

*"I feel all food should be available to everybody. The cost should not come into being a factor [for] those of us who have the least because of where we've been pigeonholed."*

"And like I don't eat, only at supper time. I know it's bad. I try to make sure that the food's there for the kids. People are like, 'how do you do it? You're starving yourself.'"

## FROM CRISIS TO CONTINUITY

A community response  
to local food systems  
challenges in, and  
beyond the days of  
COVID-19



*"But as a single person, I really have no idea where else I would qualify [for food access supports]. It's um, I almost feel like I don't count."*

"They said groceries have gone up 200%, but yet nobody's pensions or anything have gone up at all. So that doesn't make sense."

"I can pay the hydro bills OR I can have a home cooked meal."

*"One car repair or one pet getting sick or [my partner] getting sick and we're sunk."*

*"Folks, it's not that easy, like easy isn't even part of the equation."*

"Food is where we can have wiggle room."

# FROM CRISIS TO CONTINUITY

## A community response to local food systems challenges in, and beyond the days of COVID-19

Exploring the impact of, and community response to, COVID-19 on Peterborough's local food system, and how the community is responding to those impacts

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The Inter-Provincial Survey: Food Access, Concerns and Perceptions  
During the COVID-19 Pandemic, 2020 group

<https://www.kpu.ca/isfs/covid19-consumer-survey>

### Front cover:

The quotations were all provided by people who participated in this study's interviews for low-income Peterborough-area residents.

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# SUMMARY

"We are all in this together," a common refrain in the early days of the global pandemic, was very quickly exposed as simply untrue. Indeed, the pandemic continues to expose new and exacerbate existing inequities among Canadians, phenomena seen perhaps most acutely within the context of our food systems. While corporate grocery retailers post record profits,<sup>i</sup> migrant farm workers, supermarket staff, and food service staff have continued to work at elevated risk of infection for minimal compensation. Strikingly, just two months into the global pandemic's widespread transformation to life across Canada, Statistics Canada estimated that 39% more people were food insecure, a jump from 10.5% to 14.6% of the total population.<sup>ii</sup> This added over a million people to the 4.4 million people already living with food insecurity in this country before the pandemic.<sup>iii</sup> Put simply, COVID-19 has resulted in punishing impacts across our food system.

Almost immediately after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, local food systems advocates and activists, along with researchers from Trent University, began organizing to brace against the coming disruptions. An evidence-based understanding of the ongoing local impacts of the pandemic was identified as a priority. This report provides a summary of findings from the resulting community-based action research project focused on how COVID-19 impacted the local food system in Peterborough, Ontario.

The project was generously supported by Trent University's Rapid Response to COVID-19 funding envelope and undertaken in collaboration with members of Peterborough's Future of Food and Farming Working Group, the Peterborough Food Action Network, and its Food Access for Vulnerable Populations Network. In addition, Peterborough Public Health offered safe space for interviews and provided grocery gift cards for compensation for interview participants. The project balanced the necessity for immediate action given the acuity of the crisis and the longer-term planning needed to address ongoing food systems inequities. This was accomplished through a two-pronged approach focused on understanding and supporting (a) how food systems actors in Peterborough were organizing to meet the emergent needs of the crisis, while (b) strategizing to transition to a more sustainable and resilient food system at the local level in the aftermath of COVID-19.

The research summarized in this report was conducted between June 2020 and April 2021 and consisted of two surveys and one set of semi-structured interviews. One survey focused on food access and consumption patterns of Peterborough-area residents and the other aimed to better understand how community organizations were engaging in food access work within the tumult of the global pandemic. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with local people living on low incomes to understand their food experiences in the context of the pandemic.

Generally, we found:

- The local impacts of the global pandemic were experienced unequally, with more severe consequences for marginalized populations. This included increased challenges for low-income, LGBTQ+, and lone mother residents as well as youth, and those living with disabilities or living alone. Seniors, however, seemed more food resilient.
- The pandemic brought food and food issues front and centre for many people as they thought about or experienced disruptions in their ability to access food.
- People adjusted their food behaviours in inconsistent ways, with some emphasizing healthy and local food and others eating less healthy and more industrial food.
- The effects of social isolation, including mental health concerns, increased for food program staff and volunteer residents in general.
- For some, food was a resource to leverage as a way to cope with, adapt to, and withstand the realities of the pandemic – for some, cooking more at home and having more time for meals with household family members brought comfort in uncertain times.
- With limited resources, local community food organizations quickly restructured their supports to safely address the most acute needs of residents while maintaining a focus on more sustainable solutions to food inequities.



# BACKGROUND

Even before the pandemic, the Peterborough area faced numerous intersecting food system crises. Locally, 16% of households in the region served by Peterborough Public Health (vs 12% across Ontario) were food insecure in 2011-2014.<sup>iv</sup> Alarming, households with children under 18 and households led by female lone parents each had food insecurity levels about double the provincial average.<sup>v</sup> In fact, a devastating one half of local female lone-parent households were food insecure.<sup>vi</sup> The area also struggles with homelessness, housing unaffordability, and overdoses.<sup>vii viii ix</sup> At the same time, the loss of farms, farmland and total land in crops due to development, farmland consolidation and a variety of other factors has been more rapid in Peterborough than elsewhere in the province.<sup>x</sup> In short, vulnerabilities in the local Peterborough food systems were clear and present even before the global pandemic.

In March, 2020, PFAN, like so many organizations, shifted its primary focus from creating systems level change to addressing more immediate food access needs. The group launched the Food Access for Vulnerable Populations Network “to bring organizations and community advocates together, who are concerned about food access for vulnerable populations. The hope is to better understand current concerns, needs, and resources” (March 19, 2020 meeting notes). The research team’s active pre-pandemic presence on PFAN continued with this new network. Network members, in their determination to address the current and future food needs of local residents, sought to better understand how people were responding to the pandemic with regard to food

and how community supports were addressing their current needs and continuing to push for a fairer, more sustainable food system. This research stemmed from some of these discussions.

**FOOD INSECURITY** is defined as “*the inadequate or insecure access to food because of financial constraint*” (p.3).

It is categorized as marginal, moderate, or severe. Each year Statistics Canada measures rates of food insecurity within participating provinces and territories through the Canada Community Health Survey. Across the country, food insecurity is experienced differently between certain populations.<sup>xi</sup>

For example:

- **adults living alone** in experience higher levels of food insecurity than couples with or without children.<sup>xii</sup>
- **lone-mother households** across Canada (and in Peterborough) are found to be at a strikingly high risk of food insecurity.<sup>xiii xiv</sup>
- **seniors’** severe food insecurity across Canada actually *drops by half* for unattached adults upon reaching age 65, the eligible age for a Guaranteed Annual Income.<sup>xv</sup>

## Key Peterborough Food Networks

**The Peterborough Food Action Network (PFAN)** began in 2007 as a working group of the Peterborough Poverty Reduction Network. It maintains the goal to “Ensure that everyone in Peterborough has enough healthy food to eat as part of a long-term food security strategy.”<sup>1</sup> To do so, PFAN promotes community food security in Peterborough City, County, and local First Nations by bringing together anyone who supports this purpose (including social agency staff, public health staff, faith community representatives, community food advocates, academics, and people with lived experience of poverty and food insecurity). PFAN focuses on addressing food insecurity’s roots, particularly income insecurity, by using the 3-part Food Security Continuum model which includes a) food access, b) capacity building (skills, knowledge, community), and c) systems change. Peterborough’s Medical Officer of Health chairs PFAN, while Peterborough Public Health also provides the network with additional staff, administrative support, and meeting space.

**The COVID-19 and Food Access for Vulnerable Populations Network** developed out of PFAN with the support of Peterborough Public Health in March 2020. It has focused on limiting COVID-19 transmission while trying to understand and address food insecurity among vulnerable populations through emergency food provision and advocacy for long-term solutions. Membership is open and has

included: food programs and organizations; social services; researchers; advocates; and individuals with lived experience of poverty and marginality.

**Nourish**, which is administered through the YWCA Peterborough Haliburton, works in collaboration with many community partners to promote healthy food access, food skills (growing and cooking food), advocacy, and community building. Nourish was often mentioned by the study’s low-income respondents as a support during the pandemic. At the start of the pandemic, Nourish changed its JustFood healthy food box program to an emergency food box program in order to be able to reach more people in need. In doing so, it collaborated with Peterborough Public Health and local social service organizations to identify groups in need and shifted to a home delivery model so that more people could access healthy food safely.

**Peterborough’s Future of Food and Farming Working Group** focuses on strengthening local food in Peterborough City and County. To this end, it brings together a range of people from across the food system to engage in research, education, and advocacy. During the pandemic, it helped address a growing interest in local food by developing online tools to assist consumers with finding local producers (see [peterboroughfarmfresh.ca](http://peterboroughfarmfresh.ca) and [localfoodptbo.ca](http://localfoodptbo.ca)).

1. Peterborough Food Action Network. (2015). Terms of reference. <http://www.foodinpeterborough.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/151217-PCFN-Terms-of-Reference.pdf>

# METHOD

From July to August, 2020, two surveys were conducted, including:

- **General Population survey** which asked local residents about how and where they were accessing food. It was circulated to community food networks, social service organizations, faith communities, the Trent University community, and local politicians to be shared with local residents. This survey was informed by the work of the Inter-Provincial Survey: Food Access, Concerns and Perceptions During the COVID-19 Pandemic, 2020 group, and the Household Food Security Survey Module.
- **Community organization survey** which asked food-focused community organizations about programming, food choices, funding, staffing, volunteers, perceptions, needs, and government supports. It was distributed to food access, food literacy, urban agriculture, food advocacy, and environmental groups, and food networks.

The quantitative data from the survey results were aggregated, analyzed as a whole, and then differentiated by general population subgroup. The qualitative data from text responses were analyzed through inductive coding. On October 15, 2020, the researchers presented preliminary findings from the surveys at a webinar where four individuals representing

food-centred organizations in Peterborough provided context by speaking about changes they had seen and experienced in their work so far during the pandemic. On Dec. 17, 2020, the researchers hosted a second webinar featuring two experts in the field – Dr. Elaine Power and Dr. Rod MacRae – designed to generate ideas and discussion focused on ways to address food insecurity and build local food system resilience.

Subsequently, between January 2021 and March 2021, **semi-structured interviews** with people living on low incomes were conducted. Participants were provided the opportunity to share their pandemic food experiences through talking as well as drawing on paper. These interviews sought to develop a deeper understanding of the impacts of the global pandemic on the food access and food practices of those living on low income, given that low income is a significant predictor of food insecurity.<sup>xvi</sup> Recordings of the interviews were transcribed, and the responses amalgamated and coded.

# LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Several factors limit the generalizability of the study's general population survey:

- This study's convenience sample cannot be considered representative of the Peterborough census metropolitan area as a whole. In particular, the sample included a much higher percentage (79%) of respondents who identified as female than that of the general Peterborough area population (52%) and a lower percentage of people aged 65 or over (10%) as compared to the local proportion (22%).
- The survey question on household income inadvertently omitted an income bracket for those with incomes under \$20,000. It also included the bracket, "\$70,000 to \$70,999," which should have read "\$70,000 to \$79,999." This could have led people with household incomes under \$20,000 or between \$70,999 to \$79,999 to skip the question or to select another, inaccurate income bracket.
- While the breakout samples (e.g., lone mothers, seniors) allow for glimpses of the differential experiences of groups with diverse vulnerabilities, these subsamples are quite small (15 to 51 respondents), especially for visible minority/racialized people.

In addition, the interview sample is quite homogeneous with regard to gender, racial-ethnic identity, and disabilities. While the study findings may not be generalizable, they do offer insight into the ways in which the pandemic has affected the experiences of individuals and food-focused organizations within the Peterborough area.

# WHAT WE FOUND — GENERAL POPULATION SURVEY

## Who Responded?

Of 311 total survey respondents, 232 met all the criteria (including being 18 years old or older and residing in the Peterborough area) and proceeded with the substantive survey questions. Youth 18 to 25 and people living on their own each made up about a fifth of the sample. Very few respondents identified as racialized or visible minorities.

Survey Respondent Groups	Number
Total eligible respondents	232
Youth 18-25 yrs.	51
One-person households	46
Male, not part of any listed equity-seeking group <sup>2</sup>	30
Seniors 65+ yrs.	23
People with disabilities	23
Lone mothers	22
LGBTQ+	21
Visible minorities/racialized people	15

### Household incomes of \$20,000 to \$24,999:

**59%**

of youth aged 18-25

### Household incomes of over \$100,000:

**54%**

of males not identifying as part of an equity-seeking group

## Income Levels

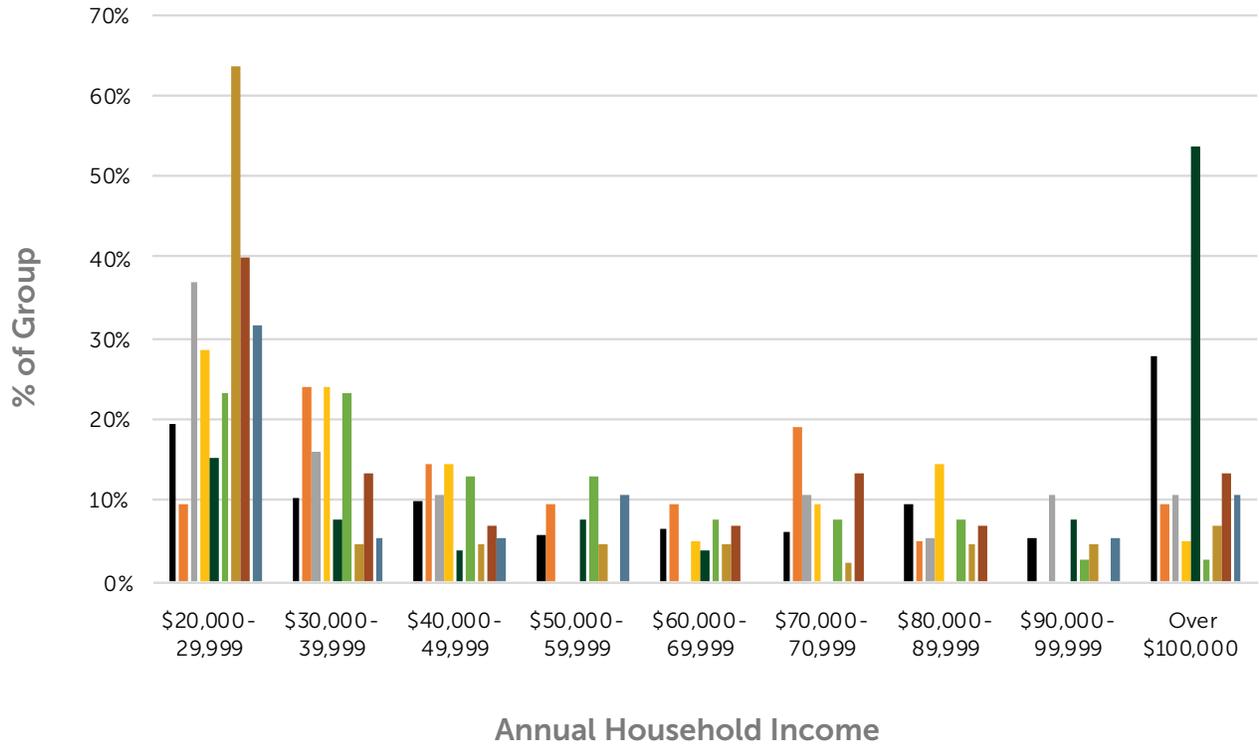
**Lack of middle incomes:** Respondents' reported annual household income revealed a marked absence of a middle class. Of the 199 household income responses, slightly over half were either under \$30,000 or above \$90,000. Overall, they show a downward curve for middle incomes of \$50,000 to \$70,000. No **people with disabilities** fit in this middle range. However, this downward curve was less evident among **seniors**, who showed a greater percentage of middle incomes and a more even range of incomes. In fact, 81% of seniors (vs 48% of the total sample) had middle incomes in the range of \$30,000 to \$89,999.

**Low incomes and high incomes:** A greater proportion of **youth, visible minorities, lone mothers, one-person households, and people with disabilities** lived on low household incomes and fewer lived on high incomes than the total sample. Strikingly, **40% of visible minorities/racialized people and 59% of youth aged 18-25 reported living on incomes of \$20,000 to \$24,999.**

**High incomes:** The over-\$100,000 bracket was dominated by respondents identifying as **male but not as part of an identified equity-seeking group (54% of this group).**<sup>xviii</sup>

2. Visible minorities/racialized people, people with disabilities, women, and LGBTQ+ people.

# ANNUAL HOUSEHOLD INCOME BY GROUP



- Total Sample
- People with disabilities
- Male, no equity-seeking group
- Youth 18-25
- LGBTQ+
- Seniors
- Lone Mothers
- One-person households
- Visible Minorities

## Changes in Employment Status

While employment status for most (69%) of the respondents remained unchanged, 3% lost fulltime employment and 10% lost part-time employment. This suggests greater precarity in part-time work. Overall, 21% of respondents reported a drop in employment status, either by being laid off or moving from fulltime to part-time hours. However, there was little increase in receipt of government supports as a main source of income, even though additional income supports like the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) and Canada Emergency Student Benefit had both been in place for several months. In fact, of the 41 people who were laid off or furloughed since the pandemic's start, fewer than half (18) reported CERB as their main source of income. This low rate could reflect a lack of need for, awareness of, or eligibility for these benefits.

A much higher percentage of people with disabilities than the total sample (43% vs 12%) reported their main source of income before the pandemic as government supports and many fewer reported fulltime employment as their main source of income. The percentage of people with disabilities reporting government supports, even without considering CERB, as their main source of income increased since before the pandemic (43% to 57%).

A full 40% of LGBTQ+ respondents lost their jobs and another 10% went from fulltime to part-time since before the pandemic.

Perhaps surprisingly, most lone mothers were employed full-time (55% vs 50% of the total sample before the pandemic and 59% vs 47% since the pandemic began). The proportion of lone mothers with full-time employment seems to contradict their low incomes, suggesting that their fulltime work may not provide sufficient incomes. Also, more lone mothers saw changes to their employment status, mostly around starting new jobs, since the start of the pandemic. The percentage of lone mothers whose main income was government supports (even with the launch of CERB) stayed the same while it rose for the total sample.

### Employment Status Pre-COVID-19 to Present

Full time	51% to 48%
Part-time	20% to 10%
No change	69%
Laid off / Full time to Part-time	21%
Government support as main source of income (only 1 mention of CERB, 7 of CESB)	12% to 14%

## Pandemic Concerns

Respondents were clearly concerned about the pandemic itself, reporting an average of 7.74 out of 10 level of concern. The average level of reported concern about food availability during the pandemic was somewhat lower at 6.22/10. As one respondent stated,

*"I am worried about food sources being [a]ffected by the pandemic and if shortages happen there will be a rapid increase in cost. I do not know how long our current food system will last and how other parts of the world will be able to manage if a place like Canada cannot keep up."*

The most concern about the pandemic itself (9/10) was expressed by seniors while the most concern about food availability (7.1/10) was expressed by people with disabilities

## Worry About Affording Food

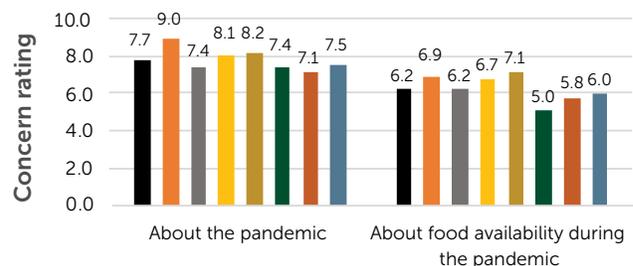
Before the pandemic, more than a quarter (28%) of respondents often or sometimes worried about affording food. This rose to 44% since the pandemic began.

- The percentage of those with household **incomes under \$30,000**, who often worried about being able to afford food rose from 13.5% to 32%.
- Conversely, pre-pandemic **no seniors** often worried about affording enough food for themselves and their households, but this rose to 5% since the pandemic started.

## Accessing Food

More than half of the participants shared that food access had become more difficult since the onset of the pandemic although the vast majority were eventually able to access what they needed. Fear of shopping stood out as the most common reason for this difficulty and points to the added stress experienced by people in their attempts to access food.

### CONCERN RATED OUT OF 10



Concern type by group



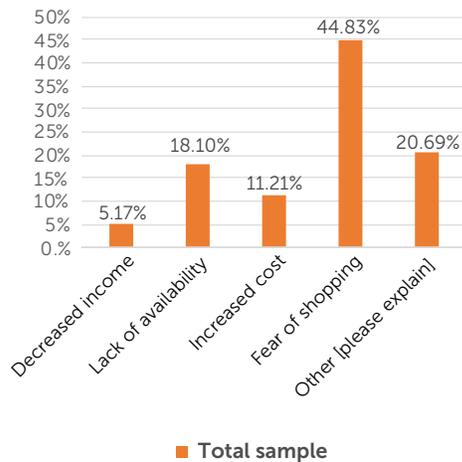
Has the pandemic made it more difficult for you to access food?

Yes – 53%

If yes, were you ultimately able to access the food that met you/your household's cultural and health needs?

Yes – 86%

If yes (more difficult), what has made it more difficult for you to access food?



### Food Emergencies & Emergency Food

There was wide variance among groups in response to the statement, "The food I buy doesn't last, and there isn't any money for more food." For example, no seniors responded that, pre-pandemic, this occurred often and only one said this was sometimes true. During the pandemic, again no seniors responded 'often' and only 2 responded 'sometimes.' Seniors struggled less with this issue than every group identified, even males not identifying with any listed equity-seeking group. Concerningly, high proportions of **people with disabilities** and **people with household incomes of \$20,000-\$29,999** reported food not lasting and not being able to afford more both before and since the pandemic began. For lone mothers, the proportion jumped while for people with disabilities it dropped but remained high.

- **No seniors** accessed food through food banks or free community meals either before COVID-19 or since. This may result from a lack of need for these supports, challenges in physically accessing them, or choices to physically distance from them.

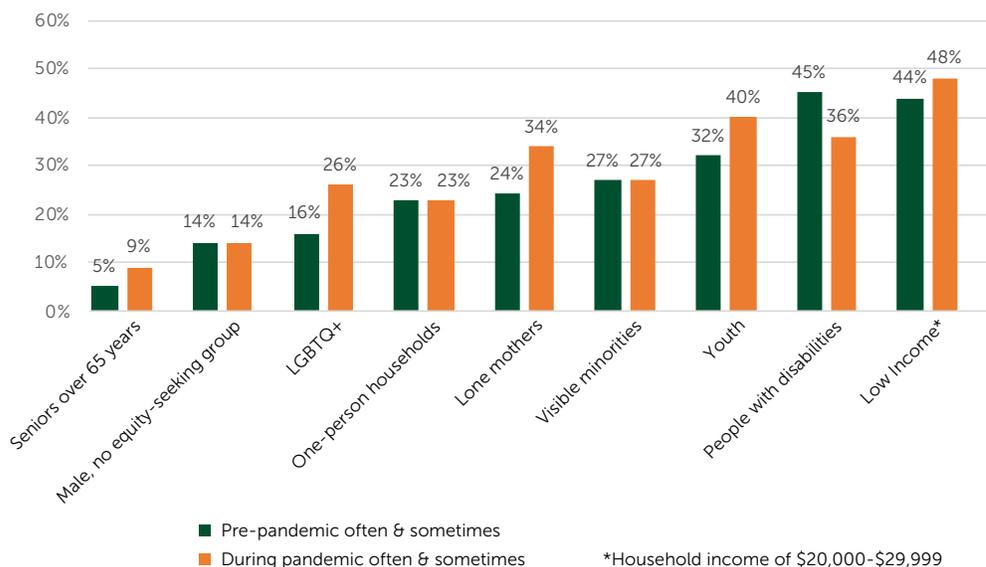
*"...so I would have to go into the store. This made me really uncomfortable and made my relationship with shopping change as I would go quickly and just grab what I could to not be inside the store long. Which meant that I would grab produce that wasn't the best at times, or rotting at times. We for a while, wiped everything down, as we were afraid to be contaminated by the food."*

- No **lone mothers** either before or since the pandemic often used emergency food supports. Although there appears to be a need among this population for greater food access, the results may also demonstrate the perceived or actual risk and challenge in accessing food banks during the pandemic, particularly with children.
- More **one-person households** than the total sample often accessed emergency food supports although the percentage decreased slightly for both groups with the onset of the pandemic. This suggests a higher need among one-person households but a possible reluctance or inability to access food banks since the pandemic began.

- More **people with disabilities** than the general sample reported challenges in being able to afford the food they needed. This could speak to people with disabilities having higher-cost food and other needs, but also to the inadequacy of their incomes.

It should be noted that, while high rates of emergency food program usage may suggest high levels of food insecurity, low rates cannot be said to reflect low levels of food insecurity. In fact, before the pandemic, only about one fifth of food insecure people across Canada accessed food banks.<sup>xix</sup> Increased physical distancing and social isolation, along with food bank closures, schedule reductions, and procedural changes could mean fewer people using those services.

### “The food I buy doesn’t last and there isn’t any money for more food.”



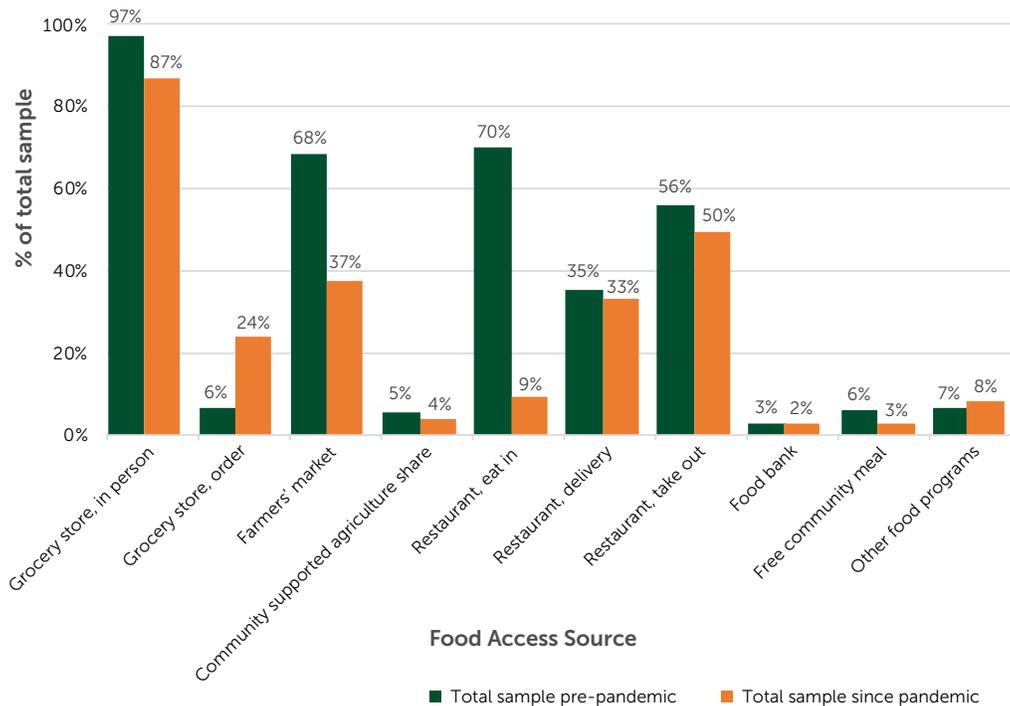
## Sources for Food Access

Overall, a more chaotic picture of the use of food access sources emerged with the pandemic. The use of grocery store orders, one of the only ways to access food at home, was the only food source to see a substantial increase in users. Except for a slight increase in people using “other food programs,” the percentage of people using all other food sources, especially restaurant dine-in and farmers’ markets, dropped. While it is understandable that people did not make use of dine-in services that ceased during the first wave of the pandemic, it is interesting that farmers’ market usage dropped markedly

given the higher safety of outdoor spaces over indoor ones. However, as the quote here suggests, many shoppers may have preferred to access all or most of their food in one place that carried it, such as a supermarket.

*“I would say that I started to do my shopping all at once in one single place (such as big supermarkets) instead of getting my food from different places (such as different local businesses with different speciality products), in order to avoid entering in multiple spaces and interacting with more people.”*

### “How did/do you access food?”



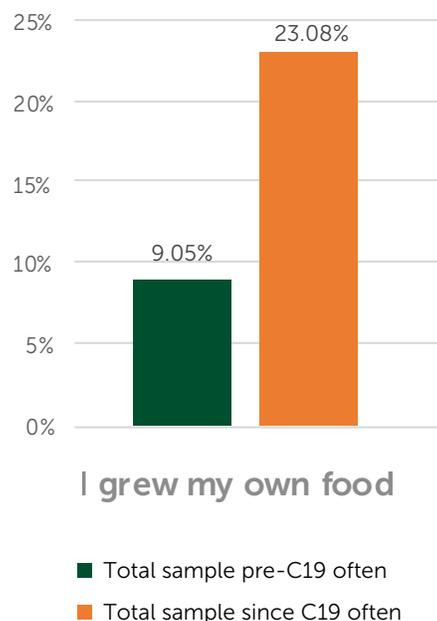
- Fewer people with disabilities than the total sample accessed food at any kind of venue both before and since the pandemic began. The only exception is that slightly more people with disabilities accessed food at food banks prior to the pandemic. This may speak to people with disabilities having support people in their lives to access food for them. However, more concerningly, it may suggest that people with disabilities live with pandemic-like social isolation and avoidance of food venues even outside of pandemic times.
- All the seniors shopped in grocery stores before COVID-19. However, the proportion who accessed food at grocery stores and farmers' markets dropped more sharply for seniors than for others. This may result from seniors' understanding of being at increased risk from COVID-19 and therefore needing to avoid public locations.
- Lone mothers made more use of restaurant delivery and take-out than others both before and since the pandemic. This may indicate a lack of time or opportunity to prepare family meals and/or pressure from children to make use of fast-food outlets.

## Food Growing

Many people began growing their own food during the start of the pandemic. One respondent declared, *"My relationship with food has gotten better since the start of the pandemic. I've grown more food this year than ever before,"* while another stated, *"We planted a huge garden this spring with vegetables and greens in case there were food supply shortages."*

Food growing seems to have been a more viable strategy for those with higher incomes, perhaps because of the initial costs and space involved. No visible minority/racialized respondents often grew their own food pre-pandemic or have often grown it since.

### "I grow/grew my own food"



## Less Local Food for Some and More for Others

Residents showed varied responses to the pandemic when it came to accessing local food. For some, there was an increase in accessing local food in order to: support local vendors; access healthy food; and support a more resilient food system. For others, fear and uncertainty led to 1) accessing more industrial packaged food, which they believed to be safer, and 2) shopping at big box stores to limit their shopping stops and potential exposure to COVID-19.

There was also a substantial increase in those who often pay attention to food news, a notable change given everything in the news in the summer of 2020. In particular, more one-person households than the total sample often paid

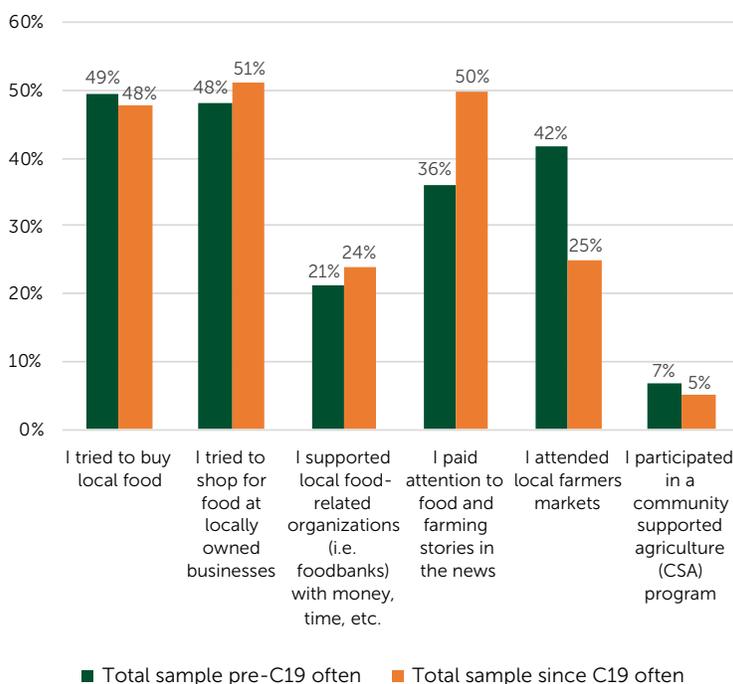
attention to food and farming stories in the news and this percentage increased since before the pandemic.

*"I go to Walmart mostly as it is a one-stop shop for me"*

*"I now buy as much food as possible from local farmers, and small stores.... I don't even look at the prices at the store, I just feel fortunate to have access to healthy food."*

*"A lot more thought about where I'm ordering food from and consciously choosing to get delivery from locally owned and operated restaurants."*

### Local Food Experiences Before and Since COVID-19 was a Global Pandemic (Often)



## Health Impacts

Home cooking and eating together with one's household, both generally regarded as health-promoting practices, rose since before the pandemic.<sup>xx</sup> Often eating home cooked meals occurred among the vast majority of seniors pre-pandemic although it dropped with the pandemic.

Some survey participants reported detrimental impacts of the pandemic on their food practices that included less meal planning, less food preparation, and eating less healthy food. As one participant stated,

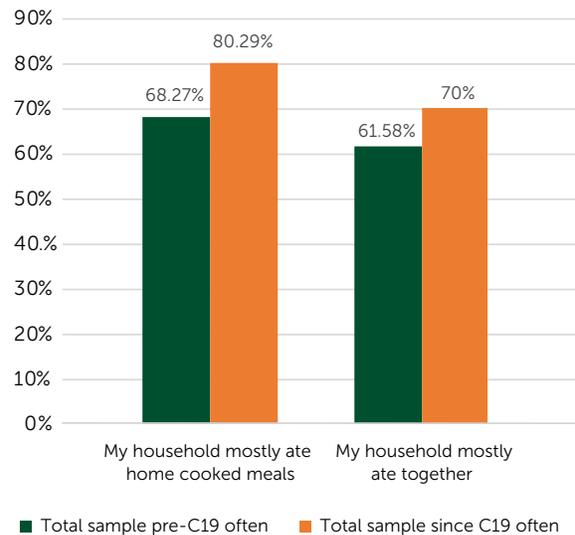
*"The overall fear and anxiety in our household caused us to be poorer at planning meals and thus [we] spent more on fast-food and delivery. It was that overall feeling of being overwhelmed. I did not attend a store for the first 3 months of the pandemic and had others shop for me."*

On the other hand, some participants noted an improvement:

*"I think since the pandemic came about, I've been increasingly focused on ensuring I eat healthy, balanced meals so that my immune system and body overall is as healthy as it can be, should I become infected."*

*"I am eating much better because we are making our own food from whole ingredients at home. My health has noticeably improved."*

## Eating Practices Before and Since the Pandemic (Often)



# WHAT WE FOUND: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS WITH LOW-INCOME RESIDENTS

## Who Responded?

Overall, 13 local individuals who identified as living on low incomes participated in interviews either by phone or by Zoom. The vast majority of them identified as female, with some post-secondary education, not racialized, and as having a disability or health condition.

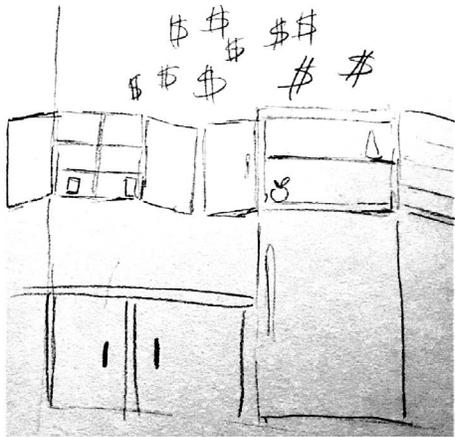
Accessing sufficient quantities and quality of food constituted a clear challenge and priority for low-income interview participants. In fact, when asked “Can you tell me about times during the pandemic when you perhaps could not feed yourself (or your household) the way that you wanted to?” one person responded, “That seems to be like all the time now” while another stated “most of the time.” A third person stated “No, I’ve been okay so far. I’m lucky”—but was only eating once a day. One participant, who illustrated her pandemic food experiences, showed a kitchen almost empty of food and indicated the need for money to address this.

Many of the participants’ struggles related to issues *external* to the pandemic such as moving, leaving school just before the pandemic, disabilities, health issues and, more frequently, already-inadequate incomes. However, the pandemic itself certainly exacerbated participants’ challenges as they:

- tried to avoid public food venues and eating with others
- waited for in-person food programs to re-open
- stretched their dollars to cope with increased prices

- experienced greater isolation
- worried about cleaning their groceries
- and became used to eating less food, less healthy food, and less preferred foods (e.g., leftovers, carbohydrates, high-sodium canned food, and cheaper produce)

Interview Participants (n=13)	
Age	30-72; 6 in their 40s
Gender	2 identified as male
Education	all but 1 have some post-secondary
Current education	1 currently post-secondary
Racial/Ethnic background	almost all identified as White/Caucasian/Canadian/European-descended
Disabilities	all but one identified having disabilities or health conditions. The remaining participant has a child with a disability
Monthly household income	\$896 to \$2,800; most (9) were \$2,000 or less
Employment	3 employed
Household composition	2 on their own; 3 with a room-mate/housemate



The participants noted barriers to food access such as lack of public transit and money for gas to get to food venues and concerns about waiting with other people outside in lines at grocery stores and food banks. Some found that the monotony of their days during the pandemic has left them less motivated around preparing and eating food. Mental health issues also interfered with participants' energy/capacity to access, grow, and prepare food. As one participant noted:

*"when you have so many other stressors in life, planting plants and growing seeds and all that stuff seems simple enough, but there's so much extra energy and effort [needed]. And to persistently put into growing plants in general, let alone food-bearing plants, that it's not just a matter of 'if you want it bad enough, that you'll do it.'"*

For the most part, interview participants acquired most of their food at grocery stores. While many reported eating less meat during the pandemic, others were eating less fresh vegetables, fruit, and other food they deemed healthy. Generally, they were eating more carbohydrates, such as pasta, bread, rice and

prepared foods. A few were eating more fresh fruits and vegetables, sometimes because these were provided through the food boxes they accessed through Nourish (see description on p. 5).

A disparity between government income supports for perceived workers and non-workers did not go unnoticed by participants.

*"\$2,000 [a month] basic income? \$500 a week is what they've been talking about, but like legit, I mean the federal government sat back and went '\$2,000, that's what people need to survive.' And even then, I'm like, 'that wasn't enough.' But I think honestly as the basic income, if that's what they're going to go with for the CERB, then at the very least, they need to be looking at ODSP and OW and raising [them] up to that amount. I think it should be a basic income for all."*

No one mentioned personally receiving pandemic government income supports, except for one person who received CERB at the start of the pandemic and a couple people who received \$100 monthly for a few months from Ontario's discretionary COVID-19 Emergency Benefit for social assistance recipients, a benefit that they noted to be too little and terminated too early. One participant explained, "that went for like half a cart of groceries, which helped me." Another was baffled that this support has ended well before the pandemic did: "We all lost it in August, but the pandemic didn't go away. So, if we had qualified then, why are we not in qualification of needing now in the second wave of a lockdown?"

For the most part, participants who accessed pandemic supports did so through community programs. They spoke about the value of: food boxes from Nourish and children's schools; meals delivered by Food Not Bombs; and online cooking classes through Peterborough Public Health.

Among their best food experiences during the pandemic, participants enjoyed:

- being able to access food through programs or buy it themselves
- opportunities to connect with others through food
- participating in community gardens
- and being able to prepare healthier food, in part because of the produce boxes delivered by Nourish

The full list of participants' recommendations can be found in Appendix A. When asked to identify what is needed to make it easier for people in the Peterborough area to eat the way they need to or want to, numerous participants mentioned a need for more income in the form of: Basic Income; livable wages; social assistance levels that match CERB; higher Old Age Pension, Canada Pension Plan, Ontario Works, and Ontario Disability Support plan benefits; universal pharmaceutical care; and geared-to-income dental care. Similarly, many wanted to see greater affordability (e.g., of food, rent, utilities, transit, and prescription drugs). They also wanted to see government more involved in ensuring that people are able to eat and can follow Canada's Food Guide.

Other recommendations included more access to food banks, an expansion of delivered essential food boxes such as those provided by Nourish, and more community gardens. Some of their ideas reflected a concern for supporting others (such as local food producers and providers to have revenue, neighbours to have sufficient food, and others to have food literacy skills). Some participants also wanted more engagement by community members through, for example, volunteering, generally looking out for each other, and raising their voices to build a more just food system.

When asked about programs that could help people connect through food, participants spoke about: cooking, budgeting and food skills classes; more ways for people to eat together, either through online means or in-person (e.g., community picnics); and ways of checking in on each other. Seniors, New Canadians, and people with specific cultural or religious food traditions were specifically mentioned as perhaps being more isolated and needing such supports around food. There was also a need expressed for greater awareness of what programs are available.

Overall, these interview participants felt that they have been coping through the pandemic by drawing on their resourcefulness, versatility (e.g., eat the same non-preferred foods often), acceptance/gratitude, and resilience.

# WHAT WE FOUND: FOOD ORGANIZATIONS SURVEY

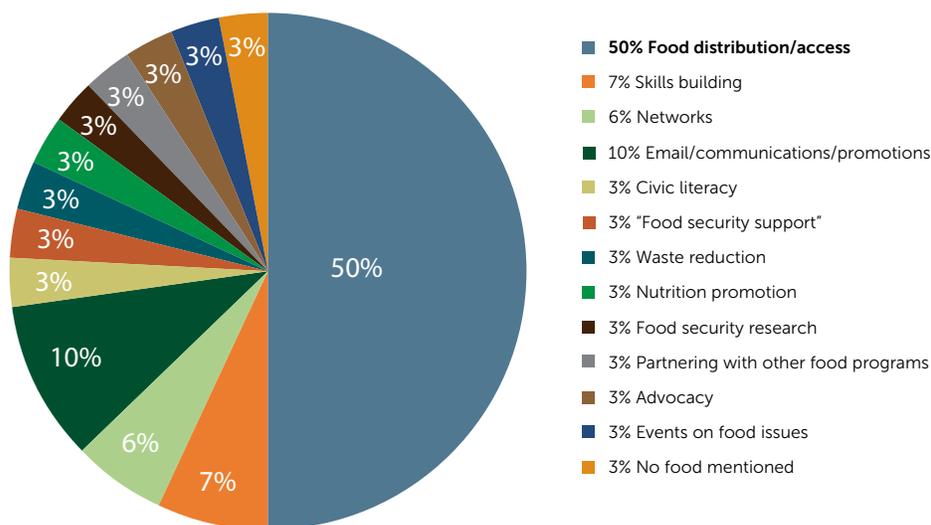
## Who Responded?

For the second survey, 25 individuals representing food programs or food organizations in the Peterborough area answered questions about the ways their organizations' programming, operations, and needs may have changed since the pandemic began. The usual food-related activities of these groups included skills building, nutrition promotion, and food issues events, as well as several related activities such as advocacy, building community networks, and civic literacy. Half of the groups' activities concerned some form of food distribution or food access provision and 17 respondents mentioned that their usual program activities included some form of food distribution.

## Overall Program Changes

Respondents spoke about various changes such as closing, suspending, and restricting programs. They also described attempts to shift programs to phone or online formats. There was some increase in low-contact approaches to food access such as driveway pick-ups or home deliveries, and distributing non-food resources such as water and personal protective equipment.

## DESCRIBE YOUR USUAL PROGRAM ACTIVITIES



## Human Resources

Many community members have been eager to contribute to food access efforts during the pandemic. However, various program changes to facilitate physical distancing, along with the suspension of some volunteers (based on personal or organizational decisions as a health-related precaution) have left many organizations more short-handed than ever. In part, this speaks to the significant contribution of seniors to the volunteer work force locally—many of whom were not able to continue volunteering on the front lines during the early months of the global pandemic. However, it also underscores the profound precarity of the human services sector which is chronically underfunded and, as a result, extremely reliant on volunteer labour.

For many volunteers, this led to a sense of disconnection, a loss of social connection and sense of meaning, and feeling helpless to support the people served by their organization. As one respondent put it, a significant theme throughout the pandemic has been volunteers' "sadness at not being able to do more."

Unlike volunteer numbers, there was little change to staffing levels. The impacts on staff related more to mental/emotional challenges, feelings of helplessness, and workload increases related to increased administrative and safety demands, switching to remote-based approaches, technology-based work, and unpredictability.

When organizations were asked what they needed during the pandemic, some responded that they needed more funding, although others said they did not need anything more. However, looking beyond the pandemic, organizations reported that they needed sustainable funding for human resources and staffing in order to effectively deliver on their mandates. Others noted that structural changes, such as the introduction of a Basic Income, are important levers that could contribute to the wellbeing of the people and communities they work with.

## Program Participants

Although physical distancing and related program closures and changes made it harder for workers to know how participants were faring during the early months of the pandemic, organizational respondents reported that the pandemic amplified the struggles of already-vulnerable people. It was typical to see more food insecurity, more income insecurity, and other vulnerabilities like housing insecurity. Additionally, staff reported that their clients felt increased isolation and disconnection, resulting in acute mental/emotional challenges. As one respondent observed, *"It [the pandemic and resulting program changes] has dramatically impacted their emotional health and mental health. We have seen a huge increase in suicidal behaviour and significant escalation in mental health symptoms."*

*"The issue of food insecurity in many ways is taking a backseat to social isolation amongst people we serve."*

## Tensions in the Sector

PFAN has long approached addressing food insecurity through a three-pronged strategy that focuses on increasing food access, building capacity (skills, knowledge, relationships), and addressing the systemic root causes of food insecurity. PFAN, along with many organizations, activists, and scholars knows that addressing the root causes of food insecurity is the only way to ensure enduring food security for all.

However, when the pandemic began, PFAN went on hold almost overnight and initiated the Food Access for Vulnerable Populations network. The initiative developed out of recognition for the increased risks the pandemic created for those already living with constant emergencies, and the realization that many more people were becoming vulnerable. The development of the new network marked an intentional shift towards emergency food provisioning in the community. Initially the new network met weekly to coordinate, in real time, community needs and available food supplies. Organizations pulled together and saw their communities recognize and respond to food insecurity in their own neighbourhoods.

At the same time, most capacity-building programs—involving preserving, cooking, eating, and learning—were suspended to reduce the transmission risks of in-person contact. While some advocacy efforts continued, network members feared losing ground in this shift away from the work of social change. They also worried that the renewed emphasis on emergency food would be understood as an implicit endorsement of food charity as a viable solution to food insecurity. As one network member remarked, suspending solidarity-building programs *“removed a critical tool in helping participants imagine new possibilities.”*

Similarly, organizations felt a sense of loss as they shuttered programs, lost or suspended volunteers, and implemented strict physical distancing protocols. Community, conviviality, and mutual support—all so essential to systems change work, were practically eliminated overnight. One respondent noted the difficult irony: *“People are socially isolating, but the organization has usually encouraged people to NOT isolate.”*

# SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

While COVID-19 persists as an unprecedented global event, in at least one way its impact has been sadly predictable: it has disproportionately been felt among those already made most vulnerable in our society. As food insecurity both deepened and broadened, the already-overburdened food security advocacy sector strained under these cascading challenges.

This research adds to growing evidence documenting the fact that challenges around food experiences are being felt differently during the pandemic, in ways that reflect existing vulnerabilities and marginalities. Importantly, this work demonstrates that Peterborough is not immune to the challenges posed by this global pandemic—indeed, in some ways Peterborough has been particularly vulnerable. Given already high rates of food insecurity, and the ongoing housing and opioid crises, the fallout from COVID-19 as it relates to food security in the community may be more acute, and enduring, than elsewhere.

Some clear trends, by way of summary, are worth underscoring:

## **The pandemic had significant consequences for people’s relationship to food**

For many people, the earliest days of the global pandemic might conjure memories of panic buying and empty store shelves. Our data show that people in Peterborough were paying very close attention to food-related news and experiencing high levels of concern about food during the early days of the global pandemic. Thankfully, while global food supply chains bent, they didn’t break.

Interestingly, the strategies people employed to access food within the context of risk, uncertainty, and general panic differed substantially. For some, the pandemic led to prioritizing local food, growing their own food, and shopping at locally-owned small businesses. Others, however, prioritized heavily processed and packaged food, and shopped at big box retailers to avoid making multiple trips. For some people and families, the pandemic meant eating home cooked meals more often together, and for others, social isolation was a constant theme throughout the study period.

As many have observed, the food system disruptions caused by COVID-19 may well have afforded us a dress rehearsal for the challenges to come related to climate change and other potential pandemics. It is clear that, at the moment, our local or regional food systems are not equipped to withstand a more significant external shock. In order to build more resilient and more equitably accessible local/regional food systems in the months and years to come, we will need to build local food system capacity through, for example, support for diversified investments in production, local processing and distribution infrastructure, and strengthening local producer-processor retail/wholesale-consumer linkages.

## **Those already made most vulnerable continue to be left behind**

Overall, and consistent with longer-term income trends, our data show a hollowing out of the middle class. The exception to this is among seniors who experience relative income stability likely as a result of Old Age Security and Guaranteed Income Supplement. Many youth,

as well as visible minorities/racialized people, people with disabilities, lone mothers, LGBTQ+ individuals and one-person households were over-represented in lower income brackets. In contrast, the majority of male respondents who were not part of equity-seeking groups appeared in higher income brackets.

Our data show that people working part-time were more likely to lose work during the research period than those with full-time employment. LGBTQ+ people in particular disproportionately experienced loss of jobs and loss of hours during the study period. These data, again, underscore that existing precarity is a strong predictor for deepening precarity related to the pandemic.

We found similar patterns related to food insecurity. Despite the common belief that seniors are at a high risk for insecurity, this study was more consistent with national research showing that, in Canada, the risk of severe food insecurity for unattached adults on income assistance actually drops at age 65, when Old Age Security and Guaranteed Income Supplement become available.<sup>xxi</sup> In contrast, youth, people with disabilities, and people on low incomes reported increased concern about food availability and experiences suggesting increased food insecurity during the study period.

People with disabilities, in particular, revealed some serious concern with food access. In addition to a high proportion experiencing low income, they expressed a high level of concern about food availability during the pandemic, high levels of food not lasting and not having

money to buy more, concern with being able to afford food, and less use of food access sources except food banks.

### **Frontline service agencies and volunteers rose to the challenge of filling in the gaps**

In the absence of a coordinated response from either the federal or provincial governments, local front-line agencies collaboratively responded to the food systems challenges posed by COVID-19. The Food Access for Vulnerable Populations network emerged as a real-time virtual platform through which to collaboratively strategize and to coordinate emergency food access. Importantly, the network also provided a venue for beleaguered sector workers to commiserate, to support each other, and to simply share virtual space.

During the same period, the Future of Food and Farming Working Group and Farms at Work, propelled largely by voluntary labour, secured grant money to develop online tools to help link local producers with consumers looking for local food (see [peterboroughfarmfresh.ca](http://peterboroughfarmfresh.ca) and [localfoodptbo.ca](http://localfoodptbo.ca)). These online resources were incredibly valuable at a time when interest in local food access was on the rise.

These innovations born out of crisis represent perhaps a silver lining, and may well be part of the enduring legacy of the global pandemic's local impacts. The dedication, passion and hard work of many volunteers, underpaid front line staff, and local food systems leaders no doubt dampened the impact of COVID-19 on our local food system.

**But the charitable organizations and voluntary sectors cannot replace a robust, publicly funded, universal social safety net**

The COVID-19 pandemic did not create food insecurity and health inequities: it amplified them. The intensification of Peterborough's already-serious problem of food insecurity has tested a system that is heavily reliant on volunteer labour, donated goods, and insufficiently funded programs. In other words, an already-frayed bandage of supports has been enlisted to cover a broader area of harm.

During the pandemic, the Ontario Government provided small bandages like the new \$100/month emergency benefit for eligible Ontario Social Assistance recipients. It was torn off after 3 months. The Federal Government provided larger bandages to food access organizations like food banks (themselves bandage programs). CERB income support of \$2,000/month may have helped many, but it also excluded those without sufficient recent employment income and left others worried about ultimately having to repay it.

Paid and unpaid community workers and marginalized households themselves have continued to inherit the work and stress of ensuring people's survival needs are met. Notwithstanding their strength and resourcefulness, the continued placement of such responsibility on them is deplorable. One respondent from a food organization called for a move to "no more crisis management," but rather support for essential services to build resilience to better weather future crises. A food system with the resilience to withstand current and future crises requires much more

than the dedication, generosity, ingenuity, and resourcefulness of those on the organizational and household front lines of the food system. It requires a solid, well-resourced infrastructure that ensures everyone in Canada can meet their needs every day.

These words from one low-income interview participant may have as easily been uttered by so many food-insecure people, food organization volunteers, and community food workers, "So I guess the survivor [in me] is kicking in, but it's really hard and it's really taken a toll on me."

# RECOMMENDATIONS

- Low income, a principal root of food insecurity, needs to be addressed through the extension of income supports like a living wage and Basic Income Guarantee to all adults under 65 to help ensure that they have more stability in income and ability to afford necessities like food.
- The precarity of part-time employment needs to be addressed through stronger employment standards.
- More resilient and more equitably accessible local/regional food systems require 1) investment in diverse forms of production, local processing and distribution infrastructure and 2) a strengthening of the connections between local producers, processors, retailers/wholesalers, and consumers.
- Universal affordable childcare is required to ensure that, wherever parents need to spend their days, they can still meet all of their children's needs.
- The pandemic has demonstrated the utter necessity of digital communications for keeping people connected and supported. The technology and skills must be available to all.
- Additional supports need to be provided for residents to be able to grow food at home and in community gardens.
- Residents' interest in safely accessing local food should be supported through more promotion of the safety of shopping at farmers' markets and more support for local food producers and businesses to provide online shopping options.
- Food-centred organizations offer a first line of defence against food insecurity and related health, mental health, substance abuse, housing, and social isolation issues. They struggled to provide support before the pandemic and are now addressing more need with fewer volunteers and less ability to do so through in-person programming. Rather than standing on the goodwill and exertion of un/underpaid people and their under-resourced organizations, government must intervene to address food insecurity and ensure adequate funding for organizations that work to address the roots of food insecurity.
- Build more robust community-campus partnerships to facilitate researchers at Trent supporting emergent and real-time action-focused research projects.
- Conduct a spatial analysis of inequity in Peterborough, including for example, mapping food access, to inform broader city planning and policy discussions.



# APPENDIX A

## Recommendations from Low-income Interview Participants

### Adequate Income and Government Supports

- universal income
- \$2,000 basic income/universal basic income
- basic income to replace ODSP
- a basic minimum income that is livable for people living in deep poverty
- better income, more livable wage
- government should pay pensioners on CPP more
- more money for people on social assistance
- higher incomes for Old Age Pension, ODSP, OW
- ensure that people can afford to eat according to Canada's Food Guide, by providing money. "I just wish they would really get more involved in the people that are extremely low income."
- more government programs to help people with food especially during the pandemic
- universal pharmaceutical coverage
- affordable transit for commuters
- good geared-to-income dental program, especially for seniors
- "making Social Services accountable for the crimes I feel they've committed" (around inadequate social assistance amounts and too many rules)

### Affordability

- lower prices in things like utilities and groceries
- cap the price of rent, hydro, prescription drugs, etc., for 5 years to give people in poverty the chance to save some money

- grocery stores should not be allowed to price gouge and need to lower their prices

### Food Access

- more food banks
- more access to food banks and donations
- another monthly food bank pick-up day so people don't have to stretch food from 2 weeks to 4
- some way for food banks to deliver
- food box deliveries that can be affordable, especially for older people who have a harder time getting out; it would be good if government could afford to support this
- more essential food boxes
- more food boxes, or something like Nourish Dollars (coupons redeemable at local farmers' markets and food vendors)
- more agencies providing food boxes like Nourish, especially since end of Salvation Army boxes
- more accessibility of the Nourish food boxes
- JustFood (the Nourish food box program before the pandemic) needs to be running again
- all schools should have been providing food for their students' families
- importance of supporting local sex workers with food
- little food pantries (like front lawn lending libraries)
- opportunities like this study to share thoughts and receive gift cards for food

- beyond financial programs, programs for people to grow more food and help others who might be struggling
- food provided should be healthy and not gone bad

### **Food Literacy**

- more support programs and people to share ideas, e.g., about how to stretch a dollar
- programs where you can bring a meal home and stretch your food budget
- programs to learn how to preserve/use vegetables so they are not going to waste
- opportunities for learning to cook in person/virtual and focus on nutrition
- more cooking classes like Come Cook With Us
- more cooking classes through PPH
- more classes on healthy eating and skills, like deboning meats to make use of cheaper cuts
- food education (e.g., cooking programs; the value of the JustFood newsletters; value of being able to try out/taste foods and not have to worry about having bought all the ingredients and wasting food and money if it does not work out; community meals)
- more awareness of what programs are available

### **Local Food**

- more greenhouses and growing food in Canada year-round to support our own economy, province, and country
- supporting local farmers and people locally
- more community gardens (2 participants suggested this)

### **Social Connection**

- more programs to help with the social isolation around food, even online (especially for seniors, New Canadians, and people with specific cultural or religious food traditions)
- programs after the COVID-19 pandemic to take seniors together to get a hot meal and socialize (e.g., play cards)
- ways for programs to allow people to eat and chat together, even by Zoom
- volunteer phone call check-in program, especially for seniors and New Canadians
- opportunities for community picnics, gatherings around food where people can eat and talk about their needs
- online resource for people to get involved, e.g., through FaceBook, so people could connect with it on a daily basis

### **Community Engagement**

- everybody giving to each other freely to meet basic needs, then money is less of a concern
- ways of sharing, e.g., through a seed library
- everyone taking responsibility for each other as a community
- people being more compassionate, proactive, and raising their voices for change
- people should volunteer if they can
- more people to volunteer their time
- more local people working together, maybe with grants or stipends

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