Healthy food for a stronger Canada

Policy brief

WELLESLEY INSTITUTE

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Wellesley Institute works in research and policy to improve health and health equity in the Greater Toronto Area through action on the social determinants of health. More than a think tank, we're a catalyst for change.

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Acknowledgement 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 and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work on this land.

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Introduction

Access to affordable, good food is a health equity issue. Immediate action is needed in Canada. Policy leaders must take measures to ensure that nutritious, healthy food is affordable for everyone in Canada.

> "We must approach the goal of affordable, nutritious food for all in a new way."

This policy brief provides recommendations to the Government of Canada to address the rising cost of essential foods, improve health, and build local agriculture and supply lines.

The brief reflects advice received from stakeholders and advocates during a consultation on an earlier Wellesley Institute policy brief. All agree. We must approach the goal of affordable, nutritious food for all in a new way.

Issue

Nutritious food is an indispensable part of good health[1,2]. Access to healthy food has been an enormous challenge for many Canadians for far too long. Data from Statistics Canada shows that 18 per cent of families in Canada reported experiencing food insecurity in 2022[3]. In Toronto, one in 10 people relied on food banks in 2023 due to rising poverty driven by increased housing costs, inflation and insufficient wages and income supports[4]. Increasing food insecurity has health impacts. More than 800,000 people in England and Wales were admitted to hospital with malnutrition and nutritional deficiencies in 2022-2023, a threefold increase from a decade before[5]. Included in these numbers are hundreds of cases of scurvy linked to vitamin C deficiency and rickets caused by vitamin D deficiency.

Canada faces a suddenly uncertain world, with climate change and foreign chaos threatening our domestic food chains. Canadian farmers are prepared to provide more food, Canadian grocers are under new pressures, and consumers face significant affordability challenges but want and need affordable, nutritious food.

[1] https://www.wellesleyinstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Bringing-Food-Equity-to-the-Table.pdf
[2] See, eg., this scoping review on prescription food: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/08901171211056584?url_ver=Z39.88-2003&rfr_id=ori:rid:crossref.org&rfr_dat=cr_pub%20%200pubmed
[3] https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2023001/article/00013-eng.htm
[4] https://www.utpjournals.press/doi/full/10.3138/cpp.2019-063
[5] https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/dec/21/surge-in-number-of-people-in-hospital-with-nutrient-deficiencies-nhs-figures-show

Solution

We must:

- **Rethink** how essential healthy food items are produced, transported, supplied and sold.
- **Create** a stronger Canada in which everyone can afford nutritious food and our local food supply chains are stronger, safer and more reliable.

Recommendations

Wellesley Institute recommends the federal government[6] move swiftly to approach food from the bottom up, and put health, affordability and building a stronger Canada first. Nutritious food is critical for health, and encouraging access to and use of it would benefit everyone. Ensuring healthy food is affordable for all would reduce pressures on those in and near poverty and address rising affordability challenges for all those experiencing them. Finally, there is an opportunity, sorely needed in this age of trade and democratic challenges, to strengthen Canada's food production, supply and delivery systems to both ensure their robustness and safety against foreign and climate threats.

To that end, the government should consider taking advantage of some combination of its National Nutritious Food Basket[7] and Canada Food Guide[8] to determine what foods are essential to health and affordability. This should include consultations with:

1) **Experts**: To determine which foods are essential for good health and demonstrate the potential economic benefits of affordable healthy food for all[9].
2) **Communities across Canada**: To determine what culturally relevant foods they need, and what support households need to create healthy meals together.
3) **Food producers, processors, transporters and grocers**: To understand which foods can be locally supplied.

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[6] The federal government is constitutionally empowered to act in this area under its taxation power, particularly as it is reasonable to connect unaffordability in these items to a failure of market competition and given joint federal-provincial authority over agriculture. A national solution is also desirable to ensure mobility between regions and provinces. However, provincial authority over property and civil rights could also be exercised to address this issue. Should the federal government act, we recommend it leaves room for *stronger* provincial action to lower prices or include more items to replace a federal minimum. Should the federal government fail to act, we encourage provincial governments to step in. Failing that, municipalities should consider what they can do to help ensure their constituents can access affordable healthy food.

[7] https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/food-nutrition/food-nutrition-surveillance/national-nutritious-food-basket.html

[8] https://food-guide.canada.ca/en/

[9] Including a stronger workforce, health system savings, and additional disposable income for higher income households.

The government should calculate a price for what an updated National Nutritious Food Basket should reasonably cost for low-income households in every region in Canada. Then, building on the supply chain consultation, the government should determine what steps need be taken to deliver a future in which these items are available at that price[10].

The system should be simple for every household in Canada. Everyone going into a grocery store should have the easy, stigma-free option of putting the healthy-priced option into their cart or choosing to pay more for other options.

The system should support households[11]. It must seek to ensure that those in poverty can better survive on their limited income support programs, and guarantee they are not made worse off due to possible changes in how poverty lines are calculated.

The system should support producers, processors and suppliers by providing them with stable, predictable income and the opportunity to fill more grocery carts. It should support grocers by understanding their challenges in providing affordable healthy food and bringing more customers through their doors for other items.

Conclusion

We believe this proposal would:

1) Reduce the devastating health and societal impacts of poverty.
2) Enhance affordability for every household in Canada.
3) Build a healthier population.
4) Strengthen our local agriculture and supply chains.
5) Bring additional customers to local grocers.

Everyone would reap the benefits of a healthier society as nutrition levels went up. Everyone would benefit from a stronger economy and improved affordability. Everyone would be safer from potential threats to our food supply chain.

> "Everyone in Canada could feel proud to live in a country where everyone can afford to eat."

Everyone in Canada could feel proud to live in a country where everyone can afford to eat.

[10] We hope communities, all levels of government and all parts of our supply chain can come together to achieve this important mission without the need for government enforcement. However, governments, as our democratic leaders, must not wait forever to deliver on this vision.

[11] Pending community consultation, this might include education on how to create nutritious meals from these foods.

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