

# Nourishing Neighbours

## A Joint Initiative to Find Creative Solutions to Food Insecurity for Halton's Vulnerable Populations (Neighbours)

### Executive Summary

A summary of the findings from qualitative data collected with a group of food program users, 'neighbours', held at the Oak Park Neighbourhood Centre, February 22, 2017.



## About the Community Ideas Factory

The Community Ideas Factory is a two-year Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC)-funded project that aims to leverage Sheridan's creativity and research expertise as well as its creative spaces in support of work being done in the Halton Region's charitable sector. Partnering with the Oakville Community Foundation in their effort to implement and execute actions to address key areas of concern in Halton; namely, access to affordable housing, food insecurity, employment equity, and wraparound services.

Dr. Sara Cumming, a Professor of Sociology, and Dr. Michael McNamara, a Professor of Creativity and Creative Thinking lead an interdisciplinary team of Sheridan student researchers, artists, and faculty in identifying the barriers and gaps currently existing in services, as well as aid the Oakville Community Foundation to engage its stakeholders in a series of Creative Problem-Solving facilitations in order to produce plans for new, creative, and fundable projects that align with and advance work in the service sector.

## Partners



# Sheridan

## How can I learn more about the project?

Drs. Sara Cumming, Mike McNamara and team are doing the research study this executive summary is based on. If you have any questions, please contact:

✉ [sara.cumming@sheridancollege.ca](mailto:sara.cumming@sheridancollege.ca)

✉ [michael.mcnamara@sheridancollege.ca](mailto:michael.mcnamara@sheridancollege.ca)

## Acknowledgments

This research would not have been possible without the efforts and support of our community partner, the Oakville Community Foundation, as well as Food for Life who helped make the connections to the neighbours and organize the event. Thank you to the Oak Park Neighbourhood Centre for donating their space for the research. We would also like to express our gratitude to the team of Sheridan College Illustration students who helped live scribe our research.



This research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.



Social Sciences and Humanities  
Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en  
sciences humaines du Canada

Canada

# Food insecurity in Ontario & Halton

The importance of hunger prevention is unquestionable. It is estimated, that approximately 1.7 million Canadian households, comprised of roughly 4 million people, are faced with food insecurity each year. Of these 1.7 million households, 20% or 340,000 are dealing with severe food insecurity – in all likelihood, these are the households that must access food banks to survive. The Ontario Association of Food Banks' (OAFB) 2016 Hunger Count Report reveals that since 2008, food bank use in Canada has increased by 27.8% and serve an overwhelming 335,944 adults and children each month.

On the whole, many factors contribute to food insecurity: poverty, precarious employment, lack of affordability, and an unavailability of access to proper nutrition throughout Ontario. Since so many people are affected by these factors, the population of Canadians dealing with food insecurity is heterogeneous in nature, consisting of both men and women, as well as children, youth and seniors.


Consistent with other cities in Ontario, the Halton Region is currently facing an increase in the local population of individuals and families dealing with food insecurity, malnutrition, and undernourishment. The 2016 Household Food Security & Cost of a Nutritious Food Basket Report for the Halton Region revealed that for the period of In 2013/14, 6.8% of Halton households were identified as food insecure. In Halton, the average cost of a healthy diet has experienced an increase of 2% since 2015, and a whopping 55% since 2003. Further, the estimated cost for nutritious food for a family of four is about \$896 per month.

For low income families and individuals currently receiving social assistance from Ontario Works (OW) and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) or earning minimum wage, the cost of food can represent anywhere between 25% to 40% of their already rigid budgets. At present, a single person on OW receives \$706 per month, in contrast, a single person on ODSP receives around \$1,128 monthly. The average rent for a one bedroom apartment in Halton is \$976. It is obvious that this income is inadequate for covering housing costs, not to mention other expenses such as transportation, personal care items, utilities, and food.

There is a pressing need to unite forces to develop and put into action long-term solutions that will improve hunger for all, and truly make Ontario a healthier, more egalitarian province. Whether reacting to the ever-present issue of food insecurity or making conscious efforts to prevent it, research suggests that a collaboration between public, private, and non-for profit organizations at a federal, provincial, and municipal level is vital. Most of all, municipal governments and service providers must recognize that there is no “universal” solution to food insecurity - that is, while sharing best practices is important, regions such as Halton, must also be responsive to the unique challenges being faced by all municipalities at an individual level.

## What does food insecurity mean?

According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, food insecurity is when people lack secure access to sufficient amounts of safe and nutritious food for normal growth and development, and an active and healthy life. It may be caused by the unavailability of food, insufficient purchasing power, inappropriate distribution or inadequate use of food at the household level.



“...hunger is a symptom of poverty, and without long-term solutions to poverty reduction, there will always be a need for food banks in Ontario”.

- 2016 Hunger Report,  
Ontario Association of Food Banks (OAFB)



# The Halton Food Security Initiative (HFSI)

Recognizing the growing need for action toward food insecurity in Halton, Food for Life (FFL), the Halton Poverty Roundtable (HPRT) and the Region of Halton (the Region) organised a meeting with 18 community organizations to discuss challenges faced by the organizations, share knowledge and explore opportunities for collaboration. Participants included food banks, outreach programs, organizations that provide food as part of a broader range of programming, organizations that focus on food distribution and representatives of food collaboratives.

From this meeting in November 2015 came the development of the Halton Food Security Initiative (HFSI). HFSI's main focus is to increase access to healthy food and obtain long-term solutions that address the core needs of those who are going hungry. They organized the Raising the Bar forum with the goal of generating animated conversations in smaller discussion groups through a series of interactions among interested parties.



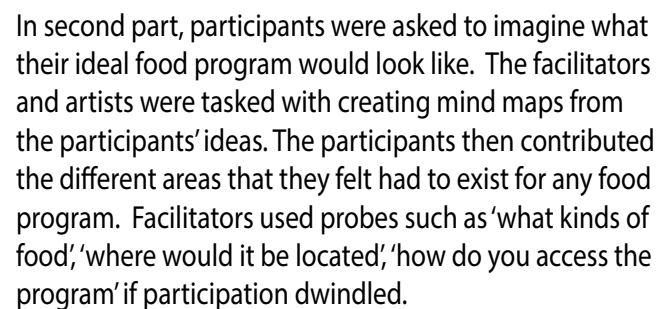
## What are food bank & program users experiences?

On February 22, 2017, the Community Ideas Factory team worked with Food for Life to hold an event with food bank and program users, 'neighbours', to hear about their experiences accessing food in Halton. People were informed about the event through an invitation and word-of-mouth at various food banks and food programs. The number of participants who participated fluctuated between 35-48 throughout the activities. Participants received a \$10 grocery gift card along with travel assistance, as needed.





Participants were divided into four groups, made up of 8 to 10 people, and placed at a table. Each table had a facilitator leading the discussion, and an illustrator capturing the group's ideas in real time drawings.



A hand-drawn illustration of a tree where the trunk and branches represent various social and health issues. The trunk is labeled "Low Access to Healthy FOOD". Branches are labeled with "HOPELESSNESS", "DEPRESSION", "OBSIDITY", "ASHAMED", and "HUNGER". The roots are labeled with "SCREENING VOLUNTEERS", "Transportation", "Asking For ID", "COST OF FOOD", and "NOT CONNECTED TO OTHER SOCIAL PROGRAMS". The tree is surrounded by small plants and a person carrying a backpack.






## Findings: **Barriers** to healthy food access

-  **Lacking financial means** The inability to afford required foods because of income levels was the most often cited reason for having little access to healthy foods by participants.
-  **Navigating Access** Participants noted access to food programs and food banks as barriers, including knowing where the food banks are located, transportation to the food banks, gaining access to healthy food once at the food bank as often you have to provide proof of food insecurity, and experiencing discrimination and stigmatization for needing to use food bank.
-  **Quantity, Quality, Variety** Many participants expressed gratitude that food programs exist, and recognized that the major underlying issue is lack of, or under-employment and poverty. However, participants had concerns about the quantity, quality and variety of foods offered at the varying food programs. The most common concern was for the need for increased access to healthy food, and food that meets the needs of varying health and cultural needs (diabetics, gluten allergies, vegans, halal). Parents of young children also asserted that there is very little 'kid friendly' food and a desperate need for formula and baby food.
-  **Stigmatizing experience** Many participants spoke at length about the stigma associated with the need to access any type of help at all, but especially the embarrassment of not being able to provide basic nutrition for their family. Participants argued that they felt incredibly judged not just by wealthy community members, but also by other food bank users, and the volunteer staff.

## Findings: **Consequences** of food insecurity

After the participants discussed their barriers to accessing healthy food they were asked to discuss the resulting consequences. The facilitator filled out the branches on the tree with the participants' responses to the question, simultaneously the artist illustrated the conversation in real time. The consequences were organized around the six themes that emerged from the data.

-  **Physical Health** The most discussed consequence was a deterioration in physical health. Some of the participants noted that they were chronically hungry and often skipped meals so that there was enough food for their children.
-  **Mental Health** Participants pointed to a number of mental health issues as a result of being hungry or concerned about potential hunger: hopelessness, depression, lethargic, stress, anxiety, they experience in their own lives because of food insecurity.
-  **Financial Crisis** Participants spoke about being so hungry that they made the decision to forgo paying bills, such as hydro and rent, to purchase food. Some participants suggested that their inability to concentrate had resulted in them losing their employment.





## Emotional Health

Many participants stated that their emotional wellbeing has deteriorated significantly over the last couple of years. Seniors articulated they never imagined that after working and paying taxes for the majority of their lives that they would end up in a situation where they needed to rely “on handouts” to survive. Participants who had children at home to feed stated that they felt great shame and embarrassment for their inability to provide adequate nutrition for their families.



## Isolation

Some participants stated that their continual inability to provide food for their children resulted in them having to move back in with family. Others said that they had to rely on family handouts in both food and money over the years. Many participants said that this had resulted in family breakdown. In addition, socializing outside of the house due to lack the finances also contributes to social isolation.



## Generational Issues

Participants also expressed their fear about reproducing poverty in their children's lives. They articulated that lacking food results in children who are unable to concentrate at school, and who, if are lucky enough to attend a school with a child hunger program, are immediately stigmatized.

# Findings: **Solutions** building an ideal food program

Once the causes and effects of food insecurity were determined by participants they were then asked to design their ideal food program. Six themes emerged from the data collected in this Mind Mapping activity.



## Intake Process

In an ideal food program, participants argued that all residents of the Halton Region who need to access a program should automatically be given access without any burden of proof of poverty. Yet there were also concerns about people who do not need the food banks are accessing them too often.



## Programming

Every participant table stated their ideal program would include community based cooking and nutritional classes. Participants also suggested a food program where there were weekly community dinners to provide food, but also help alleviate some of the social isolation many experience. Three of the groups underlined the importance of instituting community gardens where neighbours can actively participate in growing their own food. For example, The Stop, a Toronto based food bank, combines emergency food programs with additional programs such as gardening workshops for children and adults to gain hands-on experience in sustainable food production.

One of the most unexpected programs suggested was for the volunteers who work at the food programs. Every table brought forward the idea that all individuals who work, either for pay or volunteer, should have to go through mandatory sensitivity training prior to working with vulnerable populations, to help decrease discrimination.



## Transportation/Access

Participants recognized that food programs that were associated with particular low income housing locations were ideal, as food was delivered to the building rather than residents having to search out programs. The most commonly stated suggestion was to offer delivery services, especially for the elderly, lone parents of young children and for those with any type of disability.



## Improved quality and variety of food

Participants expressed concern about the quality and types of food that tend to be available in food banks. They are often low in nutrients and high in sugar and starch. As well there were concerns about lack of food labelling, allergies, dietary restrictions, as well as the availability of culturally specific foods.

It must be noted that the Halton Region in particular has taken a lead in this area and is conducting a number of surveys identifying specific agency and community needs for food. Also, food banks are becoming more aware of these nutritional deficiencies, and are trying to integrate strategies to increase the amount of fresh produce being offered. This is reflected in the development of partnerships with community gardens, community kitchens, and farmers' markets, as well as implementation of strategic policies about the adequacy of fresh produce donations, and infrastructural investments in refrigeration.



## Communication Strategies

Ideally food programs would be well advertised with posters throughout the Region, but also through weekly email updates, phone calls and through door-to-door advertising for those who don't have access to a phone or the Internet. Social Assistance offices, Employment Support offices, subsidized and cooperative housing units, apartment buildings and houses in known low income areas could also have a pamphlet that listed programs and services offered throughout the entire region, and would include their hours of operation and intake requirements. Also participants suggested that it would be ideal if administrators of programs, and boards of directors worked to build bridges between the executives and the neighbours, to help reduce stigma and make accessing the food bank service a more pleasant experience.



## Wraparound Services

Participants recognized that those who are most likely to access food programs also require the help of numerous other services such as subsidized housing, subsidized childcare, Ontario Works, Ontario Disability Support Program, Government Pensions, Newcomer programs, Legal Aid, and/or Employment Support services. As a result, an ideal food program would be located in a central location connected in one building to all of these other services.

## Conclusion

Food insecurity and hunger is a major problem in Halton, and Canada more broadly. Working with the communities involved is a crucial step in helping to reduce the day to day burden of food insecurity. This project is unique in its approach, as well as its critical involvement of the communities of people actually experiencing food insecurity every day. The entire community as well as local and federal government, must work together to reduce food insecurity, hunger, and malnutrition in the Halton Region.