

**Food Insecurity: The Impact on Children Living in North America During COVID-19**

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to discover if food insecurity worsened in North American children during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study explored the prevalence of social food programs during remote learning periods when the pandemic halted in-person learning. Through progressive theoretical sampling, I investigated American and Canadian newspaper articles and documents produced by a board of education or government agencies that discuss the prevalence of food insecurity during the pandemic. COVID-19 pandemic increased students' vulnerability to Food insecurity in Canada at a higher rate than in the U.S. Also, the design of food programs was forced to change during the pandemic to meet COVID-19 guidelines. To add, during the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an increased rate of government assistance to receive food. Government agencies might consider implementing additional mandatory training for educators on how to address issues regarding food insecurity with their students effectively. By obtaining this education, educators can develop strategies on how to apply a culturally responsive pedagogy in their teaching practices that empower students emotionally. It is suggested a culturally responsive teaching strategy that can support this pedagogical approach by actively building relationships with students and inquiring about any support they may need on a consistent basis.

*Keywords:* food insecurity, COVID-19, pandemic, North America, affects

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Food insecurity in children is associated with profound negative consequences to their physical well-being and adverse mental health outcomes (Faught, 2017). Existing literature draws to the growing health crisis of school-aged children experiencing food insecurity in industrialized countries such as Canada and the United States. Furthermore, as the COVID-19 pandemic persists, it has required families to undergo several changes in their everyday lives (Adams et al., 2020). Therefore, there is a need to investigate if there has been an increased child food insecurity rate.

My research aims to discover if food insecurity worsened in North American children during the COVID-19 pandemic. Because social food programs are designed to alleviate child food insecurity, the study investigates the prevalence of social food programs during remote learning periods when the pandemic halted in-person learning (Blanchet et al., 2019). The primary question I ask is what impact remote learning during the pandemic has on affordable food access for school-aged children in North America? Also, is there evidence that children from racialized communities experienced greater food insecurity than non-racialized people? To what degree and impact were social food programs put in place to support Canadian families during the pandemic compared to families in the United States to show evidence of a country's ability to deliver a successful food program during the pandemic?

To start, I must acknowledge that I am from a White middle-class background. Growing up as a Canadian and American dual-citizen, I went to school in urban Toronto, where food diversity is widespread, and a suburban area of Southern California consisting of mostly upper-middle-class residents. I have been privileged to live in a household where access to good-

quality food was not a concern for most of my life. However, there was a time in my childhood when I was living with my single mother of two children, and for a short period, we had to frequent local church food banks to receive an adequate supply of food. My childhood experiences of food insecurity, combined with my time working in various North American school systems, sparked my desire to research the topic.

## **Literature Review**

### **Terminology**

“Food insecurity” occurs when there is uncertainty about access to food, insufficient access to nutritional value foods, and the need to acquire foods in socially acceptable ways (Ashiabi & O’Neal, 2008). “Racialized students” refers to those who are Indigenous, Black, and students of colour (Bagelman, 2018).

### **Effects of Food Insecurity on Children**

#### ***Physical Effects***

Kral et al. (2017) document an association between obesity and food insecurity. The authors write the odds of being obese were five times more likely if a child is from a food-insecure household (Kral et al., 2017). The authors presume this occurs because, for an extended period, families may not eat to satiety due to scarcity of food, and once the food is available, they overeat (Kral et al., 2017). Landry et al. (2019) similarly share this viewpoint as they noted that children who experience food insecurity during critical phases of their development might increase their risk of developing chronic diseases. Landry et al. (2019) believe this is evident based on past research that displayed dietary habits established during childhood can persist into adulthood, causing adverse long-term health effects.

### ***Socio-Emotional/Academic Effects***

Low-income families can experience elevated levels of anxiety and stress due to financial pressures of food insecurity, causing children to emotionally take on the burdens of their parents (Kral et al., 2017). Ashiabi and O’Neal (2008) affirmed that undernourished children have heightened anxiety, depression, and are unresponsive to their environment. Ashiabi and O’Neal share how children’s emotional and physical well-being can affect their academic performance. Since food insecurity is associated with health problems like iron deficiency, children may have trouble paying attention in class, affecting their behaviour in school (Ashiabi & O’Neal, 2008).

### ***Effects During the COVID–19 Pandemic***

COVID–19 has caused changes in families’ everyday lives (Adans et al., 2020). During the pandemic, there was a drastic shift in job losses, with more than 40 million Americans filing for unemployment between March and May 2020. As a result, the rates of food insecurity will likely increase (Adans et al., 2020). In a research study, by interviewing multiple families, the findings revealed that because of COVID–19 pandemic, more families are experiencing a change in their food intake (Adans et al., 2020). With the uncertainty of how long the pandemic will last, the authors recommend continual interventions to help families resume positive feeding practices (Adans et al., 2020).

### **Association between Race/Ethnicity and Food Insecurity**

#### ***Racialized Communities***

Systemic racism can lead to poor health outcomes and cause health disparities, such as food insecurity. In 2018, 21% of Black households and 16% of Hispanic households reported food insecurity, compared to 8% of White households (Phojanakong, 2019). Phojanakong et al.

(2019) write residential segregation is more common in Hispanic and Black families than in White families (Phojanakong et al., 2019). Residential segregation leads to a social and economic disadvantage that can lead to poor health outcomes: poorer house quality and lower access to affordable, healthy foods (Phojanakong et al., 2019). Overall, the study results demonstrate that racial discrimination is a significant health crisis. If the systematic and structural violence of racism and bigotry is not eliminated, health issues such as food insecurity cannot be effectively diminished (Phojanakong et al., 2019).

Bagelman (2018) shares how Indigenous food systems have been unjustly impacted by colonialism. Traditional Indigenous foods connect to cultural practices and spiritual and mental health. Implementing colonial practices to delegitimize Indigenous natural food systems forced the Indigenous community to rely on Western food sources and methods to ensure adequate food consumption and health (Bagelman, 2008). To ensure that cultural food practices are passed onto the next generation, many Indigenous communities now try to share the importance of their food systems by educating children to maintain food security (Bagelman, 2008).

## **Interventions to Reduce Food Insecurity**

### ***Government Policies***

Policies are needed that support the expansion of nutritional programs that can assist families in increasing their food supply (Knowles et al., 2015). Ashiabi and O'Neal (2008) suggest policymakers reevaluate current federal food assistance programs to see possible changes that would benefit food-insecure families. Shankar et al. (2017) made a profound statement in their systematic review that alleviating food insecurity on a policy level is critical in producing change. Behavioural and developmental professionals can educate policymakers that

preventing food insecurity in families with children can decrease costly adverse behavioural outcomes in children caused by food insecurity, such as heightened aggression and low attention span (Shankar et al., 2017).

### ***In Schools***

Encouraging educators to be cognizant of screening for food insecurity and, if needed, referring families to health supports and public assistance programs can ensure that parents have an ample amount of opportunities to describe their hardships to professionals (Knowles et al., 2015). Many parents have shared feelings of embarrassment over admitting they cannot provide their families with an adequate food supply (Knowles et al., 2015). It would be beneficial for educators to partner with social service organizations to identify solutions to help families thrive. Both professions can bring their expertise to promote change (Knowles et al., 2015). Similarly, Sonik et al. (2016) discussed the benefits of school educators partnering with social service agencies and anti-hunger organizations (Ashiabi & O'Neal, 2008).

### **Citation Practices**

I am writing about families who are food insecure. None of the authors I mention in my research disclose if they have personally experienced food insecurity. Also, as I read the literature, none of the authors disclosed their race or ethnicity. The papers I reviewed that centre on food insecurity in racialized populations such as the Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous communities would have been ideal for those authors to identify their positionality. I believe this calls for future food insecurity research to try to include authors who are representative of the research.

### **Conclusion**

Past literature was reviewed, centred around the prevalence of food insecurity in children living in industrialized countries. However, in reviewing various literature about food insecurity in children living in wealthy westernized countries such as Canada and the United States, I find it troubling that food insecurity is still prevalent. Therefore, as the COVID–19 pandemic persists, examining the prevalence of food insecurity and efforts is critical to determine if school boards should add more social programs. Furthermore, as one of the primary survival needs, no one should experience poor nutrition or hunger. Thus, systematic change is imperative to solve this prevalent problem.

### **Methodology**

The scope of my research was an analysis of documents pertaining to food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic. I investigated differences or similarities between the social food programs and comprehensive aid offered for children in Canada compared to the United States from 2020 through 2021. To gain a deeper insight into the differences between the two North American countries, existing data was selected and then analyzed from a selection of ten documents. The ten documents included; United States newspaper articles from the Washington Post, New York Times, and United States News; public documents from the CDC government and the USDA; two Canadian newspaper articles from CTV News, a CBC article; and two Canadian public documents from Global Affairs Canada and the Official Government Canada website. In order to prevent potential bias from data results, five of the documents were purposely from Canadian Government agencies and newspaper sources, while the remaining five were derived from the United States Government agencies and newspapers. Three of the five data sources selected per country were Canadian or United States-owned newspaper sources, while the other two were Canadian and United States-based federal government documents.



Further, when I selected the documents, progressive theoretical sampling was used to select documents under the provision each document was derived from a reputable newspaper based on my judgement. As well, I obtained federal government documents from official government websites. All ten documents analyzed were produced between March 2020 and October 2021. Finally, a thematic analysis was done to code and closely look into potential themes that emerged from the documents. This analysis involved coding all the data through notetaking before identifying the emerging themes.

Due to the period designated for this research project, I narrowed down the corpus to ten documents to include an array of different sources. However, there are potential documents that may have been undiscovered that could have benefited the validity of my research results if feasible. In addition, future studies can be conducted using a broader corpus to add to the validity of my research. Therefore, the decision to analyze existing documents is to discover what potential themes emerged in the public documents during 2020 through 2021 to determine the degree of food insecurity in the United States and Canada during COVID-19 and if increased efforts would have benefited from addressing the issue.

## **Research Findings**

### ***Nutritional Support Needed for Racialized Students***

A significant finding discovered from analyzing the documents is that racialized students are disproportionately affected by food insecurity compared to their non-racialized peers. In a CTV news article, Dunham (2020) states that racism and the lasting effects of colonialism have made certain portions of the population more vulnerable to food insecurity. Through his research, Dunham (2020) found that food insecurity affected one in seven people, particularly

those in low-income and Black and Indigenous people of colour (BIPOC) communities. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Black households suffered more from job losses and school closings and had fewer assets to aid in their financial situations. A newspaper article derived from the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) highlighted how Community Food Centres Canada (CFCC) has made a plea to the Canadian government to apply more equitable food security practices (Weber, 2020). Due to additional barriers they face because of the systemic racism existing in Canada, they plan to partner with BIPOC communities affected by food insecurity (Weber, 2020.) A Canadian newspaper article by Ruis (2021) similarly recommend increased efforts to support racialized students in the classroom. For instance, Ruis (2021) states if educators highlight gaps or inequalities in society that cause systemic issues like food insecurity, this can result in students gaining a deeper knowledge of the cause behind racism and the changes within society that need to be put in place to result in positive change.

In a New York Times article, DeParle (2021) shared a similar sentiment to the findings found in Canadian documents. DeParle (2021) states that food insecurity continues to rise amongst Black and Hispanic households as years progress. The food insecurity rate for BIPOC communities grew from 19.1 percent in 2019 to 21.7 percent in 2020. In comparison, in White households, 7.1 percent experienced food insecurity. Thus, there was a gap of 14.6 percentage points between Black and White households. In 2020, California was the first state in America to implement a universal free meal program in all public schools. As a result, meals became accessible for all children and the previous requirement to show proof of family income to qualify for free meals was lifted (DeParle, 2021). A writer from the newspaper The Washington Post suggests a solution to decrease the food insecurity rate for BIPOC communities is for more American states to implement a universal food program mirroring California's program (Ruis,

2021). The writer for the United States newspaper writes that universal free meals have the potential to address inequalities due to structural racism. Therefore, local, state, and federal policymakers need to grapple with issues such as systemic racism to maximize the benefits of school meal programs and realize their value in providing adequate nutrition equitably (Ruis, 2021).

### ***Value of School Nutrition Programs***

From my analysis of documents, there is substantial evidence that school nutrition programs are essential to help alleviate food insecurity for students. DeParle (2021) found that school meals account for as much as seven percent of economic resources among low-income households. The writer adds that school meals have a significant role in positively impacting the amount of nutrition students receive and schools must have food programs to ensure all students are food secure (DeParle, 2021). On a federal government level, in the United States, nationwide government food programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) are in place. Through SNAP which was previously known as food stamps, schools in the United States are provided with additional funding to existing food programs. Also, when students are out of school in the summer, states have the option to switch to a Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) that is designed to distribute meals to students when school is closed (DeParle, 2021).

According to the United States Department of Agriculture (2021), the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) allows schools to serve up to two free meals a day to children under the age of eighteen in the summer months. By analyzing all ten documents, a finding that emerged was the vast difference between food programs in the United States compared to Canada. Along with the SNAP and SFSP, there are six other federally funded

programs in the United States. These programs include The National School Lunch Program, The School Breakfast Program, The Child and Adult Care Food Program, The Commodity Supplemental Food Program, The Emergency Food Assistance Program, and the Pandemic Electronic Benefits Transfer (P-EBT) program.

While these findings emerged from American documents, a surprising result discussed in a CBC article was that Canada is the only G7 program with no federal food program in place (Wong, 2020). Unlike the United States, because Canada did not have any federal-funded food program in place, the federal government alternatively provided additional funding by allocating funds into food banks and local food organizations (Canada, 2020). For instance, as described in an official government document derived from the Government of Canada website, Canada distributes food funding through focused investments allowing select partners around the world to respond to critical food and nutrition needs in Canada (Canada, 2020). These organizations include the World Food Programme, UNICEF, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs' Country-Based Pooled Funds, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and the Canadian Food grains Bank. Also, Canadian community-based groups such as the CFCC and Church food banks take the role to distribute Canadian food programs in schools (Wong, 2020). Hence, because of the value free meal programs have, the CBC writer emphasizes the need for the federal government of Canada to implement a national school food program to make free school meal distribution more equitable for all Canadian students (Wong, 2020). Overall, these findings reveal the crucial need for school food programs to support North American families.

### ***The COVID-19 Pandemic Affect on Children's Food Intake***

Lastly, from analyzing all ten documents, there were significant findings on the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on existing food programs and access to food in both the United States and Canada. In North America, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused food supply shortages, limiting the resources available to distribute sufficient supply to Canada and the United States (Wong, 2020). The United States had federally funded programs in place to provide food such as the SNAP program (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2020). During the pandemic, there was an increased rate of government assistance to receive food in America (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2020). Approximately half of food-insecure American households reported they participated in one or more of the federal funded nutrition programs (Coleman-Jensen, 2021). According to a USDA public document (2021), Food Nutrition Services provided a nationwide waiver for American states to locally waive specific meal pattern requirements. The waiver was implemented to increase community members access to nutritional meals when certain foods were not available due to the pandemic's food supply distribution (United States Department of Agriculture, 2021).

Similarly, another government document released stated that the COVID-19 pandemic affected public health and the economy (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2020). In the United States, there was a substantial increase in nutrition assistance with programs transitioning to remote formats to take safety measures against COVID-19. For instance, due to remote learning, students had limited access to receive meals in person. As an attempted solution, several states (though the author does not name any state in particular) replaced their school meal programs with electronic benefit cards. As a result, families could use their benefit cards to purchase food in their local area (Coleman et al., 2021).

Likewise, the Canadian documents analyzed concluded that the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected the delivery of food programs. For instance, the pandemic interrupted the first year of a new school food initiative for Montreal-based La Cantine Pour Tous to expand their hot lunch program. As well, like Quebec, a food program in a Northern Ontario school stalled plans to expand their hot lunch program because of the pandemic. Also, in the Canadian documents, a point touched upon was as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the protocols to distribute food meals shifted per orders from Public Health Canada to meet COVID-19 guidelines. In addition, food distributors, including school volunteers, were required to take additional safety measures if delivering food in person. For example, volunteers were required to wear masks, apples and other fruits were left uncut, and snacks were packaged in paper bags (Wong, 2020). Overall, these findings found indicate the COVID-19 pandemic has had an negative affect on children's food intake.

### ***Statistics of Food Insecurity During COVID-19***

In 2020, 89.5 percent of American households were food secure. The remaining 10.5 percent (13.8 million households) were food-insecure (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2021). The 2020 prevalence of food insecurity was unchanged from 10.5 percent in 2019 (Kent & Travis, 2021). In 2020, 3.9 percent of United States households (5.1 million households) had inadequate food security, not significantly different from 4.1 percent in 2019 U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2021). In contrast, according to Global Affairs Canada (2021), the prevalence of food insecurity increased for all households with children from 13.6 percent in 2019 to 14.8 percent in 2020. It was also higher in 2020 for married-couple families with children. Hence, these findings display that the COVID-19 pandemic caused both Canada and the United States to make shifts as they sought to support food-insecure families.

## Discussion

This research seeks to determine the degree to which the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced the rate of food insecurity amongst North American children. By analyzing ten documents, five from Canada and five from the United States, written in 2020 to 2021, strong evidence emerged on the growing number of food-insecure families, with racialized children being food insecure at a higher rate. Faught's (2017) research outlined the overall consensus in relevant literature regarding the cruciality adequate food supply has for children's overall well-being, and when receiving poor nutrition, children are unable to thrive socially, academically, and physically. In both the relevant literature and the documents analyzed, the significant role school programs have in providing nutrition to children is heavily mentioned (Faught, 2017).

In newspaper articles written by DeParle (2021) and Ruis (2020), both shared this to be accurate as both documents stated the critical place school meal programs have to create a nutrition safety net. In the United States, California is the only state that took the initiative to implement a Universal Meal Program. Ruis (2020) shares the meal program's success on increasing nutritional intake amongst Californians as each child was guaranteed a meal even during the COVID-19 pandemic by picking up food at a child's local school. In contrast, Ruis (2020) revealed that states outside of California often solely relied on federally funded food programs like SNAP. Food was not as readily available due to pandemic-related issues such as food supply delays. Based on the information gathered, I suggest other states in America take similar steps. I hope the Universal Meal Program's success in California schools influences other state governments to conduct a jurisdictional scan. By doing so, states can learn from California's model and implement their own program as pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic continue to increase food insecurity as a more viable solution is needed across America. For

American families to speed the process of change, it can also be beneficial for families to advocate (e.g. petitions, letters, community initiatives) for their state government officials to take increased action to address pandemic food insecurity. Also like discussed in my findings, the American federal government was able to provide electronic benefit cards to families in need because of the delay some families experienced to receive their SNAP benefits (DeParle, 2021). In my opinion, I feel it would be of benefit for electronic benefit cards to be made permanent, not just during the COVID-19 pandemic as an alternative support.

After comparing the American documents to those from Canada, it is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic increased students' vulnerability to food insecurity in Canada at a higher rate than in the United States. As mentioned by Shankar et al. (2017), school meal programs are vital for children facing food insecurity to access nutritional food and to run these programs adequately, schools require government funding. Through my research, I was astonished to learn Canada is the only G-7 country without a federally funded food program (Wong, 2020). Canada's absence has hindered its ability to provide social food programs across the province, particularly during the pandemic when food insecurity has been exacerbated (Wong, 2020). As displayed in my findings, the lack of a National Food Program places a heavy reliance on local community programs in provinces to provide aid. I question if this is why during the COVID-19 pandemic, the rate of food insecurity remained the same for American populations (besides racialized communities) between 2020 and 2021. In contrast, in Canada, the rate of food insecurity increased during those same years for all. This evidence outlines that Canada will benefit from switching the current framework as they presumably strive to improve Canadian families' number of food secure. Based on my research, I recommend that the Canadian



government launch a federally funded program accessible to families in all Canadian provinces, similar to California's model, but on a national scale.

As mentioned, racialized communities across North America, unfortunately, experienced higher rates of food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic (Weber, 2020). Phojanakong et al.'s (2019) research highlighted the importance of dismantling systemic racism and bigotry because if not eliminated, health issues such as food insecurity cannot be effectively diminished. If action is not put into effect to successfully support families from racialized communities, the rate of food insecurity will continue to rise (Phojanakong et al., 2019). Hence, I advise both the United States and Canada to adopt a Universal Free Meal Program as a probable solution to help provide free meals for students from neighbourhoods of diverse economic backgrounds.

Along with providing nutritional support to racialized students, I believe it is equally essential for students of racialized backgrounds to be provided with emotional support by their school staff. I can rationalize emotional support to be needed because food insecurity may make students feel ashamed and different from their peers for needing additional nutritional support. Both Weber (2020) and Ruis (2021) newspaper articles support this suggestion as they recommended increased initiatives to support racialized students when systemic issues like food insecurity are discussed in the classroom. Although Weber (2020) and Ruis (2021) suggest increased efforts are needed to address food insecurity for Canadian families, a critique of the newspaper articles is that they do not explicitly provide actionable recommendations. Therefore, I propose implementing additional mandatory training for educators on how to address issues regarding food insecurity with their students effectively. By obtaining this education, educators can develop strategies on how to apply a culturally responsive pedagogy in their teaching practices that empower students emotionally. I suggest a culturally responsive teaching strategy

that can support this pedagogical approach by actively building relationships with students and inquiring about any support they may need on a consistent basis.

### **Limitations**

I must state that my interpretation of this research was limited by the time frame allocated to conduct my study, thus restricting the number of public documents I could analyze. However, as the COVID-19 pandemic persists, I presume more data will emerge through research and public documents that can further develop the strength of this study and add to my current results. That being said, additional information on innovative strategies to support North American children not receiving sufficient food supply should continue to be investigated.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, this study aimed to determine the impact food insecurity has on North American students, particularly those in the United States and Canada. In my research, fascinating insights were discovered from the public documents analyzed. First, the cruciality food programs have on increasing students' nutritional food intake is clear. Next, racialized students are more affected by food insecurity than their non-racialized peers. Lastly, the COVID-19 pandemic has been a significant barrier to existing social food program operations and access to food. While this study is limited by the number of public documents accessible to analyze, valuable insights that emerged from the ten documents chosen can be used to activate additional academic research to validate the dire need for sufficient government programs to address food insecurity for families in North America. Specifically, I desire further research exploring interventions (e.g. additional funded programs) students can receive that can result in a drastically increased number of children receiving adequate food supply. Overall, I firmly

believe that because Canada and the United States are industrialized countries with immense wealth; it is unacceptable why the numbers of food-insecure children continue to grow with limited viable mitigation initiatives. It will take collaborative action from academics, policymakers, grassroots advocates and governments to address this human rights issue.

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