Hunger and Poverty

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CANADA, WE ARE so often told, is among the world's richest countries, with a high standard of living enjoyed by the majority of our population. To many, this is something to celebrate as we mark the 150th anniversary of Canadian Confederation. Yet, there is a darker side to this story. In reality, a surprising number of people living in Canada struggle to meet even basic needs. Take food, for example. Along with shelter and clothing, there is nothing as critical to sustain life. For many Canadians (about 12 percent of households, and more than four million people), food insecurity—inadequate or unreliable access to food—is a real presence in daily life.

Without enough money for food, food-insecure Canadians may cut portion sizes; buy cheap, filling food instead of costlier, healthier items; or simply skip meals and go hungry. This includes the parents of one in six children, who do whatever they can to ensure that their children don't go hungry. The stress of living in a food-insecure household takes a toll. Children who grow up in food-insecure households are more likely to have asthma, behavioural issues, and depression. In adolescence and early adulthood, they are more likely to contemplate suicide. Experiences of food insecurity are also associated with a variety of adult health problems, including back pain, diabetes, and various mental health issues. These impacts have significant and direct implications

for Canadian health care costs, especially for people who experience severe food insecurity. And, in a country where most people have so much, struggling to get adequate food results in social isolation, marginalization, and despair.

Not having enough to eat is a symptom of poverty; we cannot talk about hunger without talking about poverty. Over 60 percent of all food-insecure households in Canada are working poor, highlighting the inadequacy of low-waged work to cover the costs of basic needs. Canadians who are more likely to be poor are also more likely to be food-insecure. These include households headed by single mothers, African-Canadian families, people living on social assistance, and those with children under eighteen. As well, rates of food insecurity among Indigenous peoples are much higher than for non-Indigenous Canadians. For off-reserve Indigenous people, rates of food insecurity are more than double the national average. In some remote First Nations communities, the majority of the population is affected. The problem is particularly acute in Canada's remote northern settlements, where logistical considerations greatly increase prices for the market foods that make up an increasingly large portion of northern people's diets. Nunavut has the dubious distinction of having the highest rate of food insecurity of any Indigenous population in a developed country, with 60 percent of households affected. Seven out of ten Inuit preschool children live in food-insecure households.

How have we come to separate food insecurity from its primary cause, poverty? And how is it possible, in a country so wealthy, that food charity is the dominant collective response to such a widespread and serious problem?

The answer can be traced back more than three decades. Since the fiscal restraint and social spending cutbacks of the 1980s, there has been no systematic, comprehensive federal or provincial policy response to either poverty or hunger in Canada. Canadians now respond to food insecurity with food charity—that is, with food banks. While their existence signals the generosity of Canadians unwilling to see their neighbours go hungry, food banks are a grossly inadequate response. The overwhelming majority of those affected by food insecurity never visit a food bank. And even those who do visit food banks remain

food-insecure. Charity is unable to solve a problem caused by systemic poverty and deprivation. Charity is no response to injustice.

Resort to charity as a response to poverty is consistent with a shift in the broader political discourse toward neo-liberalism that began in the late 1970s. Neo-liberalism has delegitimized government action to support citizens' health and well-being, and it has elevated the free market as the solution for all social problems. An important plank of neo-liberalism is tax cuts, especially for the wealthy. These cuts strangle the ability of government to protect the welfare state and implement much-needed public health and social programs. The consequences include job losses, precarious part-time work, and increased economic insecurity and instability for millions of Canadians. At the same time, welfare state programs that once reduced hardship resulting from job losses and economic insecurity have been decimated. In place of government policies and programs that ensure adequate income security, voluntary organizations, such as food banks, must do what they can to support communities.

Canada's first food bank opened in 1981 during a deep economic recession, when unemployment rates rose steeply. The idea of food banks was imported from the United States, after the founder of the world's first food bank, John van Hengel of Arizona, paid a visit to Edmonton. Within four years, there were almost a hundred food banks in cities across Canada, and the idea of food charity as the best policy response to poverty took root. There are now more than seven hundred food banks and three thousand charitable food programs across Canada, in every province and territory.

Although the provision of food as the dominant response to poverty is relatively new to Canada, it has a long history in the United States. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, America was faced with the paradox of high rates of unemployment, poverty, and hunger amid huge quantities of food, from oranges to milk to hogs. The crisis of overproduction in US agriculture began in the 1920s but became more acute with falling demand during the 1930s. As demand fell, prices plummeted, and farmers responded by producing even more. The US federal government intervened to support farmers, propping up prices by buying up some commodities, such as wheat, and paying farmers to destroy other crops.

The public were outraged at the "wickedness" of destroying perfectly edible food while so many Americans could not meet basic needs. While the government delayed action to alleviate unemployment and hunger, the framing of the problem shifted subtly. The central issue changed from hunger to food waste, which could be remedied by distributing the excess to those who were hungry. The Roosevelt administration set up the Federal Surplus Relief Corporation (FSRC) to purchase and distribute a variety of surplus agricultural products. The plan was widely hailed because it supported both farmers and unemployed workers, while relieving the distress felt by better-off Americans about wasted food. The actions of the FSRC supported the notion that providing food was the appropriate public policy solution to hunger, rather than policies aimed at ensuring adequate income so that hungry people could buy their own groceries. This idea rooted itself deeply in US consciousness and remains present today. Even in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the solution to hunger was reframed using the language of the civil rights movement, the problem was seen as the failure of government to ensure citizens' right to food through access to food assistance programs.

The policy tale in Canada is different, even though rates of unemployment, poverty, and hunger were comparable to those in the US during similar time periods. The economic collapse of the Great Depression affected Canada almost as severely as it did the United States. During the worst years, approximately 20 percent of the labour force was unemployed, and another 15 to 20 percent of Canadians depended on public relief. Many others could have benefited from relief but were too proud to apply. In response to the crisis, Prime Minister R.B. Bennett declared that he wouldn't let anyone starve and set up ad hoc emergency grants to the provinces in 1935 to help the unemployed. The experiences of the Great Depression led directly to the introduction of Unemployment Insurance in 1940, and the family allowance (or "baby bonus") in 1945, Canada's first universal social security program, which gave income directly to families to spend. This approach was distinct from that taken by the US; the Canadian focus was on income support, not food distribution.

Similarly, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when poverty and hunger were once again in the spotlight, Canadian activists and policymakers embraced a different approach to that of the United States.

The 1971 *Report of the Special Senate Committee on Poverty in Canada* suggested that the national poverty rate during the 1960s was approximately 20 percent. The committee declared poverty our "national shame" and made special note of poor nutrition as a "critical" factor in poverty, with poor nutrition linked to poor health and mental apathy. In recommending a guaranteed annual income (GAI), the committee cited the director general of the Medical Services Branch of the Department of National Health and Welfare, who argued that funds used to treat poverty-related diseases might be better spent on alleviating poverty. In response, the federal government took steps to do just that, by setting up a GAI experiment in Dauphin, Manitoba, tripling the baby bonus, and creating a child tax credit.

It was in the 1980s that Canadians began thinking about food insecurity in ways that aligned more closely with long-standing US policies: food charity, rather than poverty reduction, became the policy solution to hunger. In turning to food provision as a solution, Canadians stopped treating the problem as an issue of poverty. Food banks were set up as an "emergency" response to a perceived "crisis" in the economic system, and at least some food bank founders expected that food banks would close once the economic emergency disappeared. As late as 1991, food banks in Toronto were still debating when and how they might close.

As food banks have expanded and spread across Canada, they have also become more complex, co-opted by interests other than simple provision of food to the hungry. They now also provide easy opportunities for corporate marketing, disguised as social responsibility and philanthropy, and for ordinary citizens to "do something" about hunger. Although the national organization of food banks, Food Banks Canada, and some of the largest food banks in the country have called for public policies to address poverty, such as a GAI and affordable housing, the idea that Canadian food banks might one day close has become unthinkable. Too much is now vested in handling hunger in this way. Given this present-day reality, how do we move forward?

The influential American economist Milton Friedman, whose ideas underpin neo-liberalism, has a theory about change that was popularized in Naomi Klein's book *The Shock Doctrine*. Friedman argues that "only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change. When that

crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around." What ideas do we want "lying around" about tackling poverty-induced hunger when the next crisis inevitably strikes? Over nearly the past century, we have accumulated a number of "solutions" to hunger and poverty, including ideas about food charity, food waste, and the right to food. But among these ideas, there is one that holds the most promise and that is the most consistent with historical Canadian tradition. This is the idea of an adequate, universal guaranteed annual income or basic income guarantee—a policy that would eliminate poverty and complement other essential health and social programs.

A basic income guarantee could be the Canadian Medicare of the twenty-first century, a program to be proud of, and, like publicly funded universal health care, something we will one day not be able to imagine living without. As part of a progressive renewal of our social safety net, an adequate and effective universal basic income would eliminate poverty and, thus, also food insecurity. It would give us a renewed sense of community, one that manifests a kinder, more compassionate, just, and healthy society. It will give us a society that tackles hunger from the appropriate angle: poverty eradication. Then, and only then, will food banks finally close.