

Insights from Interview with Dr. Rachel Engler-Stringer

Community Food Security during COVID-19 in Saskatchewan

Pre-COVID-19, food insecurity in Saskatchewan affected 12.5-13% of people.

- The latest report from PROOF indicates the percentage of households experiencing food insecurity in Saskatchewan is 13.9%*

During COVID-19, food insecurity will rise because of rising unemployment rates, as well as emerging issues related to access to food, and the increased demand on existing community services.

- “Poverty is already a significant issue in the community of Saskatoon, and COVID has brought this to the forefront and exacerbated the problem.”
- Food security is primarily determined by access to income in a Saskatchewan context. Because many people have lost their incomes, this has a significant impact on community food security.
- Dr. Engler-Stringer predicts that the situation of food insecurity has likely doubled (based on the rising unemployment rates) during COVID-19.

With the closure of schools, there exists food security implications for students who receive breakfast, lunch or both through a school food program.

- Dr. Engler-Stringer notes that there are many kids (known anecdotally) who do not eat sufficient food outside of school, and that their main source of nutrition are the meals provided through the schools. This is known anecdotally through her work with CHEP Good Food, a community-based organization who works with the Saskatoon Public School and their food programs.

- Since COVID-19, CHEP Good Food has adapted their school food program to meet the emerging needs of the community. They are providing a modified version of their Good Food Box to families of children affected.

The people and communities most impacted by food insecurity during COVID are those who are already marginalized and experiencing food insecurity.

- This includes people with low incomes, and disproportionately affects racialized communities, single parent families (especially single-mother led families) and people in service-industry jobs.

There are both medium-term and long-term risks associated with this increased food insecurity during COVID-19.

- In the medium term, mental health concerns are heightened.
- Families who are already in under-housed situations or living in crowded housing, now have less mobility and cannot leave that situation for any length of time. The most likely challenges we will see quickly may be related to mental health and domestic violence.
- In the long term, there's lots of evidence to show that experiencing periods of food insecurity, such as the many months or more that the COVID-19 crisis could last, can have long-term effects on health, especially for children.

A silver lining to COVID-19 exists. There is public support in this particular moment for innovative solutions that could benefit everyone in the long run, such as Universal Basic Income and a universal school lunch program.

In the end, the crisis needs to be responded to based on the needs communities are identifying. We have to listen to what is being said by community organizations, and respond and do what they say is needed.

We can highlight the stories of how communities are responding and also connect those responses to the greater structural issues that exist.

We need to connect conversations about solutions back to structural issues and not just keep the conversation in the realm of charity as our solution. We need to talk about poverty, low minimum wages and what is needed to live in our societies.

We are in a moment where we have the opportunity to rethink how our society functions. There's an immense opportunity to come out of this crisis stronger and to emerge with a better sense of how to take care of each other in our communities. Let's take advantage of this opportunity.

Engaging for Health Equity

A Community-Campus Response
to COVID-19 in Saskatchewan