FOOD INSECURITY

Public health experts blame Ontario government for gap in food insecurity data

The province's decision to halt collection for a survey for 2015 and 2016 will impact program planning for the region's most vulnerable families, critics say

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Public health experts in Ontario are alarmed by the provincial government's decision to opt out of an annual survey that measures the number of households struggling to get enough to eat.

The province chose not to monitor food insecurity as part of the Canadian Community Health Survey for 2015 and 2016. As a result, food security experts say there are no indications of how many families have inadequate access to food for those years – and this will impact planning for programs that address a problem that affects close to 600,000 households.

The CCHS, issued by Statistics Canada, is the only government-mandated method of tracking food insecurity numbers provincially. Ontario has been compliant in submitting data since 2005, when the topic was added to the survey.

The decision comes as a disappointment to public health workers in the province, who found out about it in May.

"From what we can figure out, people in public health were absolutely blindsided by this. People didn't know they had opted out. We didn't know until we gained access to the data and then realized that Ontario wasn't there," said Dr. Valerie Tarasuk, a nutritional sciences professor at the University of Toronto and lead researcher at PROOF, a research team investigating household food insecurity in Canada.

"It's very odd that they would decide to do it now given that their own provincially paid public health staffers are routinely using that information for planning and programming at local levels," she said.

A household is considered food insecure when its members do not have adequate access to food because of financial constraints. Food insecurity within adults puts them at risk of a number of poor health outcomes, from depression to heart disease. Children are especially vulnerable to chronic conditions, including asthma.

As the most populous jurisdiction, Ontario is home to the largest number of food insecure households in the country.

Household food insecurity in Canada

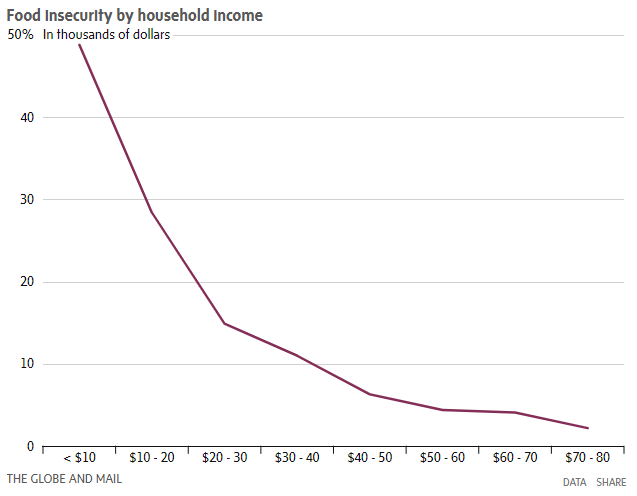
The map below indicates the rate of household food insecurity by province and territory in 2012, which was the last year it was mandatory to submit data.



Data source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Community Health Survey, 2012.

"One of the things that is problematic about Ontario not being part of that data-set is that Ontario comprises 38.5 per cent of the population, and so when we want to release national statistics on food insecurity, for us to be missing more than a third of the population really messes things up," Prof. Tarasuk said.

But public health units across Ontario worry that this gap in data will mean lost credibility when it comes to analyzing policies such as the basic income pilot, a three-year study providing a minimum level of income to people living on low incomes, and the food security strategy, an initiative proposed as part of the poverty reduction strategy to create access to food for families impacted.

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|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Household income group | Marginal moderate or severe food insecurity |
| < $10 | 48.80 |
| $10 - 20 | 28.40 |
| $20 - 30 | 14.90 |
| $30 - 40 | 11.00 |
| $40 - 50 | 6.30 |
| $50 - 60 | 4.40 |
| $60 - 70 | 4.10 |
| $70 - 80 | 2.20 |

**FOOD INSECURITY BY HOUSEHOLD INCOME**

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Earlier this year, the Ontario government announced the basic income pilot project to measure outcomes in certain key areas, including food security. In May, the provincial government also sought public input for Ontario's first food security strategy.

"In our consultations to develop our poverty reduction strategy, we heard a large number of people express support for our ongoing participation in the CCHS food security module going forward," said Myriam Denis, press secretary for Housing Minister Chris Ballard in an e-mail. Ballard is responsible for the poverty reduction strategy. "We will be working with the Ministry of Health to revisit the possibility of more frequent data collection under our food security strategy."

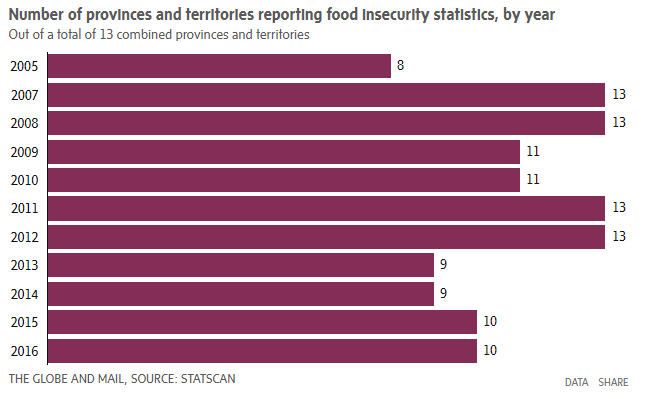
The CCHS operates on two-year cycles. The household food security survey module alternates between mandatory and optional, with the 2015-16 cycle being optional. The next cycle for 2017-18 will require require mandatory responses on food insecurity from all provinces and territories.

A spokesperson for the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care said in an e-mail that Ontario has continued to follow the same consultation process for "optional" topic selection for the CCHS. The process involves discussions with public health units, local health integration networks, various researchers and ministry staff to decide which optional topics to answer. As a result, food insecurity was not a topic chosen for the 2015-16 cycle.

"As with the selection process for CCHS cycles, choosing optional topics is a balancing act. Factors considered included emerging population health issues, data gaps, data needs and data availability," wrote Ministry spokesperson David Jensen.

Yukon and Newfoundland and Labrador also chose not to monitor food insecurity for those years. Both regions have opted out before.

Number of provinces and territories reporting food insecurity statistics, by year



|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Year | Reporting |
| 2005 | 8 |
| 2007 | 13 |
| 2008 | 13 |
| 2009 | 11 |
| 2010 | 11 |
| 2011 | 13 |
| 2012 | 13 |
| 2013 | 9 |
| 2014 | 9 |
| 2015 | 10 |
| 2016 | 10 |

**NUMBER OF PROVINCES AND TERRITORIES REPORTING FOOD INSECURITY STATISTICS, BY YEAR**

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Since 2005, Ontario's rate of household food insecurity has hovered around 12 per cent. Nationally, Nova Scotia has the highest rate of food insecurity at 15.4 per cent among the provinces and Nunavut had the highest rate overall at 46.8 per cent. In Ontario, Peterborough has the highest rate at 17.6 per cent in 2013-14, affecting over 1 in 6 households.

"The CCHS data is showing that we are higher than the provincial average. Without this overall Ontario data, we can't drill down to what this means in our local areas," said Caroline Doris, a Peterborough member of the Food Security Workgroup for the Ontario Society of Nutrition Professionals in Public Health (OSNPPH). "It's like telling an old story without knowing how things are changing."

"This is a serious, serious problem that a lot of people think is being taken care of. But it's not, and we're just trying to expose it. Having all of this data is key to that," said Mary Ellen Prange, co-chair of the food security working group for the OSNPPH.

The OSNPPH have sent recommendations to Health Canada and Statistics Canada to make the household food security survey module mandatory for the CCHS going forward.