

# Conceptualizing Food Security for Aboriginal People in Canada

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## ABSTRACT

Food insecurity is an urgent public health issue for Aboriginal people in Canada because of high rates of poverty; the effects of global climate change and environmental pollution on traditional food systems; and high rates of diet-related diseases. However, to date, public health has operated with conceptualizations of food security that were developed in non-Aboriginal contexts; they do not take full account of the traditional food practices of Aboriginal people or Aboriginal conceptualizations of food security. In this paper, I argue that there are unique food security considerations for Aboriginal people related to the harvesting, sharing and consumption of country or traditional foods, which impact the four pillars of food security: access, availability, supply and utilization. Thus food security conceptualizations, policies, and programs for Aboriginal people must consider both the market food system and traditional food system. Given the centrality of traditional food practices to cultural health and survival, I propose that cultural food security is an additional level of food security beyond individual, household and community levels. Conceptualizations of food security for Aboriginal people will be incomplete without qualitative research to understand Aboriginal perspectives; such research must take account of the diversity of Aboriginal people.

**Key words:** Native Americans; food policy; public health

## RÉSUMÉ

L'insécurité alimentaire est un problème de santé publique urgent chez les Autochtones du Canada en raison de leur taux élevé de pauvreté, des effets du changement climatique mondial et de la pollution de l'environnement sur les circuits alimentaires traditionnels et des taux élevés de maladies liées au régime alimentaire. Jusqu'à maintenant toutefois, la santé publique a fonctionné à partir de concepts de la sécurité alimentaire élaborés dans des contextes non autochtones, qui ne tiennent pas vraiment compte des pratiques alimentaires traditionnelles des Autochtones, ni des concepts autochtones de la sécurité alimentaire. Dans cet article, je tente de démontrer qu'en matière de sécurité alimentaire, les Autochtones ont des considérations uniques, liées à la récolte, au partage et à la consommation d'aliments du terroir ou traditionnels, qui ont un effet sur les quatre piliers de la sécurité alimentaire : l'accès, la disponibilité, l'approvisionnement et l'utilisation. Ainsi, les concepts, les politiques et les programmes de sécurité alimentaire qui s'appliquent aux Autochtones doivent tenir compte à la fois du circuit alimentaire commercial et du circuit traditionnel. Comme les pratiques alimentaires traditionnelles sont au cœur de la santé et de la survie culturelle, j'avance que la sécurité alimentaire culturelle est une dimension de la sécurité alimentaire qui s'ajoute aux dimensions de l'individu, du ménage et de la collectivité. Les concepts de la sécurité alimentaire chez les Autochtones resteront incomplets si l'on ne fait pas de recherche qualitative pour comprendre la perspective autochtone; ce genre de recherche doit tenir compte de la diversité autochtone.

**Mots clés :** Amérindiens; politique alimentaire; santé publique

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Food insecurity is an urgent public health issue for Aboriginal people in Canada. Rates of individual and household food insecurity are much higher for Aboriginal than non-Aboriginal Canadians,<sup>1-4</sup> with one in three off-reserve households reporting food insecurity in 2002;<sup>1</sup> climate change and environmental contamination modifying the food supply of at least some Aboriginal people,<sup>5-7</sup> and diet-related diseases affecting proportionately more Aboriginal than non-Aboriginal people.<sup>8</sup> However, conceptualizations of food security used in public health have been developed in non-Aboriginal contexts; they do not take Aboriginal food practices into full account, nor do they reflect Aboriginal perspectives. The purpose of this commentary is to promote the conceptualization of food security for Aboriginal people in Canada, and to propose the need for qualitative research about Aboriginal perspectives on food security, which would reflect Aboriginal worldviews and ontologies.

I argue that there are unique food security considerations for Aboriginal people related to the harvesting, sharing and consumption of country or traditional food (which refers primarily to wild-harvested food such as wild meat, fish, birds, sea mammals, berries and other plants). These considerations affect the four pillars of food security as defined by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO):<sup>9</sup> access, availability, utilization, and stability of supply. Moreover, because food obtained from traditional food systems is key to cultural identity, health and survival, I propose that "cultural food security" is another level of food security for some Aboriginal people, beyond individual, household and community food security.

## An overview of food security

The Canadian Government has endorsed the definition of food security that was developed at the World Food Summit in 1996:

*Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.<sup>10</sup>*

Canadian public health research, policy, and practice have emphasized the access, availability, and utilization dimensions of food security.<sup>11</sup> The access dimension is

concerned with the economic ability of individuals and households to purchase food in the market (or retail) food system. This dimension is known as “individual and household food security”, and it is what is measured in federal government surveys.<sup>11</sup> The availability dimension of food security is focused on the production and supply of food, and critiques the dominant industrial agricultural model because of its environmental unsustainability and adverse impacts on food safety and consumer health.<sup>12,13</sup> The third dimension, utilization, is concerned with Canadians’ ability to make healthy food selections in their local environments, such as schools and workplaces. Since the mid-1990s, an approach to food security now known as “community food security”, encompassing all three dimensions,<sup>12,14-16</sup> has been dominant in public health practice.

Canada has made many international commitments related to the achievement of food security for all Canadians, beginning with the *International Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) and most recently with the *Declaration on World Food Security—five years later* (2002). Canada has also made international commitments specifically to its Aboriginal people, for example, in the *International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention 169* (1989), which states that Indigenous People’s land rights are related to food security; and in its participation in and support of the *UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues*, which advises the UN Economic and Social Council on Indigenous issues related to economic and social development, culture, the environment, health and human rights. Canada’s *Action Plan for Food Security* (1998)<sup>10</sup> recognized that Aboriginal people experience “all or most aspects of food insecurity”; stated that ensuring the traditional food acquisition methods of Aboriginal communities was one of its ten priorities; and identified four key actions to promote traditional food acquisition. The *Action Plan* also recognized Aboriginal people’s important role in sharing knowledge of traditional foods and the sustainable management of natural resources. Despite Canada’s international commitments, there is scant evidence that they guide national decision-making or policy formulation.

### Considering food security for Aboriginal people

While the *Action Plan* and other documents acknowledge food security issues particular to Aboriginal people, there is little in the published literature about how to comprehensively conceptualize food security for Aboriginal people. There are unique considerations for each of the four dimensions of food security for Aboriginal people, related to the consumption of country or traditional food. For example, in terms of access, food security may be affected by access to traditional/country food, as well as access to market food.<sup>17</sup> In terms of availability, environmental contamination of traditional/country food and the impact of global climate change on ecosystems affect the availability, supply, and safety of traditional/country food.<sup>5-7</sup> And in terms of utilization, traditional/country food is more nutritious and more nutrient-dense than market food, and remains important to the quality of the diets of many Aboriginal people.<sup>18-22</sup> Thus it is important to consider both the market and traditional food systems\* in conceptualizing and measuring Aboriginal food security because it has implications for the success of public health policies and programs addressing food insecurity; to date, this has not been the case.<sup>17</sup>

The harvesting of traditional/country food is one of the primary aspects of the special relationship Aboriginal people have to the land†, and a primary means of transmitting cultural values, skills and spirituality.<sup>23</sup> Food obtained from traditional food systems links the environment and human health, and forms the basis of social activity, social cohesion, and social integration.<sup>24-26</sup> For many Aboriginal people, country/traditional food retains significant symbolic and spiritual value, and is central to personal identity and the maintenance

\* Kuhnlein and Receveur<sup>7</sup> define a traditional food system as “all food from a particular culture available from local resources and culturally accepted” (p. 418).

† According to the Royal Commission of Aboriginal Peoples,<sup>23</sup> the term “land” has a broad meaning to Aboriginal peoples – “not just the surface of the land, but the subsurface, as well as the rivers, lakes (and in winter, ice), shorelines, the marine environment and the air. For Aboriginal people, land is not simply the basis of livelihood but of life and must be treated as such. The way people have related to and lived on the land (and in many cases continue to) also forms the basis of society, nationhood, governance and community” (p. 448).

of culture.<sup>5,25-33</sup> Thus, for some Aboriginal people, the ability to access sufficient and safe traditional/country food, or food security, is integral to cultural health and survival. The proposed concept of cultural food security would emphasize the ability of Aboriginal people to reliably access important traditional/country food through traditional harvesting methods. Indicators of cultural food security might include the levels of traditional food knowledge, access to traditional food systems, and the safety of traditional/country food.

Traditional food provisioning is threatened by a number of factors, including lack of access to traditional lands; the extinction and decreased density of plant and animal species; changes in animal migratory patterns; decreased transfer of cultural knowledge from elders to young people; a decrease in time and energy available for harvesting due to paid employment; loss of taste for traditional foods due to the uptake of market food; lack of money for expenses related to hunting and fishing; not having someone in the family to harvest; and disincentives to harvesting built into social assistance programs.<sup>18,20,23,29,30,34-37</sup>

Understanding what food security means for Aboriginal people, and the policy implications of addressing food insecurity, is complicated by the diversity among Aboriginal people in Canada<sup>38</sup> and the diversity of food consumption patterns.<sup>30</sup> There may be differences by age, gender, geographic location in the country, and among those living in urban, rural, and remote communities. For example, survey results in three remote First Nations and Inuit communities have shown that rates of food insecurity among children are as high as or higher than adults in the same households.<sup>2-4</sup> This is the reverse of food-insecure households in southern Canada, where children’s food insecurity is consistently lower than for adults in the same households.<sup>11</sup> Anecdotally, this has been explained by the observation that children have not acquired a taste for country/traditional food, preferring market food, and when there is no money for market foods, adults will access supplies of country/traditional food while the children refuse it. This fits with the general observation that younger people eat less country/traditional food than older peo-

ple.<sup>20</sup> Thus, levels of individual and household food insecurity for some Aboriginal people, especially in remote areas, may depend on acceptance of and access to country/traditional food.

For those who live in urban areas, the meaning and measurement of individual and household food insecurity may be similar to non-Aboriginal populations because the diet is likely overwhelmingly based on market food. With respect to cultural food security, living far from the land presents significant challenges because access to country/traditional food is more precarious. Urban dwellers may be dependent on relatives living closer to the land for supplies of traditional/country food, and may have difficult burdens of reciprocity.<sup>39</sup>

### CONCLUSION

I have briefly outlined some evidence that suggests that conceptualization of food security for Aboriginal people in Canada must take account of traditional food harvesting, sharing and consumption. However, conceptualizing an adequate and appropriate understanding of food security for Aboriginal people should begin with qualitative research, just as our understanding of individual and household food insecurity, and the development of the measurement tool the *U.S. Food Security Survey Module* (also used in Canada) began with the experiences of low-income women.<sup>40,41</sup> Such research would have to take into consideration the tremendous diversity among Aboriginal people, including geographic location across the country, type of community (urban, rural, remote), gender, and age. This research could form the basis of a supplemental tool to measure the unique aspects of food security for Aboriginal people. It could also be used to inform policy and program decisions, to improve the effectiveness of food security interventions and the appropriateness of evaluation.

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