

# Household Food Insecurity Community Action Guide



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## About this document

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The target audiences for this action guide are public health professionals and community members.

This document aims to:

- Build a common understanding about household food insecurity
- Support meaningful conversations that engage persons with lived experience, communities, and decision makers in identifying household food insecurity and inequities in their communities.
- Guide effective actions in addressing household food insecurity and related health inequities.

The primary focus of this action guide is to address the root causes and experience of household food insecurity.

The following documents can be found on [Household Food Insecurity: Actions in the Community](#). They provide more background information on household food insecurity:

- Household food insecurity in Alberta: Infographic
- Household food insecurity in Alberta: A Backgrounder
- Household food insecurity lived experience and strategy effectiveness
- PROOF An interdisciplinary research program studying effective policy approaches to reduce household food insecurity

 To connect with a local public health dietitian, email [publichealth.nutrition@ahs.ca](mailto:publichealth.nutrition@ahs.ca).

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Definitions



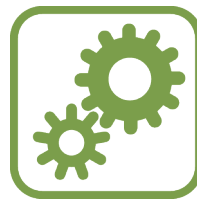
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# Definitions



## Definitions

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You may find people referring to different things when they talk about food security. Having common definitions and understanding about issues community partners want to address is essential to help individuals, groups, or policy makers take appropriate and effective actions.

**Household food insecurity** refers to inadequate or insecure access to food that results from severe financial constraints. It can be sudden, intermittent, frequent, or continual depending on the conditions that led to a household's financial situation. Most often, financial strain occurs because of social and economic inequities in society.<sup>1</sup>

Financial strain is the biggest barrier to individuals and families accessing and consuming adequate food in Canada.

**Community food security** is a broad term with various interpretations. A commonly used definition is a situation in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, and nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice.<sup>2</sup>

Numerous related terms and concepts have been defined to capture different aspects of community food security. For example: healthy food environments, local or sustainable food systems, food sovereignty, food justice, and household food insecurity.

A full discussion of the various dimensions of community food security are beyond the scope of this document. However, it is important to think about the connection between these concepts and household food insecurity.

- Community food security is not the opposite of household food insecurity. It is a broad term with several concepts.
- Addressing household food insecurity and financial strain can reduce health inequities that impact individuals and society.
- Reducing inequities can increase the number of individuals who have the resources to contribute to and participate in changes the community would like to see, such as community food security initiatives. This can make changes more successful.

## Definitions

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**Health equality** is focused on providing equal resources or opportunities to all individuals and groups.<sup>3,4</sup>

**Health equity** is concerned with consistent differences in health between groups because of unfair distribution of the social and economic resources that people need to be healthy, such as income, education, and employment.<sup>3,4</sup>

Enhancing health equity enables each person to reach an optimal outcome by providing the resources and opportunities they need.<sup>3,4</sup>

Examples:



### Health equality

Having a grocery store in town that anyone can go to. It is used by many people in the community, but not all can afford to shop there.



### Health equity

Everyone having enough money so they can afford to buy food they need at the grocery store.

➤ For more information on health inequities, visit [National Collaborating Centre for the Determinants of Health](#).

# About household food insecurity





## About household food insecurity

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Many communities are concerned with the increasing rates of household food insecurity. Communities see the negative impacts on their friends, family and neighbors. For example, poor health, stress, and social isolation.

Household food insecurity occurs when there is too little money for food (financial strain) and, as such, requires income-based solutions.

There are many actions that communities can take to reduce the burden of financial strain and its impacts on individuals and the community.

> Read [Beyond hunger: The hidden impacts of food insecurity](#) to learn more about the impact of household food insecurity

### Facts



**21.9%** of households in Alberta were food insecure in 2022<sup>1</sup>



**27.2%** of all children in Alberta lived in food insecure households in 2022<sup>1</sup>



**80%** of adults who experience household food insecurity say it negatively impacts their physical and mental health<sup>5</sup>



**58%** of adults say household food insecurity negatively affects their ability to participate in community<sup>5</sup>

## About household food insecurity

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### Household food insecurity is a symptom of financial strain.

By the time a household begins to experience food insecurity they have already been struggling to pay their bills and meet other basic needs for some time.

Households that experience financial strain often reduce their expenses by skipping meals and medications because they need to prioritize other basic needs like rent and utilities.

“You shouldn’t have to choose between paying rent and eating dinner... that’s the choice we face.”  
- [Goldie Wallensky](#)<sup>7</sup>

#### Who is affected\*?



**2 in 5** households who receive social assistance in Alberta<sup>1</sup>



**1 in 6** households who rely on employment income in Alberta<sup>1</sup>



**1 in 4** renters in Canada<sup>1</sup>



**2 in 5** single mothers in Canada<sup>1</sup>

#### The problem is getting worse

In 2023, 43% of survey respondents reported feeling financially worse off than they did one year ago.<sup>8</sup> Factors affecting financial hardship include Covid-19 pandemic, global conflict, affordable housing crisis, and increased cost of living.

It’s more and more difficult to keep up with rising cost of basic needs.

\* Data from [Household Food Insecurity in Canada 2022 Report, PROOF](#)

## About household food insecurity

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### How can communities help?

A thriving community is possible when all individuals can contribute to and fully participate in society.

Communities can address the underlying issues of financial strain to reduce household food insecurity and health inequities by applying an equity lens and taking a collaborative approach.

The section [Planning principles](#) provides guidance on key messages for starting conversations and planning actions with others in your community.

The section [Ideas for action](#) provides suggestions on steps community can take.



Addressing household food insecurity requires collaboration, building partnerships, networking, and taking collective actions across sectors and settings.

## About household food insecurity

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### Resources for working together

The “Alberta Healthy Communities Approach” is an example of a collaborative approach for working with community partners. It can be adapted to the scope of your work. Visit the [Alberta Healthy Communities webpage](#) to find information and examples of how communities have worked together to build environments that support healthy eating.

The Tamarack Institute promotes a collective impact approach to specifically address poverty and inequities in communities. The [Tamarack Institute](#) offers extensive training and many resources for engaging communities in change.

Whatever approach you choose, the [planning principles and tools](#) in this toolkit can help your group focus conversations and actions on the unique aspects of household food insecurity and inequities.

### Alberta Healthy Communities Approach



# Planning principles



## Planning principles

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Together, communities can promote dignity, choice, and equity through actions that are strengths-based, inclusive, accessible, responsive, and based on the experience of those living with food insecurity and financial strain.

This section provides some principles to keep in mind when engaging communities in conversations about household food insecurity:

1. Aim to increase awareness that household food insecurity is a symptom of financial strain and social inequities
2. Shift conversations towards actions that address financial strain and inequities
3. Reduce barriers to accessing existing programs and services
4. Use a strengths-based approach to identify existing resources and foster collaboration.

Tools are available to help you with each of the principles, including how to frame conversations with partners in the community.

## Planning principles

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### 1. Aim to increase awareness that household food insecurity is a symptom of financial strain and social inequities.

Social and economic barriers, such as income, employment, education, racism, and colonialism, make it hard for many people to have enough money to cover the cost of their basic needs. Those who are most affected include racialized groups, those working in low wage and precarious jobs, and those on social assistance.<sup>1,8</sup>

For example, individuals who identify as Indigenous or black are **2-3X more likely** to experience household food insecurity compared to those who identify as white.<sup>1</sup> **7 out of 10** households who experience food insecurity in Alberta are actively working to earn income, yet they cannot make ends meet.<sup>1</sup>

An understanding of what causes household food insecurity, who experiences it, and **addressing misconceptions** can help groups focus on diverse solutions that reduce food insecurity, financial strain, and their negative impacts.



### Tools to build understanding

- Poverty simulation replicates a month in the life of a family living in poverty. The experience can challenge perceptions, strengthen understanding, and increase empathy. In-person sessions are run by some United Way chapters. You can also use [Make The Month](#), an online version of the simulation.
- Empathy mapping, community personas, and journey mapping are activities that can help groups capture the perspectives of those experiencing financial strain and other barriers.

See Activities 1–3 (pages 14–18) in the [Population Health Needs Framework User's Guide](#) for worksheets.

- See [Appendix A](#) for a list of common assumptions and misconceptions about household food insecurity.

## Planning principles

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### 2. Shift conversations towards actions that address financial strain and inequities.

Bring together a group with common goals. Reducing household food insecurity requires actions to address its underlying cause - financial strain and inequities.

Although food insecurity is caused by financial strain, a common response is to create food programs and services. Thus, conversations about potential actions may shift towards food hampers, meal programs, food literacy, local food systems, or healthy food environments. While these programs can have some social and health benefits, they do not address the underlying social and economic reasons that contribute to household food insecurity.

Many of these food programs are also facing growing demands. Demand will continue to grow if the underlying causes of household food insecurity are not addressed.

Look at the [Ideas for Action](#) section for examples on your community can take to address financial strain and inequities

“What would it take for me? More money! More money, it’s really a financial problem.”<sup>9</sup>



### Framing conversations to promote understanding of health inequities

Communities and decision makers are more likely to take collective action to address health inequities when they understand the social and economic determinants that contribute to the inequities. How these facts are presented is crucial to building a shared understanding.

Tools:

- [Communicating about the social determinants of health: income inequality and health](#)
- [Communicating the social determinants of health: guidelines for common messaging](#)



## Planning principles

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### 3. Reduce barriers to accessing existing programs and services.

The experiences of household food insecurity and financial strain create barriers for households to participate in the community. For example:

- Unable to access services due to lack of or cost of transportation
- Reluctant to participate in programs due to fear of stigma and judgement
- Unable to afford recreation or community events

These barriers can negatively affect a person's sense of connectedness and belonging. The [Building Financial Well-being Toolkit](#) (page 6) contains strategies to help reduce barriers to participating in existing programs and services.<sup>10</sup>

- Be accessible
- Consolidate and simplify
- Listen
- Take a strength-based approach
- Be adaptable and responsive.

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Helping those who are in most need in the community enhances equity.



### Assessing impacts on health equity

Some policies or programs may unintentionally benefit some groups more than others. This can increase health inequities.

Assess the impact of the policy or program on individuals experiencing financial strain by asking<sup>11</sup>:

- What are the unintended positive impacts?
- What are the unintended negative impacts?
- Were groups facing the greatest inequities involved in the planning process?

Consider ways to enhance positive impacts and minimize unintended negative impacts.

For example, a free income tax filing clinic is open 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. on weekdays. The clinic hours make it hard for low-income families to attend. These families may work several jobs or have limited flexibility to take time off to go to the clinic.

Providing weekend and evening hours and/or doing outreach clinics may make it easier for families to benefit from this services.

## Planning principles

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### 4. Use a strengths-based approach to identify existing resources and foster collaboration.

Many communities have existing services, resources, people, and other strengths that can improve the quality of life for those who experience household food insecurity and financial strain.<sup>12</sup>

Bringing interested groups together to create connections and leverage resources can inspire creative actions towards common goals.

While some of the existing programs and services in your community may not directly address financial strain, increasing awareness and communication between groups can create opportunities for more income-based solutions.

For example, partnering with parenting groups to provide benefit navigation services or supporting households via a [grocery gift card program](#) to increase dignity and choice to meet personal, cultural, religious, and health needs.



### Asset based community development

Solving community challenges requires collective action. The asset-based community development approach can bring partners together to:

- Identify common goals and opportunities to work together.
- Build on what is already working well in the community to address household food insecurity and financial strain.

Many tools are available through the Tamarack Institute to support community change, including [asset-based community development](#), and other approaches to addressing poverty and inequities.

# Planning principles

This infographic contains key messages and actions on household food insecurity. It reflects the principles discussed in this section. You can use it to guide your conversations with others in the community to build awareness and common understanding about household food insecurity. It can help you brainstorm ideas for action.

Statistics

Positions household food insecurity as a symptom of financial strain requiring income-based solutions

Why it is important to communities



Ideas for action that consider dignity, inclusion, and equity

Website for more information

➤ Access this [infographic at www.ahs.ca/HFIcommunity](http://www.ahs.ca/HFIcommunity).

# Ideas for action



## Ideas for action

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Below are some ways communities can help to reduce the impact of household food insecurity and financial strain. Example actions are provided on the next page.



### Where do we start?

Engage diverse stakeholders, including individuals who face barriers and inequities, to identify issues, opportunities and assets to take actions on household food insecurity in your community. You may start with actions that address needs and align with the opportunities and/or assets identified.

Over time, build momentum and strive to undertake strategies that may be more complex, but will have [greater impact](#) on the underlying causes of financial strain and health inequity.

## Ideas for action

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Action	Examples
Reduce social and economic barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Understand socio-economic barriers and identify opportunities for change</li><li>• Co-create community policies and programs to address identified barriers with groups who experience household food insecurity</li><li>• Assess services and programs for impact on <a href="#">health equity</a> for equity denied groups</li><li>• Have conversations on <a href="#">living wages</a>, basic income, and other supports.</li></ul>
Connect to income supports and benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Help with benefit navigation and income tax filing</li><li>• Help with getting government IDs, which is needed to access services and benefits</li><li>• Help with applying for special diet funding for those on social assistance.</li></ul>
Shift to charitable responses that are income-based versus food-based	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Help with basic needs in a way that enhances choice and dignity. For example: grocery gift cards, low-cost transportation passes, free parking, and low fee recreation passes.</li></ul>
Reduce stigma, increase inclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Normalize talking about household food insecurity and financial strain. Acknowledge that it can affect health and well-being</li><li>• Develop less intrusive intake processes for support programs</li><li>• Review opportunities to widen eligibility criteria so more people can participate</li><li>• Flexible service hours so individuals don't have to take time off from work to attend appointments.</li></ul>

 See the [Building Financial Well-being: A Community Planning Toolkit](#) for more ideas and success stories from other communities.

## Ideas for action

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### For effective and sustainable change

- **Partner** with others on creative solutions.
- Tailor actions based on your **local context**.
- Co-create with those who have **lived expertise of household food insecurity and financial strain**.
- Build on **what is already working well** in your community.

Pages 24–31 provide considerations for specific settings:



[Community food-based programs](#)



[Indigenous communities](#)



[Schools, child & youth programs](#)



[Service providers](#)

## Ideas for action

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### Considerations for community food-based programs

- **Switch to grocery gift cards** to offer clients more dignified access to foods. A grocery gift cards can empower household to buy foods that meet their personal, cultural, and health needs.

Clients receiving grocery gift cards report improved financial, nutritional, social, and emotional wellbeing and less food waste.<sup>13</sup>

Research shows participants do not take advantage of grocery gift card programs and the money goes towards food.<sup>13</sup>

Agencies that switch to providing gift cards report increased efficiency, more money going to clients, and reduced operational costs.

Learn about the [impact](#) experienced by one non-profit program and their clients.

“With grocery gift cards, you’re able to go out and pick out your own food. It just makes you feel human. It makes me feel like I just did that myself. I didn’t have somebody do it for me.”

– [iCAN program participant](#)<sup>13</sup>

“My child is very intrigued with baking and cooking. I always had all the tools for it, but I just didn’t have the money to go get all the ingredients. So now he plans meals with the grocery gift cards.”

– [iCAN program participant](#)<sup>13</sup>



## Ideas for action

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### Considerations for community food-based programs

- **Partner with others in the community to connect clients to income-based programs and services available in community** to help households access eligible income benefits and supports.

For example:

- Free income tax clinics
- Community programs (e.g., benefit navigation services)
- Financial assistance programs
- [Skills and training](#) programs.

- **Explore ways to create a less intrusive intake process.** For example, asking less information to prove eligibility to reduce stigma or burden on the clients.

- **Consider ways that food programs can be more accessible and inclusive** by reducing barriers, such as extending service hours, providing alternative pick-up locations, delivery services, translation services, and dignified screening processes.

- **Work with clients to understand how the food program can better meet their needs.**

For example:

- Work with clients to help them access the foods they need to meet their personal and cultural preferences and religious and health needs
- Provide relatively more expensive, perishable, nutritionally dense foods, such as milk or plant-based beverages, cheese, meat, vegetables, and fruit that clients struggle to afford.

## Ideas for action

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### Considerations for Indigenous communities

- Colonial policies, such as residential school and land use policies, have negatively impacted the social determinants of health for Indigenous people. This increases Indigenous people's risk of household food insecurity.
- In addition to income, communities may face additional barriers to accessing food such as the lack of access to market and traditional foods.<sup>14</sup> These barriers may overlap to make it more difficult for communities to reach their food and nutrition goals. For example, the cost of equipment may reduce ability to hunt or gather food.<sup>14</sup>
- Many community-led actions to enhance access to traditional food and food sovereignty can also reduce the burden of household food insecurity and financial strain.

The Indigenous food sovereignty movement is about reclaiming control over food systems and promoting traditional food practices.

- Indigenous communities are diverse. Work with each community to understand their unique priorities, challenges, community assets and opportunities.
- Grant funding may be available to support community initiatives and infrastructure projects from the federal government.
- Healthcare and service providers should be aware that Indigenous people have access to different funding and coverage for nutrition products and special diet funding depending on their situation. For example: Indigenous identity, treaty status, and living on or off reserve.

Be familiar with different funding and coverage available. Work with your client to understand their situation and support them with accessing funding and coverage based on their needs and health goals.

## Ideas for action

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### Considerations for Indigenous communities

#### Resources for community action

- The [Alberta First Nations Food Sovereignty Declaration](#) provides guidance and a list of recommendations to increase access to traditional foods in community programs and facilities.
- [Indigenous Traditional Food Systems](#) (Communities Choosewell) contains information and examples on how First Nation communities in Alberta are returning to traditional food systems.
- The [Planning for Food Security \(First Nation Health Authority\)](#) toolkit provides ideas for planning community actions.
- [Success stories](#) from Alberta.

#### Resources for healthcare and service providers

- The [funding options for special diets and nutrition products](#) document may help you identify the types of coverage and funding your client may be eligible for.
- For First Nations clients living on-reserve receiving income support, such as AISH, contact the client's First Nation Social Director for more details on funding availability and eligibility.
- For First Nations children under 18 years, consider applying to Jordan's Principle to help cover the cost of healthy foods, formula, or specialty food products. Contact the [First Nations Health Consortium](#) to learn about how to apply and what is covered.

## Ideas for action

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### Considerations for schools, child & youth programs

- **Consider dignity, equity, and inclusion for activities and programs.** Assess whether activities may unintentionally make students experiencing food insecurity feel excluded or judged. For example: potlucks, healthy snack challenge, and food records.

Contact [schoolhealthandwellness@ahs.ca](mailto:schoolhealthandwellness@ahs.ca) if you would like ideas or a presentation on how to shift activities to consider diversity, equity, and inclusion in schools.

- **Support families experiencing food insecurity with access to income-based supports** through referral to free tax clinics and local community supports whenever possible, or advocate for such programs if they do not exist.

Ideas include setting up tables with information about program and services available at school events such as parent teacher interview or sharing information in the school newsletter.

- **Explore ways to reduce families' financial burden.** For example, reduced school and program fees without the need to prove income, installment payment options, and community sponsorship to cover extracurricular costs.
- **Existing schools or child and youth programs that offer food-based programs for families experiencing financial strain can be enhanced by:**
  - Maintaining anonymity throughout the process (application and distribution)
  - Providing food for the whole family rather than only the child or youth
  - Providing grocery gift cards instead of food to give families choices and flexibility to buy what they need
  - If offering food, focus on healthy foods such as fruit and milk.

## Ideas for action

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### Considerations for schools and child & youth programs

- **School food programs**, such as breakfast, lunch, or snack programs, can provide benefits such as opportunities for social connection and exposure to a variety of foods.

Consider ways that food programs can be more accessible and inclusive by:

- Ensuring **all children and youth** have access to the food program, thereby reducing stigma for those who participate
- Offering a variety of vegetables and fruits. Research shows that vegetable and fruit programs are the most effective way of improving nutrition and health for all students
- Offer foods from different cultures.

**Note:** While school food programs can meet children's immediate food needs at school, they do not reduce the rates of household food insecurity, which is caused by financial strain.<sup>15</sup>

More considerations for schools can be found in the article “Household Food Insecurity: Common Questions from Educators” on p. 24 of [Ever Active Healthy Schools Alberta Magazine Fall 2023 Issue](#).

## Ideas for action

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### Considerations for service providers

- Service providers can assess for financial strain in one-on-one settings.
- Ask about financial strain to guide referrals to income-based supports, such as [special diet funding](#), which more effectively addresses the root cause of household food insecurity.

Asking about financial strain is not about solving food insecurity or financial problems. Rather, it is about understanding how a household's financial circumstances affects their health and living situation. It can help providers create realistic care plans.

Questions about levels of household food insecurity tend to lead to food-based responses, which do not address the financial hardship that led to food insecurity.

- Financial strain may not be a topic that individuals have an easy time raising on their own without being asked. Asking about whether someone has difficulty making ends meet at the end of the month can normalize talking about financial strain and validate their experiences.

This conversation can help service providers better understand their client's experiences, which can support referrals to resources that better meet their needs. Check out this [module](#) for information on how to talk about financial strain.

- The [Nutrition Guideline: Household Food Insecurity](#) provides more information for care providers to identify and address household food insecurity.
- More information for care providers can be found at [www.ahs.ca/foodinsecurity](http://www.ahs.ca/foodinsecurity).

# Appendix



## Appendix A: Common assumptions about household food insecurity

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Assumptions	Facts
<b>Household food insecurity is a hunger issue</b>	Household food insecurity is a symptom of a larger struggle to keep up with the cost of living and meet basic needs. All levels of household food insecurity, from worrying about being able to afford adequate food to skipping meals, causes adverse physical, mental, social, and spiritual impacts across all age groups. <sup>16,17</sup>
<b>Only unemployed people experience household food insecurity</b>	While households relying on social assistance have a higher risk of household, in Alberta, 68% of households experiencing food insecurity relied on wages or salaries as their main source of income. <sup>1</sup> Those most likely to experience household food insecurity have low wages, have short-term or precarious jobs, are racialized, work multiple jobs, and/or often provide for multiple people. <sup>18</sup>
<b>Households who are food insecure spend their money on items they don't need or lack skills and motivation</b>	Food insecure households prioritize necessities such as housing and utilities, which takes up most of their budget. They spend less on everything, including food, compared to food secure households. These households are also resourceful, have similar food skills to food secure households, and invest significant energy in strategies to make ends meet. <sup>6,9</sup> This is not enough to break free from poverty. More support to address financial strain is needed.
<b>The youngest children in a household are most at risk</b>	Parents and older children (adolescents) often sacrifice their needs to ensure younger children have enough to eat. <sup>9</sup> However, children are aware of and worry when parents eat less to feed them. <sup>19</sup> Providing food to only children and not the whole household doesn't alleviate the stress children see and may reinforce food related worries.



## Appendix A: Common assumptions about household food insecurity

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Assumptions	Facts
<b>Older adults are more vulnerable to household food insecurity</b>	Older adults are more protected from household food insecurity in Canada due to Old Age Security and Guaranteed Income Supplement. <sup>20</sup> But the raising cost of living affects everyone, including those with fixed incomes and greater healthcare needs. <sup>5</sup> <a href="#">Nutrition screening</a> can help identify financial, social, and physical barriers and connect older adults to person-centered supports.
<b>Improving food access through charitable food programs will reduce household food insecurity</b>	While low-cost or charitable food programs may provide immediate relief, overall, they do not reduce household food insecurity because it doesn't address the underlying cause of financial strain. <sup>21</sup> Additionally, many households experiencing food insecurity do not access these programs due to perceived stigma, accessibility, or feel it does not meet their cultural and health needs. <sup>9</sup>
<b>School food programs reduce household food insecurity among children</b>	School food programs may improve access to healthy food at school for all participating children. However, providing meal or snack programs at schools is unlikely to impact food insecurity in the household. Studies have found that food programs may actually increase children's worry around their family members not having enough food. <sup>22,23</sup> If schools are running food programs, it is important that schools offer universal food programs to reduce the risk of unintentionally creating stigma, which can reduce participation in the program. <sup>24</sup>
<b>Budgeting resources and food skills programs are helpful for everyone who experiences household food insecurity</b>	<p>Households that experience food insecurity are twice as likely to report shopping with a food budget and have similar food skills compared to food secure households.<sup>25</sup></p> <p>However, food insecure households may encounter obstacles with applying conventional budgeting and cooking tips due to limited transportation, unstable housing situations, limited time, and lack of essential appliances and food storage.<sup>9</sup> Strategies such as buying in bulk, visiting multiple stores for deals, using food-price comparison apps, and cooking in large quantities are more suitable for households who have more spending flexibility than those experiencing moderate or severe food insecurity.</p> <p>Ask your client to understand what their social context is and what would be most helpful for them.</p>

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