

Food Access

NEARLY ONE IN six (15.7 per cent) Winnipeg households are food insecure, meaning they do not have the financial resources to buy enough food (Tarasuk and Mitchell, 2020). This is a serious social equity issue with significant impacts on public health. While income is the most reliable indicator of Household Food Insecurity (HFI), other financial assets and liabilities have significant impacts on access to food, suggesting that HFI is more precisely a measure of poverty or overall material deprivation.

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Although there is no available data on HFI in Winnipeg and very few publicly-available data sources for Manitoba, national trends indicate that households that identify as Indigenous or black are more than twice as likely as the average household to experience HFI; recent immigrant households experience higher levels of HFI than the average household, and female lone parent households experience household food insecurity at twice the rate of couples with children and 1.5 times that reported by male lone-parent households (Tarasuk and Mitchell, 2020). In Manitoba, nearly three quarters (71.8 per cent) of households who rely on social assistance as their primary income are food insecure, which reveals that social assistance does not provide enough income for Winnipeggers to afford basic necessities. At the same time, nearly two-thirds (65 per cent) of all households that report being food insecure rely on employment income as their primary source (Tarasuk and Mitchell, 2020), suggesting that for many employment income does not cover the basics.



Food Matters

Community meal (pre-pandemic)

Below, three different pillars of food insecurity will be outlined; these are income, built environments, and transportation. Working through these three pillars will offer policy options that are implementable and achievable by the City of Winnipeg and would help to sustainably reduce HFI rates in the city.

These include introducing: a living wage policy; a city-wide food availability assessment with actionable targets; additional public transportation supports; and a means of generating revenue to ensure economic and social sustainability for the city.

Income

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, global food security gradually declined due to economic losses as well as other variables. As restrictions were implemented and some businesses were forced to temporarily discontinue, jobs were lost and income was disrupted. In Canada, employment declined by 15 per cent during the first quarter of 2020; this primarily affected women, immigrants, and younger populations working in hospitality and the food service industry (Men and Tarasuk, 2021). These cohorts relied on income

to sustain their essential needs, which aggravated the prevalence of food insecurity during the pandemic. Of the 15 per cent of the country's workforce whose jobs were disrupted during the pandemic, one-quarter of these individuals reported experiencing food insecurity due to a corresponding income disruption (Men and Tarasuk, 2021). Currently, a noticeable rise in food prices is being observed across the country due to inflation and supply disruptions, thereby also decreasing the economic accessibility of food. Overall, Statistics Canada (2020) has estimated that the prevalence of food insecurity rose by 39 per cent due to the pandemic.

Community-based interventions, including food banks, soup kitchens, mobile markets, and community gardens have tried to mitigate the impacts of HFI. Further, home-based interventions such as gardening and grocery budgeting have been positioned as solutions to food insecurity. However, all these have ultimately been proven ineffective in systemically addressing HFI among low-income people, employed or otherwise (Tarasuk et al., 2019). As an example, a survey conducted by Statistics Canada in the spring of 2020 found that only 7.4 per cent of HFI individuals used food charity interventions (Men and Tarasuk, 2021). Furthermore, despite an injection of \$250 million from the Federal Government into the charitable food sector, the majority of HFI individuals reported that they did not receive additional charitable assistance (Men and Tarasuk, 2021).

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What does make a difference in decreasing rates of HFI is income redistribution. For example, Canada's Old Age Security and Guaranteed Income Supplement has been shown to reduce rates of HFI by as much as half (McIntyre et al., 2016) and adjustments to social assistance programs in Newfoundland and Labrador resulted in drastic declines in HFI in that province (Loopstra, Dachner, and Tarasuk, 2015).

Recommendation

The City of Winnipeg should work with the Province of Manitoba towards compatible provincial and municipal poverty reduction strategies with target increases in employment and income equity and reductions in household food insecurity in Winnipeg.

Establish a living wage policy for all City of Winnipeg employees (See Living Wage, Employment and Training).

Built Environments

An assessment conducted by Wiebe and Distasio (2016) suggest that over 120,000 people in Winnipeg live in “severely unsupportive food environments”. This definition encompasses food desert and food mirage areas, where sufficiently nutritious food is geographically unavailable (defined as within walking distance, or one kilometer) or physically available food is not affordable to local residents (defined by a calculated “social deprivation score”). More than two-thirds of these “severely unsupportive food environments” are found in the inner-city, where a modest increase of geographic food availability is overridden by a corresponding increase in food unaffordability. Newcomers and Indigenous peoples (especially those migrating from Northern and remote communities) often face additional geographic and social barriers in accessing culturally appropriate or preferred foods, which are less commonly available and often sparsely distributed.

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, people also faced difficulty in accessing foods due to social distancing restrictions, especially for the elderly, disabled, and those with health conditions. Further barriers included food supply chain disruptions and the shortages of frozen and processed foods (Rounce and Levasseur, 2020). Some iterations of provincially-mandated public health restrictions added additional considerations; this includes the one-month period where only one member of a household could enter a food store (Province of Manitoba, 2021), and mandated capacity limits for stores also adding to the time spent needed to enter and navigate a food store (Rounce and Levasseur, 2020).

Recommendation

The City of Winnipeg should commission and fund the Winnipeg Food Council to conduct a Winnipeg Food Assessment, including food assessments for each ward, to identify additional and location-specific assets, opportunities, and barriers to equitable food distribution and availability. This information should be publically available and used to supplement the already-existing Winnipeg Food Atlas.

New Expenditures:

Coordinate a review of zoning-bylaws and tax structures, with recommendations to incentivize the equitable distribution of sufficient, safe, and culturally-appropriate food throughout the city. \$200,000

Transportation

Due to the combined factors discussed above, especially limited household income, unsupportive food environments (both physically and economically) and the sparse distribution of culturally appropriate foods, many residents in low-income neighbourhoods must rely on public and for-hire transportation, where and when available, to access preferred food choices. Because of the limitations on the amount of groceries one can carry onto a Transit Plus vehicle, coupled with the lack of reliable service, many low-income people with disabilities in Winnipeg use taxis to grocery shop. This added cost, along with recent increases in Winnipeg Transit fares, has cut into the already stretched grocery budgets of low-income people in Winnipeg.

Winnipeg Transit slowly started phasing in a low-income transit pass, the WINNpass, in May 2020 for households under the low-income cut-off, citizens on Employment and Income Assistance (EIA), and recent newcomers. However, while this is helping solve the issue of affordability. A 50 per cent fare reduction is unattainable for some citizens, especially with consistent year-to-year increases in overall fare prices. This is evidenced by the fact that Winnipeg Transit estimates that it will only sell 78,000 of these passes (CBC News, 2019), when there are roughly 90,000 individuals (Statistics Canada, 2021) that fall under the low-income cut-off group alone (one of the three eligible sub-groups). Further, the downtown spirit buses were discontinued in the Fall of 2020 (Global News, 2020), which was a usable transportation resource for downtown residents.

Lone-parent families, who disproportionately experience HFI, are especially vulnerable when it comes to accessing appropriate food. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed this especially, when a single parent wasn't able to bring their children food shopping with them due to public health restrictions. Low-income lone-parent household disproportionately rely on public transit when compared to the average citizens due to being a more feasible and affordable option (Wang and Xu, 2020). This correlation holds true even when controlling for other factors, such as income disparity and quality of transit infrastructure nearby. As an effect, this demographic also spends more on transit than the average citizen as well. Advocacy groups in other cities have recommended that transit fare discounts should be provided and other ride-sharing options should be subsidized for low-income lone-parent households.

Recommendation

The City of Winnipeg should coordinate an evaluation of bus routes, bus design, and service design to ensure people can access and transport a reasonable amount of food in a reasonable amount of time using reliable Winnipeg Transit or Transit Plus services.

Implement a system of providing low-income lone-parent households with transit vouchers to cover 100 per cent of fare costs, or provide credits to use for other ride-sharing options such as Peg City Car Co-op or taxi services.

New Expenditures:

\$1.25 million

Revenue Generation

It is estimated that over 25,000 tonnes of avoidable food waste is discarded every year at the retail level within Winnipeg (Second Harvest, 2019). Ideally, a more nuanced approach to food procurement by chain stores would reduce a large amount of this avoidable food waste. Strategies to solve this problem more permanently can be addressed by multiple levels of government and the agri-food industry working in conjunction. In the meantime, other imperfect but still valuable alternatives to this problem include a revenue generation opportunity and a food supply transfer opportunity.

A food surplus fee policy would generate revenue by applying a higher municipal waste fee on avoidable food waste (by weight) for the 73 for-profit national and regional chain food stores within Winnipeg (Wiebe and Distasio, 2016). Alternatively, this policy could also influence a store to instead divert food surplus to a willing partner, such as food banks, other non-profit outlets, schools, or community centres. Through either outcome, the city would either generate revenue through this new fee or save costs through reduced amounts of food waste processing. While food redistribution efforts do not reduce HFI rates and would only help to alleviate the effects of the pandemic (PROOF Food Insecurity Policy Research, 2019), this alternative could be a temporary help as upstream responses are implemented to reduce food waste (i.e. through improved production and retailing) and eliminate HFI (i.e. through income redistribution).

Recommendation

The City of Winnipeg should work with the Province to:

- Coordinate and disburse guidelines on how to classify food surplus as avoidable food waste through incorporating The Food Donations Act and existing food safety regulations.
- Create a long-term strategy to address food oversupply in retail markets and align with existing agri-food system regulations

Implement a food surplus fee on for-profit national and regional chain food stores in coordination with the upcoming pilot composting program.

Revenue generated:

\$3.36 million

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