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Food insecurity in Nunavut: Are we going from bad to worse?

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- Tackling food insecurity is a political and public priority in Nunavut.
- The effectiveness of food policy is questioned by increasing rates of food insecurity in the territory.
- Complex interactions between the availability and access of store and traditional foods will determine policy effectiveness, in ways not fully understood.
- Cross-cutting systemic action rooted in Inuit values and knowledge is central to action to strengthen food systems.

Access to adequate food is a major challenge for communities across the Inuit Nunangat (1). In Nunavut, food insecurity has been identified to be at crisis level, with 50.8% of Nunavut households categorized as food insecure in the most recent Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS). This is among the highest rate of food insecurity documented in a high-income nation, with widespread health and societal implications (1). Reflecting these concerns, food security has become a political and public priority in Nunavut, and in 2011 the federal government launched the Nutrition North Canada (NNC) program to improve the affordability and accessibility of perishable, nutritious store foods. NNC has been controversial since its inception and St Germain *et al*. (2) provide evidence that rates of food insecurity in the territory have actually increased by 13.2% since the program's launch.

The results of St-Germain *et al*. are disheartening, questioning not only the effectiveness of NNC but also a whole suite of actions targeted at strengthening food systems by government, civil society, and communities (3). Yet, we offer a more cautious interpretation of their findings.

Firstly, policy evaluation is notoriously difficult, and while St-Germain *et al.* develop a novel study design using surveys before (2007-10) and after (2014-16) program implementation, we feel that the main argument that NCC has contributed to increased food insecurity needs further investigation. Standard food surveys such as used in the CCHS can be misleading in the absence of qualitative research focusing on how Inuit access both store *and* traditional foods, have been critiqued for lacking cultural appropriateness, and provide only a snapshot on the state of food systems at a particular point in time (4, 5). The authors acknowledge some of these limitations but in the absence of a more comprehensive suite of evaluation methods, the work paints only half a picture.

Secondly, in assessing the association between NNC and changing rates of food insecurity, several socio-economic-demographic characteristics are controlled for but other important co-founders are not considered. This raises the question of the counterfactual: even without NNC, would rates of food insecurity have increased? Multiple lines of evidence suggest it might:

- **Social changes**, rooted in the impacts of colonialism and its legacy, continue to affect Inuit food systems in diverse ways. Reduced participation in harvesting among younger generations and diminished intergenerational transfer of traditional ecological knowledge have been identified as potential factors exacerbating food insecurity by reducing access to traditional foods (1). Coinciding with NNC there has also been a growing commercialisation of traditional foods (e.g. 'pop up' markets, Facebook), a controversial development which some see as disrupting food sharing networks and increasing food insecurity among poorer households by increasing reliance on store foods (6).
- **Demographic change** is being experienced across Nunavut, and for the ten communities that form the basis of St-Germain *et al*.'s analysis, population increased by 8.7% from 2011-2016, and 20.8% from 2006-2016. While demographic factors including household type and the presence

of a child under 18 are controlled for in the study, household size and crowding are not. In the Inuit Health Survey (2007-08) the prevalence of household food insecurity in Nunavut was shown to be associated with household crowding (7), and research has documented that population growth can dilute traditional food sharing networks, with food security implications (8). While household size has remained fairly stable across Nunavut, the number of crowded households increased by 4% between 2006 and 2016.

- Over the last decade, **harvest restrictions** have been implemented in Nunavut for various wildlife species. Caribou, in particular, is fundamental to Inuit food systems, ranking as the top dietary source of protein in Nunavut (9). Dramatic population declines for several caribou herds have been documented, with total allowable harvest designations applied to herds on Southampton Island since 2012, and for the three Baffin Island herds since 2015 (9). Harvest restrictions and declining wildlife abundance have the potential to exacerbate food insecurity by increasing reliance on store foods, reducing income earning opportunities, disrupting sharing networks, and limiting opportunities for youth to acquire harvesting knowledge and skills.
- Nunavut's **climate is changing** rapidly, affecting the access and availability of traditional foods. While we found few changes in access to trails used for hunting and fishing when applying Ford et al's (10) dataset to the communities in St Germain *et al.* for the period 2006-2016, declining caribou populations and increasing stress on other species consumed by Inuit have been linked to climate change (9).

Examining these alternative explanations of rising food insecurity underlines the need for qualitative ethnographies of the pathways through which policies affect Inuit food systems. Such work needs to consider both store and traditional foods, and the complex interlinkages between the two.

Despite our more cautious interpretation of St-Germain *et al.*'s results, we share their concerns over the effectiveness of NNC in improving food access in Nunavut. The absence of price caps, program accountability and transparency, and limited responsiveness to community needs, have been noted to undermine the ability of the program to meet its goals, along with a neglect of traditional foods and their cultural significance in NNC support mechanisms (11). Even if these concerns were to be addressed, however, food subsidization is just one part of a continuum of actions needed to tackle food insecurity. Policy changes are required to strengthen harvester support programs (e.g. funding for hunter and trapper organizations), invest in infrastructure and skills development, and support community wellness programs, and must accompany broader efforts focused on poverty reduction, community development, and reconciliation and healing. Recognizing the need for such cross cutting systemic action, the Nunavut Food Security Strategy (2014) proposes a collective vision and common agenda for impact rooted in Inuit values and knowledge. If we are to avoid going 'from bad to worse,' such a vision needs to underpin all our efforts.

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