



This brief is connected to the [sustainable food systems policy brief](#) one of a series produced by the [Building Back Better Post-COVID-19 Task Force](#), a group of experts affiliated to the [Canadian Commission for UNESCO](#) and its UNESCO Chairs Network. Their goal is to bring together sustainable economic recovery ideas to make our communities stronger in a post-COVID-19 world. The series highlights how responding to the COVID-19 crisis through adaptive and strategic infrastructure investments can preserve critical ecosystems, increase the use of green infrastructure, and protect regional resources and distribution systems. These infrastructures can meet basic human needs and improve human health, while fostering long-term community resilience, well-being and sustainable employment. The suggestions offered in this series support Canada's commitments to the UN Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goals and position the country as a world leader in developing new economies based on environmental sustainability.

FOOD SECURITY THROUGH ECONOMIC SECURITY: RESPONSIVE SOCIAL SUPPORTS AND PROTECTION

Food insecurity and undernourishment remain realities for families around the world and Canada is no exception. In 2017-18, 12.7 percent of Canadians reported some form of food insecurity, though this insecurity is not equally distributed across provinces, communities, or even family members. There is a [more than five-fold difference](#) between food insecurity levels in Quebec (11.1%) and Nunavut

(57%). Within communities, individuals will experience food insecurity differently based on a variety of factors, including race, gender, age and socio-economic status. One in every six children in Canada live or have lived in a household that faced some form of food insecurity. [Academics](#), [advocates](#), and [communities](#) are working extensively to build more robust social systems that recognize the role of economic justice, including sufficient and predictable income, in food security.

The negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on many families – including racialized households, women, and those engaged in low-wage and precarious work arrangements – have compounded and exposed the food insecurity crisis in Canada. A [June 2020 report](#) shows wage earners that were “absent from work due to business closure, layoff, or personal circumstances due to COVID-19, were more likely to be food insecure (28.4%) than those who were working (10.7%)”. Households with children show higher rates of food insecurity, with 13% “sometimes-to-often” unable to provide a balanced, adequate meal, and over 11% of families with children indicated that their food supplies would run out before they were able to afford more food.

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Food insecurity can translate to long-term health consequences: limited intake of fresh fruits and vegetables contributes to greater risk of non-communicable, diet-related diseases (such as diabetes), [costing the Canadian healthcare system](#) millions of dollars annually. Food insecure individuals are also likely to face [premature mortality](#). In addition, food insecurity has been linked to adverse

mental health outcomes, with families during the pandemic in food insecure households [reporting higher levels of severe anxiety](#) than their food-secure counterparts.

This policy brief outlines the interconnectivity between food security, access to a livable income, and supportive social programming and policies.

BASIC INCOME: BUILDING A BROADER NET

The [Ontario Basic Income Network](#) has laid out the intimate ties between adequate income support, health, and food access. It outlines the opportunities presented by the pandemic and post-pandemic period to re-structure programs towards a permanent basic income guarantee. Basic Income (BI) is “an unconditional cash transfer from government to individuals to enable everyone to meet their basic needs, participate in society and live with dignity, regardless of work status” ([Basic Income Canada Network](#)) and is a measure that should be included in any post-COVID recovery plans. It is both predictable and equitable, and recognizes that food insecurity is rooted in income insecurity: 65% of food insecure households generate inadequate [employment income to meet this basic need](#).

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Basic Income programs have been piloted in Canada, with compelling results. Manitoba’s [1970 pilot](#) saw improvements in mental and physical health, with an 8.5 percent decline in hospitalizations. Other pilots consistently also reported improved food access. [Old Age Security](#), for example, has a positive effect on reducing food insecurity in Canada’s older residents. Exploring the [different types of potential basic](#)

[income frameworks](#) to develop a national Basic Income program, indexed for cost of living and location, would help complement other forms of social assistance to reduce poverty, improve health, and provide dignity to the lives of many. Canada would not be alone in moving towards more harmonized, inclusive programming. Amid the pandemic, [Spain has moved forward with one of the largest Basic Income programs](#) by introducing a Minimum Living Income that is targeted at the most vulnerable, including single-parent households.

Basic Income would also open up new opportunities to support small-scale food entrepreneurs and benefit food growers. Current farming policies predominantly support growers who operate larger-scale facilities and depend on international market access, with the exception of Canada’s supply-managed commodities. Basic Income could support innovative and small-scale food producers and new farmers by ensuring access to a predictable income while feeding people in their communities. The [Agrarian Basic Income](#) (ABI) model could help support an agricultural transition to more ecologically sensitive practices and equitable treatment of farm workers. By providing a whole-of-society approach to social protection, we could also uphold the right to food through support for growers, eaters, workers, and the planet.

SOCIAL SYSTEMS REFORM: NARROWING THE GAPS TO CREATE EQUITABLE FUTURES

Basic Income, as part of a holistic approach that includes inclusive social programming (such as subsidized childcare or housing), employment insurance, enhanced labor standards, and retraining programs, is an effective strategy (e.g. [BC](#) and [NFL](#)). All levels of government need to collaborate to provide a more holistic network of supports, including affordable housing, community-led food interventions, comprehensive childcare, broadened health coverage for physical and mental health, and dental care.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed weaknesses in our current social structures and presented the opportunity to reflect on programs such as the Canadian Economic Recovery Benefit (CERB). Implementing a similar Basic Income program for the long-term, while enhancing broader social infrastructure, could significantly improve the lived experiences of Canadian families and communities in post-COVID recovery frameworks.

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CONSIDERATIONS

To ensure everyone in Canada has consistent access to healthy, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food, the following considerations would help build a more holistic approach to food insecurity:

1. Ensuring a Basic Income for all Canadians is a key step forward in providing adequate and timely support.
2. The enhancement of social infrastructure could help families across Canada. Universal childcare, affordable housing, and other forms of inclusive social infrastructure programming are important steps towards supporting families.
3. In addition, reform to social support programming should include the need for enhanced labour regulations and the implementation of a living wage.

These considerations cannot be adopted individually or at the expense of one another; rather, they complement one another. They should be implemented in a comprehensive manner to phase in more extensive policies (such as Basic Income) while reforming existing supports (social assistance and minimum wage) and augmenting access (through affordable housing and childcare, and community-based food initiatives) – resulting in a more inclusive and equitable policy structure for all families.

With each community [facing unique barriers](#) to broader food access, we must consider the overall food environment, such as the need for strong

regional food systems, integrated governance, and place-based public procurement. Looking at integrated and robust systems, like the work on a [Joined-Up Food Policy](#) by MacRae (2020), helps articulate the need to create ‘full integrated architecture’ for food policy, moving away from the insufficient patch work approach of current programs.

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Actions on these issues would help advance the [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDG\)](#) in Canada, to create a society that leaves no one behind. By creating inclusive systems, we will support the realization of SDG 1 (ending poverty), 2 (achieving zero hunger), and 3 (good health and wellbeing) while contributing to other goals.

To build back better, we need to consider structures that will weather future shocks. These investments would establish Canada as a global leader. Creating a Basic Income program provides a consistent and predictable form of support for all Canadians while reforming social programs and employment frameworks. An overarching policy environment that supports equitable access to housing, childcare, and health programming will benefit our society as a whole, fostering greater equity, and creating more inclusive and resilient communities.

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