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Household Food Insecurity is not a Food Problem —it’s a Money Problem *No money for food is Cent\$less*

Summary

What is household food insecurity and who is most at risk? Household food insecurity is “inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints”. The underlying cause of food insecurity is not having enough money to pay for food and other basic needs. One in 8 households in Simcoe Muskoka is food insecure. Who is at greatest risk? Households with income from social assistance, renters versus home owners, single parent families, families with children (more children, greater risk), people with lower levels of education and people who identify as First Nations, Metis or Inuit. In Simcoe Muskoka about 1 in 4 single parent households and 1 in 6 “singles” experience food insecurity.

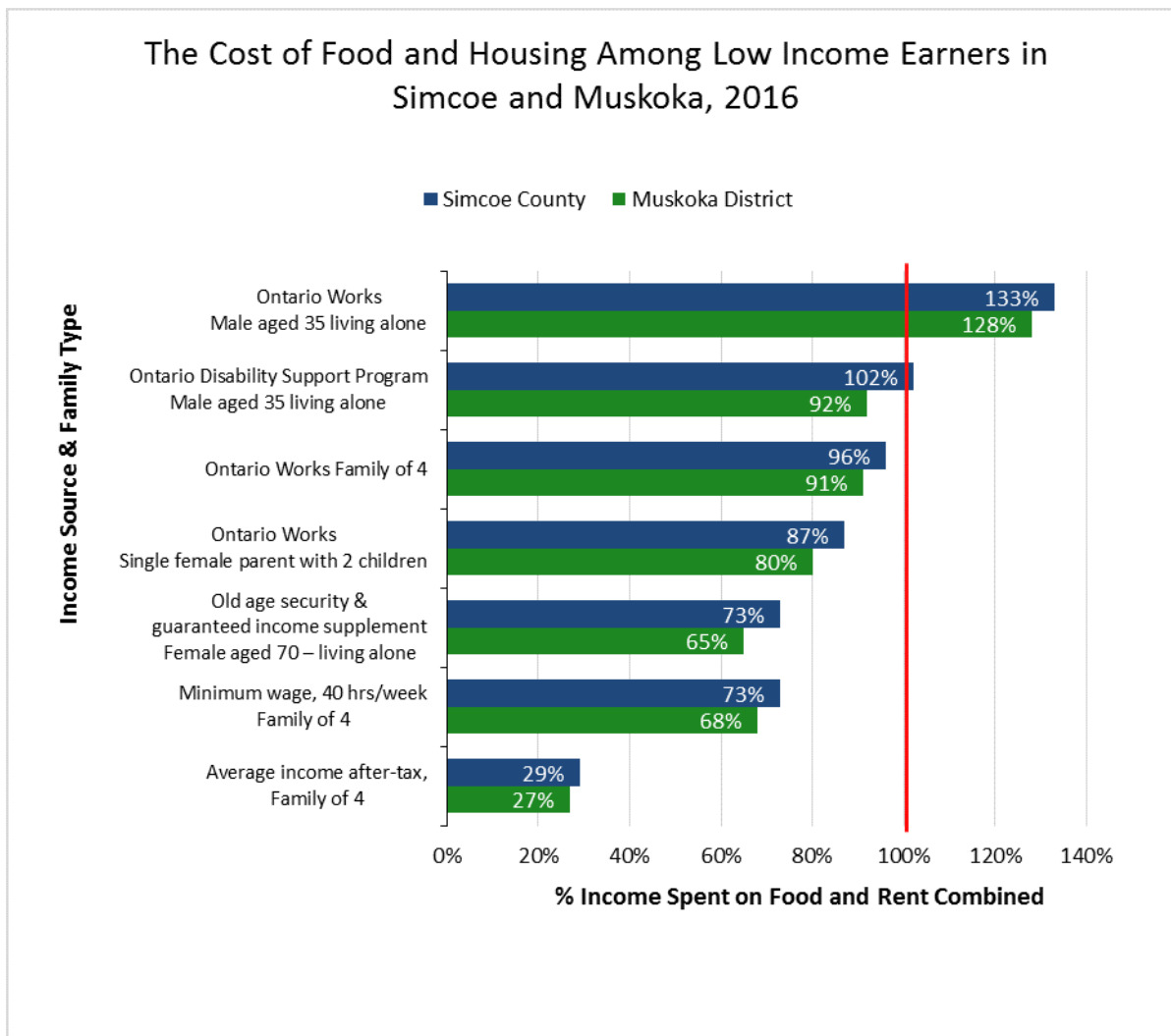
Why is it a problem? People living in food insecure households have more health problems and use more health services. Exposure to severe food insecurity early in life can leave a long-lasting mark on physical and mental health. Children who experience “hunger” (severe food insecurity) face an increased risk of conditions like asthma, depression and suicidal thoughts in adolescence and even into early adulthood. Food insecure adults are also more vulnerable to chronic health problems such as high blood pressure, diabetes and arthritis, as well as mental health issues including anxiety and mood disorders. These health issues result in greater demand for health services and lead to higher health care costs. In fact individuals from the most food insecure households utilize 121% more health dollars than those from households that have an adequate and secure food supply.

What is the cause and how can it be fixed? Household food insecurity and income are tightly linked. Household food insecurity is most prevalent in households in the bottom 20% of income earnings. People in this income category experience household food insecurity at a rate 4 times that of higher income earners. Since food insecurity is so closely linked to income, policy solutions that include a variety of income supports are required to address food insecurity. Solutions such as a living wage and a basic income, social assistance rates that match real living costs, and affordable housing and child care can ensure everyone has sufficient and consistent income to meet their basic needs with dignity.

History of the Issue

Statistics Canada began monitoring food insecurity in 2005 through the Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS). The most recent survey of Ontario households (2014) shows 11.9% of Ontario households struggle to put food on the table. Moreover, it shows that 62.2% of those households get their income primarily from wages, salaries or self-employment: the “working poor”. Clearly, having a job is no guarantee of having enough money for food. The province mandates all health units, including the Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit, to carry out an annual grocery store survey to determine the local cost of a Nutritious Food Basket. The protocol includes conducting a survey in Simcoe County and in the District of Muskoka, visiting a sample of six grocery stores in each area. In each store, surveyors record the price of 67 specific food items that could be used to prepare meals and snacks consistent with healthy eating patterns recommended in *Canada’s Food Guide*.

Nutritious Food Basket survey results are used as a benchmark measure of the cost of basic healthy eating across the region and to assess whether or not lower-income Simcoe Muskoka residents are likely to have enough income to pay for a healthy diet when the cost of housing is also considered. A summary of this year’s results:



The Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit has been using the Nutritious Food Basket data to raise awareness that current levels of social assistance, and income from minimum wage employment, are not enough to cover the cost of food and rent for many people—even before factoring in other basic

costs such as transportation, phone, clothing, school-related costs, personal care products and more. The health unit is supportive of the basic income pilot project because it will help us determine the best way to help all Ontarians eat well and live with dignity.

Summary of Current Action

Poverty is the root cause of household food insecurity. Systemic policy responses that ensure sufficient and consistent income for all households are the best way to effectively address household food insecurity in Canada. Despite the best efforts of local food banks and community food programs, the level of household food insecurity has remained unchanged at approximately 12% for over a decade.

In 2015 the Association of Local Public Health Agencies (ALPHA) passed a resolution to advocate to the provincial government to investigate a basic income guarantee.

In the March 2016 Ontario Budget, the province pledged to create a pilot project exploring the concept of a basic income guarantee. The SMDHU is pleased to see the pilot announced. We are also eagerly anticipating the expected evaluation data that will include measures of household food insecurity.

The SMDHU will continue to support organizations in our community in their advocacy efforts for income based solutions to poverty and household food insecurity. It is important to see the pilot through its entirety in order to get the best data and make the best decisions moving forward.

Health Unit Priorities

The Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit's strategic direction for 2017 aims to reduce inequities in overall health and improve quality of life for those at risk of poor health outcomes. The outcomes we hope to achieve include:

- a. Assessing groups at risk of health inequities and identifying appropriate responses.
- b. Meeting the public health needs of individuals and families living in low income.
- c. Supporting community partner advocacy efforts to reduce poverty.

We believe that our work to reduce household food insecurity will help us meet these goals.

For further information or to arrange interviews:

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