



# IN Focus

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## Canada's baby formula shortage is another blow for infant food security

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**T**he topic of food insecurity for families with young children has made headlines in recent days, as infant formula shortages in Canada have led to instances of panic buying. The problem of food insecurity for families in Canada is not new, however, nor is it limited to the availability of formula. In fact, breastfeeding and formula are part of a larger unsustainable food system made worse for families who are also experiencing economic hardship.

In my book, *Out of Milk: Infant Food Insecurity in a Rich Nation*, I explore the breastfeeding paradox – that those who are least able to afford formula are also most likely to use it. I also learned from mothers that breastfeeding is like any other food system – it can either be sustainable or unsustainable. The sustainability of any food system is determined by whether the producers of a given item can afford to feed themselves and aren't suffering economic hardship. Breastfeeding infants becomes unsustainable if the producer (the mother) has no economic protection for the labour required.

While breastfeeding is inherently more affordable than formula, research I conducted with a group of colleagues on the cost and affordability of feeding a baby has shown that many low-income families with infants would be in dire straits whether they were breastfeeding or not. In fact, the data on the cost of food for a four-person family that included a three-month-old breastfed baby showed a family on income assistance would experience a deficit of over \$500 a month if they purchased the basics for a nutritious diet. Formula feeding would put them further in the hole, but both food systems have costs.

While infant food supply is made up of two streams – commercial formula and non-commercial breastfeeding – we know that among the 91 per cent of Canadian mothers who initiate breastfeeding, only about one-third breastfeed exclusively for six months, meaning that most infants rely on formula to varying extents. Milk banks are few and far between in Canada, and this milk is mostly limited to use by fragile infants for whom it is classified as medicine.

there is an alternative.

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We are especially quick to judge mothers who have trouble affording formula; after all, they “chose” not to breastfeed, forgoing “free” and accessible food. But, as we say in the sociology field, choices are always based on circumstance.

Not all mothers are able to breastfeed with ease, and depending on their work environment, not all women are able to pump breastmilk to leave for their babies while they are away. As a society, we often fail to provide the social and economic support needed to produce breastmilk, which leads many families to turn to formula.

The commercial formula market poses problems for infant food security too. Infant formulas constitute one of the fastest-growing food markets globally, yet the industry is monopolized by a small number of international corporations (recent shortages in the U.S. were fueled by the closure of just one Michigan factory, which produces a quarter of the country’s infant formula). Canada is near 100 per cent reliant on imports from those companies.

The U.S. operates the federally funded Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, which provides free formula access to those under a certain income threshold. Canada has not created specific infant-feeding programs for low-income families, even though economic access to formula has long been a problem. Instead, infant formula is routinely locked up in retail outlets due to high rates of theft. Long before the current shortage, there were already desperate pleas for formula on second-hand exchange websites, and infant food banks had popped up across the country. Canadian babies should not be going hungry, especially in one of the richest countries in the world.

A recent survey I conducted with colleagues, called Feeding in the Early Years, showed that among a group of 800 people who use formula to feed their babies, a third had difficulty finding the formula they needed in nearby stores. Furthermore, 41 per cent of those surveyed were also food insecure.

We should be extremely concerned about the potential impact of this on babies. We know the first 1000 days of a human’s life constitute the most critical period for optimal growth and development, setting a trajectory for life-long health.

During the height of COVID-19, stockpiling and panic buying made it difficult to find formula, especially in rural and remote areas. Families’ social precarity intensified across a whole host of needs. But the formula shortage has simply added itself to a long list of public policy failures for food access that were already present – infant food access is receiving more scrutiny now because it is hurting more than just low-income Canadians.

Canada needs both short and long-term strategies to stabilize formula supply, and must look to non-commercial distribution methods that ensure dignity and access beyond just piecemeal food bank or charity solutions. Most importantly, we need adequate economic protections to guarantee food access for Canadian children and their families.

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