utility" approach and prescription food, with both trying to advance food security by addressing health outcomes. It could also help shift all users of the proposed program towards healthier eating habits. It was suggested it could be valuable to link the Wellesley proposal to public health work on nutrition.

Participants discussed how the Wellesley proposal, if adopted, could be a first step to “de-marketizing” ‘basic food.’ This was connected to other countries, such as Brazil and Turkey, that have successfully stepped in to subsidize essential food goods. We heard that those programs make clear that programs like this should be universal, to avoid stigma and complexity. This means including in the program those who do not normally receive targeted income support. Other countries have seen value in linking the foods supported to local culture. Also raised was a possible connection to anti-monopoly work needed in Canada, and work to decrease consumer prices without solely relying on the demand side.

We heard that Canadian farmers consulted on other food insecurity policy proposals believe measures like this could be useful – they could provide more food than they do, and steps like this could stabilize demand year to year.

It was seen as positive that this proposal would involve the corporate sector, as food insecurity work too often comes only from the community sector. Broadening coalitions and responsibility is helpful in creating change. We heard that one food retailer considered an approach where one aisle could be set aside with low-cost and healthy, Canadian products in a way that it was not perceived as a poverty-based program, but focused on everyone “eating healthy.”

Participants raised that this proposal could help advance other levers for more interventions on food security, and that although it might not decrease poverty, it would reduce pressure on limited incomes and make people more healthy.

We heard that food bank clients mention they are significantly impacted by increases in food prices.

Some participants also highlighted that the whole supply side of food has not been explored in-depth and that many policy solutions targeted towards improving food security default to obvious tools that do not consider structural challenges of the system. This proposal opens the door to involving many other industries in coming together for a longer-term structural strategy that could result in lower prices.

## What are the *concerns* with the Wellesley proposal?

We next asked participants to let us know what “concerns” or challenges they thought the proposal had. In designing the session, we wanted to make sure we heard about downsides we would need to overcome in future work on food insecurity.

One concern was that the current Government of Canada nutritious basket item list is exhaustive and includes imported items (which our food chain could not be expected or supported to produce). It also does not seem to include many culturally specific foods.

Another question was raised around consumer education. Some people this program would be designed to help might not understand how they can prepare these items.

A challenge we heard for food producers was that these costs might fall disproportionately on farmers, and that farmers generally feel food prices should go up to benefit their businesses.

Participants debated the assertion in the Wellesley proposal that “food insecurity is breaking away from poverty.” There was concern about ensuring this was carefully framed in future around income security.

Questions were raised about what exactly this would do to poverty measures. Participants noted it would increase purchasing power, but wondered if the already inadequate “poverty lines” would then drop down, possibly harming income security efforts. We also heard that we should consider how inflation might then be affected. Participants suggested the way Canada measures poverty is problematic in general.

Some participants feared this regulatory approach could be a distraction or dilution of income security efforts. Some pointed out that “policy bandwidth” for advocates and government is limited, and difficult choices have to be made. We heard that perhaps “food insecurity” should not be a policy goal for our proposal at all. Rather, the focus for food insecurity policy should be on income. For some, it was viewed as very likely that income security was a much better investment for governments.

Other participants noted research that does point to a growing difference between food insecurity rates and poverty rates because purchasing power is eroding for those above the poverty line. It was clear that income security is an essential part of food security, but that there are some above the poverty whose cost of living is becoming out of control, and who may be experiencing a poverty-level of living.

## **Potential *solutions***

Next, we asked participants to turn their minds to step ups and solutions. We wanted to learn what could build on the good aspects and address the concerns that had been discussed earlier.

We heard it might be helpful for future work to consider additional qualitative investigation (speak directly to those living with food insecurity) and quantitative analysis on projected impacts. Qualitative work should include making sure the national food basket list includes foods people want to consume. Quantitative work could be useful in making wider economic arguments for the proposal, perhaps around health savings, workforce participation and productivity, or lowering other food costs.

Another opportunity to fill a gap that was suggested was around consulting with those who set food prices.

Participants suggested broadening the approach to include education around how to use food. It was suggested to consider connecting the idea to [Canada's food guide](#) rather than to the nutritious food basket as it was more positive and better connected with culture and accommodated cultural foods and recipes.

It was suggested additional policy thinking be added around ensuring food provided through the proposed policy would be fresh and high quality.

We heard we could consider framing the entire proposal around health and local agriculture, leaving poverty out of it. This was viewed as a step towards ensuring it did not compete with income security.

Participants thought building strategic alliances around the program would be important as a next step.

## Other ideas

Finally, we wanted to hear from participants about what other ideas they thought would advance food insecurity. We hoped our earlier discussions might lead to new ideas, and that participants would value finishing their time by engaging with each other more broadly.

We heard that centring lived experience and ensuring participants in qualitative research were fairly compensated was important to food insecurity work in general.

Participants discussed the importance of storytelling and highlighted past successful work on journey mapping that looked at different households that experience food insecurity to determine what the critical point of intervention was. That work found that debt was an important factor that was not considered enough in food insecurity work. System navigation was also raised, including accessing benefits, challenges around neighbourhoods that change and community agencies losing their space in neighbourhoods. The latter was viewed as potentially requiring assistance.

Another participant thought there could be opportunity for more cohesion across groups working to advance income security. They saw a gap around connecting that to housing.

We heard that reframing social assistance as housing policy and an anti-homelessness program was a potential direction. Another idea was to frame food insecurity around dignity as part of a human rights-based approach. Some noted that the concept of “human rights” was running into challenges due to skepticism of institutions, but dignity was a possible approach that was more intuitively understood.



## Discussion

Wellesley Institute thanks all participants for their time, their commitment to constructively solving the problem of food insecurity, and their valuable contributions to the future of food insecurity work. We learned a great deal that will help make future work on this, and other approaches to food insecurity, stronger.

We heard that tackling the price side of food supply is important, but that it would be helpful to dig deeper into challenges including framing, centring voices of those with lived experience, and making clearer how costs would be borne.

It was clear that considering the entire system, including labour, supply chains and retail, will be critical to lowering prices in the long-term.

All potential solutions should also consider the inclusion of foods for different cultural groups, which may differ from foods included in the nutritious food basket.

Finally, ensuring the focus remains on health and well-being rather than reducing food insecurity could be helpful to building support and a broader coalition.

We look forward to continuing our relationships with the partners who were able to attend the lab, and with others in the future, to address this determinant of health.

Food insecurity will not go away on its own.

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