

Defining food security and food insecurity in British Columbia

Process background

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BC Centre for Disease Control
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Introduction

The terms food security and food insecurity are complex and have been used inconsistently in British Columbia (BC) and across Canada resulting in confusion around appropriate policy and program interventions to address the unique circumstances of each. However, research in the North American context shows that the terms and the required interventions are distinct.

In 2017, the Health Authority Food Security Committee (HAFSC) in BC identified the need to create consistent definitions for the terms food security and food insecurity to help clarify the actions and policies needed to achieve desired outcomes for each. Food security and food insecurity have many definitions specific to different contexts and public health in BC does not have agreed upon definitions for food security and food insecurity. The COVID-19 pandemic and recent climate-related events have added pressure to clarify these terms to ensure appropriate actions are taken.

The purpose of this project is to develop a clear and consistent understanding of food security and food insecurity, through the creation of BC-specific definitions, that will help inform appropriate actions for both areas. The definitions were developed using a public health framework and in collaboration with public health staff¹; however, the HAFSC hopes the definitions will be used or adapted by other partners outside of the health sector. The project is divided into two phases:

- ▶ **Phase I (Development):** Develop definitions for food security and food insecurity based on the latest evidence that align with the BC public health context. The goal is for these definitions to be adopted and used by the health authorities, the Ministry of Health (MOH) and within the health sector.
- ▶ **Phase II (Dissemination and knowledge translation):** The HAFSC will share the definitions with internal and external partners. The definitions can help partners, within and beyond the health sector, to better understand the unique differences between food security and food insecurity to help support the implementation of policies and/or programs that address desired outcomes.

This report describes the process undertaken to develop the definitions for Phase I.

¹ Toward the end of the Phase I, the Ministry of Health's Office of Nutrition Policy and Promotion was engaged and provided valuable feedback on the final draft three-page definitions document.

Methodology

The BCCDC team conducted a literature search, key informant interviews and iterative consultations with the HAFSC to inform the food security and food insecurity definitions.

The literature search explored current definitions of the terms food security and food insecurity. The search was not intended to be exhaustive, but rather exploratory of commonly cited sources and emerging narratives in BC.^{1,2} The search strategy included databases such as Wiley online, EBSCOhost, Google Scholar, JSTOR and ProQuest. The search was largely limited to the BC and Canadian context, with an expanded scope where Canadian evidence was limited. Publicsearch engines were used to scan for grey literature and emerging narratives; e.g. , how factors beyond income, such as access to traditional Indigenous foods, contribute to experiences of food insecurity. Results were synthesized in an annotated bibliography. Findings and key themes were presented to the HAFSC to validate in alignment with the food security and food insecurity context in BC and identify key themes to incorporate into the definitions.

The search also included different frameworks for explaining food security. The Five A's of Food Security by Rocha was selected and adapted as a framework to guide the development of the food security and food insecurity definitions.³

The BCCDC developed draft definitions and sought initial input through key informant interviews (KII) with six HAFSC members, representing all the health authorities and the Ministry of Health. The interviews focused on the approach to defining food security and food insecurity, content within the definitions and accessible language.

The BCCDC incorporated input from the KII to update the definitions. Further draft definitions were iteratively reviewed and discussed at HAFSC meetings to ensure the definitions reflected the BC food security and food insecurity contexts. The Ministry of Health's Office of Nutrition Policy and Promotion was also engaged in the review process and provided input from policy and multi-sectoral perspectives.

Key Findings & Discussion

Literature search

The literature search provided foundational information for developing the food security and food insecurity definitions. This section is a high level overview of some of the key findings that informed the definitions.

We found a number commonly used food security and food insecurity definitions in Canadian jurisdictions and literature, many of which cite, or are adapted from key definitions such as the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) food security⁴ and Hamm and Bellows' community food security⁵ definitions. Similarly, Anderson's food insecurity definition⁶ has generally been cited in literature, and, in the Canadian context, the definition is often discussed at the household level with linkages to the household's financial ability to access food.⁷

“Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.”⁴

“[Community food security is] a situation in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutrition-ally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice.”⁵

“Food insecurity exists whenever the availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or the ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways is limited or uncertain.”⁶

“Food insecurity is 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. Household food insecurity is often linked with the household's financial ability to access adequate food.”⁷

The literature search also highlighted a number of themes that contribute to, or are closely associated with, food security and food insecurity in the Canadian context.

- **Financial constraints** is one of the most common barriers attributed to difficulty accessing food.^{8,9} In Canada, food insecurity is largely measured through the Household Food Security Survey Module (HFSSM), part of the Canadian Community Health Survey

(CCHS). The HFSSM measures income-related food insecurity, often referred to as household food insecurity. A large body of research in Canada draws from this income-related food insecurity data.⁹ Excluded from the survey's coverage are “persons living on reserves and other Aboriginal settlements in the provinces; full-time members of the Canadian Forces; the institutionalized population, children aged 12-17 that are living in foster care.”¹⁰ Therefore, work which draws from this income-related food insecurity data is not inclusive of and may not be reflective of these excluded populations.

- Some **household compositions and social identities** (and the intersections between these and other determinants of health) are more likely to experience food insecurity compared to others. This includes lone parent and lone adult households and social identities such as race, immigration status, disability, socio-economic status, health status, sexual orientation and gender identity.¹¹⁻¹⁸
 - While there is limited quantitative data for some social identities, emerging data continues to illustrate the negative structural biases towards these identities. For example, Black households are twice as likely to be food insecure than white households with the same income, education and household makeup.¹³
 - Similarly, the Canadian Community Health Survey is not administered in community (on reserve) for Indigenous peoples and does not consider non-market food access. While this represents a gap in data, it is well understood that Indigenous peoples are overrepresented in experiencing difficulty accessing both traditional and market-based foods as a result of historical and ongoing colonization and systemic racism.^{12,19}
- **Agency, or self-determination**, was noted as an essential element of food security.^{20,21} This speaks to an individual or community’s ability to respond to their own food needs in ways that align with their cultural and personal preferences. For example, for Indigenous peoples, agency could speak to freedom from dependence on a colonial market-based food system and transitioning to traditional Indigenous food systems if communities/people choose.^{22,23}
- **Sustainable food systems** are deeply tied to food security and food insecurity and incorporate practices that are adaptive and resilient to the changing climate, minimize negative environmental impacts and support the health of the environment.²⁴ Sustainable food systems also include adequately tending to the **well-being and needs of the people and communities** involved in the food system, including migrant and non-migrant food industry labourers.²⁵

- **Rural, remote and Indigenous communities** face unique and longstanding food access challenges.^{14,19,26-32} The challenges are complex, and include issues of access, affordability and availability of nutritious foods. For Indigenous communities, these challenges are a result of underlying factors such as systemic racism, colonization and ongoing colonial practices.
- **Health considerations** relating to food security and food insecurity are also a key theme for both concepts; however, health narratives beyond health status, as noted above, were not explored for this project given that health conditions are often an outcome of the absence of food security, rather than a key component of how food security is defined.

Approach to defining food security and food insecurity

At the outset of the project, the HAFSC discussed defining a number of food security terms including food systems and community food security; however, the committee ultimately agreed to focus on three terms most widely used in public health: food security, food insecurity and Indigenous food sovereignty. The HAFSC integrated concepts from all the food security terms where appropriate and decided that limiting the focus to these three terms would best support a foundational understanding of the concepts and inform actions that can be taken.

Indigenous food sovereignty (IFS) is a vital element to addressing food security and food insecurity for Indigenous peoples and the broader population.³³ Although defining IFS was within the original scope of this project, the HAFSC decided not to define IFS based on engagement and guidance from Indigenous colleagues. We heard that a single definition cannot adequately capture the nuances of IFS, as it would not account for the unique histories, cultures, traditions, worldviews, languages and living realities of the diverse nations. Indigenous ways of thinking also note that process cannot be separated from the purpose; therefore, understanding IFS requires reconceptualising colonial systems and actions to meaningfully address systemic issues and honour the knowledge of, and work by, Indigenous communities. This reconceptualising work is the responsibility of non-Indigenous people and is an ongoing process of unlearning current ways of thinking and re-learning based on the values and practices that guide Indigenous peoples' relationships to the land and to each other. Although we did not include a definition of IFS for this project, concepts of Indigenous food security and Indigenous food sovereignty from the literature and HAFSC knowledge were woven into the food security and food insecurity definitions.

The concept of food sovereignty was first defined in South America in the early 2000s and has been defined as “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems.”³⁴ While we do not offer a definition of how food sovereignty is interpreted in Indigenous communities, this definition contextualizes the significance of self-determining food systems in discussing Indigenous food sovereignty.

As mentioned in the methods section, the *Five A's of Food Security*³ was used as a framework to identify and define key elements of food security. The *Five A's* stand for availability, accessibility, adequacy, acceptability and agency, and the framework is used to describe the key elements needed to achieve food security. Originally designed to focus on food security, the HAFSC agreed that the elements of the *Five A's* were also relevant in defining food insecurity. The elements were simplified to create more concise definitions and further adapted, including the addition of sustainability and affordability, to align with the BC context. See **Appendix 1** for the original and adapted models and the rationale for the changes.

The adapted *Five A's* provided aspirational elements relating to food access that weighed heavily into the creation of the food security and food insecurity definitions. Findings from the literature search and input from the HAFSC built upon the adapted *Five A's* to inform the approach to defining each term.

Our approach to defining **food security** emphasized people's ability to engage with, and influence, the food system in ways that meet their needs, honours their right to food and supports sustainable and resilient food systems. We aimed for a broad approach and included the variety of food security work that public health engages in across the province.

Similarly, the adapted *Five A's* provided an understanding of *how* people's food access may be compromised. The approach to defining **food insecurity** incorporated this understanding and examined *why* certain populations are more negatively impacted by structural barriers. For example, this approach considered the impact of poverty on food access, while also recognizing that poverty often manifests from the intersection of various systems of oppression based on one's social identity, such as race and gender.^{35,36} Incorporating this structural barriers lens, or the structural determinants of health, is important as it highlights the histories of systemic racism, colonization and discrimination that has led to inequitable distribution of power, money and resources, including access to food.³⁷⁻³⁹ The *Five A's* model complements this structural

barrier approach as it makes the case that interventions must consider the plurality of systemic-level factors that contribute to compromised food access.

Key informant interviews and HAFSC discussions

Key informant interviews and conversations within the HAFSC raised a number of questions and thoughts throughout the development process. A summary is provided below.

Framing of food security and food insecurity as opposite concepts

- Food security and food insecurity have sometimes been framed as opposite concepts; however, the HAFSC agreed this is an oversimplistic comparison given the body of evidence that notes actions to support food security may not necessarily address food insecurity (e.g., food skills).^{40,41}
- Rather than furthering this type of comparison, the HAFSC focused on differentiating food security and food insecurity by highlighting specific elements of each term, such as framing food insecurity as an issue of structural inequities.

Income, food insecurity and household food insecurity

- In BC, the HAFSC previously used the terms “household food insecurity” and “food insecurity” synonymously to refer to insufficient or inadequate access to food due to financial constraints.⁹ However, existing and emerging research and community experiences challenge the idea that inadequate income is the only driver of food insecurity. This includes evidence demonstrating how factors such as race, geography and environmental threats negatively impact Indigenous and market food systems.^{12-15,24,26-32}
- The HAFSC recognized the significant impact of economic constraints on food security and included this as a key part of the food insecurity definition. The HAFSC decided to use the term “household food insecurity” for income-specific food access discussions.

Community food security

- In BC, there are a large number of community-level organizations working to support local food security and well-being. This level of work is often framed as community food security (CFS). While there was interest in developing a consistent definition for CFS, the HAFSC acknowledged that the broad scope of the food security definition captures community-level work and that communities’ unique contexts may shape their own understanding of CFS.

Incorporating Indigenous peoples' unique experiences

- The literature search and HAFSC engagement found that food security and food insecurity definitions often did not reflect the unique needs and experiences of Indigenous peoples.^{1,2,42} For example, the focus on income-related food insecurity centres market-based food as the dominant food system and does not account for traditional Indigenous food systems and traditional ways of gathering and exchanging food. Similarly, Indigenous peoples' participation with the market-based food system is not the same as it is for non-Indigenous people. This could include continual tension between traditional and market-based food systems and more precarious supply of fresh produce.
- In response, the HAFSC aimed to define food security and food insecurity more broadly and holistically to be more inclusive of diverse relationships with food and food systems. This included interpreting broader aspects of health and wellness. Similarly, the HAFSC noted the importance of acknowledging how historical and ongoing colonialism and systemic discrimination has negatively impacted Indigenous peoples' access to food and that food security cannot be achieved without honouring Indigenous food sovereignty.

Conclusion

Various definitions and understandings of food security and food insecurity exist as a result of unique social, environmental and economic circumstances in which people are situated. Phase I of defining food security and food insecurity aimed to provide a clear and consistent understanding and delineation of the two concepts from the perspective of public health in BC. These definitions form a foundation from which public health and others outside the health sector can implement interventions that appropriately address food security and food insecurity. Similarly, the definitions help cross-sector partners understand how public health is interpreting and aiming to address both concepts, allowing for potential new or strengthened partnerships.

The process to define food security and food insecurity from the health perspective was grounded in evidence and informed by practice to align with the diverse contexts in BC. In defining the two concepts, the HAFSC recognized the importance of the values needed to support food security, such as agency, social justice and sustainability. The HAFSC also acknowledged a broad set of economic, social, environmental and geographic factors that contribute to difficulty accessing food, and recognized that food insecurity is most acutely felt by people facing the negative impact of structural inequities. Indigenous food sovereignty, although not defined here, is essential in ensuring food security for all. Any work for public health to develop a definition of Indigenous food sovereignty must be led by Indigenous peoples and communities.

Sharing the definitions and using them to help guide appropriate actions will take place in Phase II of this project.

Appendices

Appendix 1

The *Five A's of Food Security* was developed by Dr. Cecilia Rocha³ to explain the elements needed to achieve food security (see below). These elements were adapted to align with the BC context and to provide a strong foundation to inform food security and food insecurity definitions. A summary of the modifications are noted below.

Modification	Rationale
Under <i>availability</i> , incorporated the presence of diverse foods for people to access, beyond there being sufficient quantities for all people.	In BC, there can be sufficient quantities of food for everyone, but for rural, remote and Indigenous communities, desired foods may not be present in either the market or traditional food systems.
Separated economic access from <i>accessibility</i> to create its own <i>affordability</i> element. <i>Accessibility</i> now refers specifically to physical access to adequate and acceptable foods.	Economic access was moved into its own element to distinguish it from physical access under <i>accessibility</i> and to recognize the strong evidence of the relationship between income and food insecurity.
The focus on policies and processes under <i>agency</i> was shifted to focus on people's ability to have choice over the food they eat, how they access it, how they use it and how they interact with their food systems. People's ability to advocate for food security was also added to agency.	From a social science perspective, agency is the capacity of individuals to independently make their own choices (i.e., self-determination). This framing aligns with the recognition of the rights of Indigenous peoples to access their traditional foods, as well as the work of community to influence their local food systems. This interpretation of agency builds on the original language by outlining the approaches needed to achieve food security.
Changed "culturally acceptable" under <i>acceptability</i> to "cultural preferences".	Culturally preferred foods builds on the idea of food being culturally appropriate and brings in an element of enjoyment from consuming the food.
<i>Sustainability</i> was added as a separate element and the environmental language was removed from <i>adequacy</i> .	The environmental aspect was taken out of <i>adequacy</i> to provide a stronger focus on the ecological practices and considerations that are needed to ensure safe and resilient food systems, both now and for future generations.

The Five A's of Food Security

From the Centre for Studies in Food Security

Availability: Sufficient food for all people at all times.

Accessibility: Physical and economic access to food for all at all times.

Adequacy: Access to food that is nutritious and safe, and produced in environmentally sustainable ways.

Acceptability: Access to culturally acceptable food, which is produced and obtained in way that do not compromise people's dignity, self-respect or human rights.

Agency: The policies and process that enable the achievement of food security.

Source: Rocha C. Centre for Studies in Food Security [Internet]. Toronto, ON: Toronto Metropolitan University; n.d. [cited June 2020]. Available from:

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