



## COVID-19 IMPACTS ON FOOD SECURITY OF REFUGEES AND OTHER VULNERABLE POPULATIONS IN CANADA

# COVID-19 Impacts on Food Security of Refugees and Other Vulnerable Populations in Canada

SUJATA RAMACHANDRAN, ZHENZHONG SI  
AND DANNY NING DAI

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**No 2** *Impacts of COVID-19 Policy Measures on Migration and Food Security in Ecuador*

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy audit explores the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on food security in Canada, with a focus on immigrants, refugees, and other marginalized communities, particularly in Ontario and the Waterloo Region. The pandemic caused widespread socioeconomic disruption, leading to heightened food insecurity across both low-income and high-income countries, including Canada. Vulnerable populations such as immigrants and refugees faced disproportionately high risks of infection, economic hardship and food insecurity.

## Key Findings

1. **Food Insecurity Surge:** COVID-19 significantly exacerbated food insecurity in Canada, adding to existing vulnerabilities. This was especially evident in historically disadvantaged communities, who already faced barriers such as low-income employment, poor housing, and limited healthcare access.
2. **Disproportionate Impact on Migrants:** Migrants and refugees, particularly women and racialized groups, were especially affected by the pandemic in Canada, with barriers to healthcare, employment instability, and language difficulties exacerbating their vulnerabilities. In Ontario, immigrants accounted for 43.5% of COVID-19 cases, despite representing 25% of the population.
3. **Government Response:** Various federal and provincial measures were introduced to mitigate the effects of the pandemic, such as the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), the Emergency Food Security Fund, and the Indigenous Community Support Fund. These programs provided financial relief, increased food bank support, and targeted assistance to vulnerable populations. Yet, temporary support measures could not fully address structural food security challenges. With persistently high food inflation and most COVID-19-related support measures ending by 2023, the food security challenges of households in Canada did not end with the pandemic.
4. **Food Supply Chain Disruptions:** COVID-19 responses, including lockdowns and travel restrictions, disrupted food production, processing, and retail services. Labour shortages, particularly in agriculture and food services, strained the food supply chain. Temporary workers from other countries, essential to food production in Canada, faced additional challenges due to the travel restrictions.
5. **Food Inflation and Economic Access:** The pandemic, coupled with inflation and supply chain disruptions, drove food prices to their highest levels in decades. Economic access to food became a pressing concern for low-income households, including those of migrants and refugees.

6. **Impact on Food Banks:** Food bank visits surged during the pandemic, with a record 1.5 million visits in March 2022 alone. In Ontario, rising food and housing costs were cited as the main reason for the consistent increase in food bank usage.

## Policy Recommendations

1. **Targeted Social Safety Nets:** Introduce more inclusive eligibility criteria for social safety programs, such as CERB and Employment Insurance, to ensure vulnerable populations, like refugees and recent immigrants, can access financial aid in times of crisis.
2. **Food Assistance Programs:** Expand funding for food assistance programs and food banks, particularly in areas with high concentrations of immigrants and low-income families. Provide culturally appropriate food options to meet the needs of Canada's multicultural population.
3. **Basic Income Support and Affordable Housing:** Address the root causes of food insecurity by investing more in affordable housing and considering the introduction of a universal basic income.
4. **Healthcare Access for Immigrants:** Eliminate barriers to healthcare for immigrants and refugees by increasing outreach and offering services in multiple languages. Strengthen healthcare coverage, particularly for immigrants in precarious employment, by expanding public health initiatives.
5. **Labour Policy Reforms:** Provide better protections for temporary workers from other countries, including fair wages and safe working conditions. Offering pathways to permanent residency for agricultural workers would help stabilize the food production workforce.
6. **Long-Term Food Security Strategy:** Develop a comprehensive national food security strategy that takes into account the lessons learned from the pandemic. This strategy should include stronger protections for food supply chains, better coordination between federal and provincial governments, and sustained funding for emergency food programs.
7. **Food Insecurity Trends:** Implement a national system to monitor food insecurity levels, allowing for quicker policy responses during economic downturns, natural disasters or public health crises. This would ensure that vulnerable populations are supported promptly and effectively.
8. **Food Security Research:** Support more food security research that focuses on the most at-risk groups, including refugees, and the sociocultural, economic and institutional barriers they face.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought food insecurity to the forefront of public health concerns in Canada. While government measures provided some relief, the long-term effects on food security remain significant, requiring ongoing monitoring and targeted policy interventions.

# INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 crisis profoundly affected the food security of individuals, households, and communities across countries and regions, particularly through its devastating aftereffects on national and local economies. Preliminary projections in *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World (SOFI)* report for 2020 estimated that the pandemic would add between 83 million and 132 million food-insecure persons globally in its first year (FAO et al., 2020). The 2022 SOFI report confirmed that an additional 350 million people were facing moderate or severe food insecurity after 2020 (FAO et al., 2022). This number remains above the pre-pandemic level, with little change in four years, according to the SOFI report for 2023 (FAO et al., 2024). These reports show that women have been more severely impacted by food insecurity and challenges of nutrition across all regions. The persistent effects of COVID-19 on food insecurity were witnessed by mid-2022, compounded through new challenges, such as increased food prices as a result of the Russia-Ukraine war (FAO et al., 2022).

While the greater share of food insecurity continued to be concentrated in the low and middle-income countries in the Global South, high-income countries of the Global North also saw a concomitant rise in hunger and undernutrition. The three-year average share of food insecure segments among the total population in these countries increased from 1.5% to 1.6% from 2014-2016 to 2019-2021 (FAO et al., 2022). This share would be higher if the data for 2019 was excluded from the calculations. This adverse change is more obvious when the moderate and severe forms of food insecurity in the high-income countries are considered. The number of people facing severe food insecurity increased from 18.1 million to 21.7 million between 2014-2016 and 2021-2023 and the number of people experiencing moderate food insecurity grew from 94.9 million to 98.4 million during these sets of years (FAO et al., 2024). The reasons for these shifts and the most affected cohorts in these countries deserve scrutiny, as do the linkages between the main determinants of food insecurity in the immediate years preceding the pandemic and after 2020.

In this report, we examine the changing state of food security since 2020 in Canada. Against the backdrop of the broad socioeconomic changes wrought by COVID-19 at the national and localized levels, we assess how these transformations affected food systems and the food security of individuals and households across this Global North country. We also evaluate these changes for the Waterloo Region in Ontario. The objective of this report is to assess the broad consequences of the pandemic on the food security of immigrant and refugee households and map its gendered dimensions. We examine the various public health measures imposed by the federal government, provincial government of Ontario, and Region of Waterloo to limit the spread of the coronavirus. We also



identify the fiscal measures introduced to mitigate the negative socioeconomic outcomes of the COVID-19 crisis.

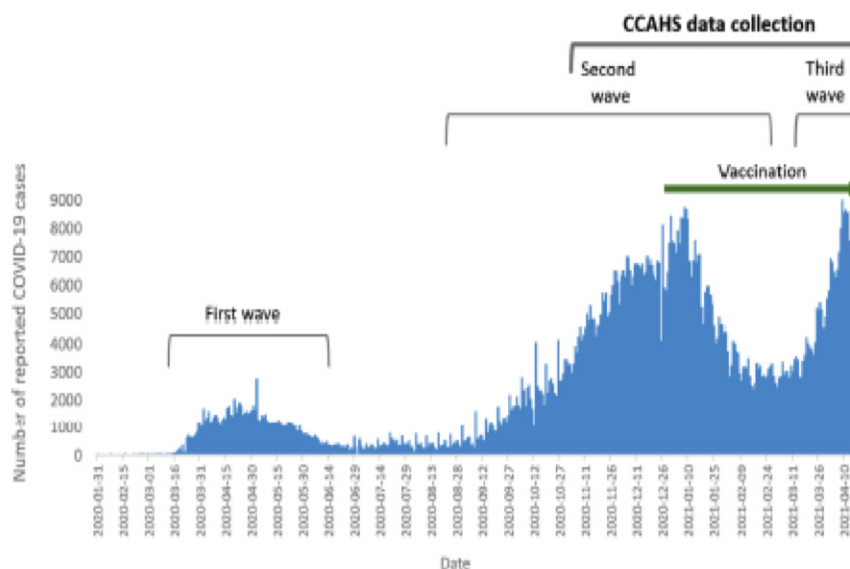
Section 2 of this policy audit report provides an overview of the unfolding of the pandemic in the Kitchener-Waterloo area, in the province of Ontario and, overall, in Canada. This section also discusses the impacts on employment and the Canadian economy. Section 3 reviews the government policy response and civil society initiatives, especially those related to food security. Section 4 evaluates the impact of the pandemic and the public health response on food supply chains in Canada, with selected examples in Ontario and the Waterloo Region. It also assesses the broad effects on the food security of individuals and households in Canada, especially the immigrant cohorts. This report provides the background material for empirical research with a selected set of recently resettled refugees in Kitchener-Waterloo from three crisis-affected countries: Afghanistan, Somalia, and Syria.

## UNFOLDING OF THE PANDEMIC

### COVID-19 Cases

Canada's first confirmed case of COVID-19 was reported at a Toronto hospital on 25 January 2020. In the next six months, 113,000 Canadians were infected and 8,880 died. As Figure 1 shows, during 2020 and 2021 the country experienced three pandemic waves. By May 2022, Canada had witnessed around 3.7 million COVID-19 cases, with 3.5 million persons having recovered (Table 1) (Government of Canada, 2022a, 2022b). The province of Ontario had the highest provincial count with 1.2 million cases. By July 21, 2024, Canada had 4,818,690 reported cumulative COVID-19 cases and 55,280 deaths (WHO, 2024). The Waterloo Region (with a population of 590,000) had nearly 46,000 confirmed cases by May 2022 with 412 deaths.

By the end of September 2022, 81% of the residents of Ontario and Canada, and 82% of the Kitchener-Waterloo population had completed the primary series of COVID-19 vaccinations (Region of Waterloo, 2022a). By October 6, 50% of Waterloo Region residents had received at least three doses, 82% had at least two doses and 85% had received at least one dose (Region of Waterloo, 2022b).

**FIGURE 1: COVID-19 Cases in Canada, 2020-2021**

Source: Bushnik et al. (2022: 26)

**TABLE 1: COVID-19 Infections in Canada, January 2020 to May 5, 2022**

| Details            | Geographical Setting |            |                    |
|--------------------|----------------------|------------|--------------------|
|                    | Canada               | Ontario    | Region of Waterloo |
| Total cases        | 3,782,959            | 1,274,910* | 45,628             |
| Active cases       | 269,615              | 38,841+    |                    |
| Total hospitalized |                      | 47,219     |                    |
| Recoveries         | 3,473,667            | 1,237,805  | 44,525             |
| Deaths             | 39,677               | 12,398     | 412++              |

Source: Government of Canada (2022a) and Government of Ontario (2022b)  
 \*Since January 2020  
 +Reported in the 14 days prior to May 5, 2022  
 ++Since March 2020

## Timeline of COVID-19 Public Health Measures in Ontario

On March 17, 2020, the Government of Ontario declared an emergency under the Emergency Management and Civil Protection Act. On March 25, the Region of Waterloo (2020a) and all seven municipalities declared local states of emergency under the Act. Residents were required to remain at home, except to purchase essential items. Social distancing measures were introduced on March 15. Closures of all settings and events, including schools, daycares, churches and other faith settings, recreational programs, and bars/restaurants (except for take-out/delivery) were instituted on March 17 in the Waterloo Region (2020c). The

Government of Ontario ordered all non-essential businesses to close for 14 days from March 24. By March 28, the Government of Ontario had limited gatherings to no more than five people. Two days later, the state of emergency was extended for another two weeks, and all public and private outdoor recreational amenities were closed. Payments for the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) were temporarily deferred along with an interest-free moratorium till the end of September. Public schools were to remain closed until May 1. By April 4, the list of businesses deemed essential was reduced and more workplaces were closed.

In the weeks that followed, the state of emergency was extended several times through to August 2020. The Premier announced on 22 September that the province was officially in the second wave of the pandemic. In November, the government introduced a new five-tiered colour-coded system that differentiated between different parts of the province in terms of risk and response: prevent (standard measures — green), protect (strengthened measures — yellow), restrict (intermediate measures — orange), control (stringent measures — red), and lockdown (maximum measures — grey). And on 21 December, a second province-wide shutdown was imposed. On 26 February 2021, 27 regions moved back to the colour-coded system while several (including Toronto) remained in lockdown. On 7 April, as the third wave got underway, a third state of emergency was declared. The province prioritized vaccine distribution for “hot spot” regions based on patterns of transmission, severity of illness, and mortality rates using mobile clinics at highly impacted neighbourhoods. Workplace inspections became more frequent at essential businesses in the hot zones. The emergency ended on July 24, 2021. From September 22, the Ontario government mandated that residents provide proof of vaccination to access some public settings and facilities.

On January 3, 2022, Ontario was moved a step closer in its reopening plan with the following requirements: social gathering indoors and outdoors limited to five and ten persons respectively; employees encouraged to work remotely, retail settings to operate at 50% capacity; indoor dining prohibited in restaurants and similar establishments; remote learning for all schools for at least two weeks. Remote learning continued for school students until the end of the school year. Before October 1, 2022, when federal border testing, quarantine and isolation requirements were ended, various containment measures were enforced by the Canadian government such as border restrictions, testing, and social distancing requirements.

# DISPROPORTIONATE VULNERABILITY OF IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

COVID-19 infection and mortality rates varied by demographics with vulnerable groups such as immigrants, newcomers (defined as those who immigrated within the previous 5 years), temporary migrant workers and refugees were much more affected by pandemic infections and virus-related deaths, and had lower vaccination uptake (Arya et al., 2021; Guttman et al., 2020; Waterloo Region Immigration Partnership, 2020). Combining COVID-19 mortality data from Statistics Canada's Provisional Vital Statistics database with data from the 2016 short-form Canadian census and Census Area profile data, the Public Health Agency of Canada (2021, 2022) explored the linkages between socioeconomic factors, health risks, and COVID-related mortality. The Agency examined the role of factors such as sex/gender, residence in large cities, income, dwelling type, household type and size, economic inequality, and area-level ethnocultural composition in shaping the inequitable distribution of health risks and higher death rates during the pandemic. The study focused on neighbourhoods with concentrations of visible minorities, recent immigrants to Canada, persons born outside Canada, and those whose home language was neither English nor French.

The data analysis showed that between January 1 and August 31, 2020, age-standardized mortality rates were higher in areas with greater ethno-cultural composition. Mortality rates for men were higher than for women overall and this gap was even higher in low-income areas. Age-standardized mortality rates during the pandemic were linked to the ethno-cultural and socioeconomic characteristics of geographical settings in Canada for several reasons including higher poverty rates and lower household incomes; concentration in disadvantaged neighbourhoods with poor housing conditions; and employment in occupations with a high risk of exposure to the virus (Guttman et al., 2020; Subedi & Aitken, 2022; Subedi et al., 2020). Using the 2016 Census and the Canadian Vital Statistics Death Data till October 2020, Subedi et al. (2020) concluded that mortality rates were higher in the ethno-cultural neighbourhoods with a higher proportion of visible minority residents. Neighbourhoods with the most visible minority residents (25% or more) had more than twice the mortality rates of neighbourhoods with low concentrations (less than 1%) (see also Ng, 2021).

The low-income areas and densely populated urban neighbourhoods where many immigrants and single-parent households reside had significantly higher pandemic-related mortality rates – at 66.7/100,000 population – which was 2.6 times higher than that of the low-mortality neighbourhoods (Subedi & Aitken, 2022). People living in larger households and high-rise apartments were at greater risk of COVID-19 infection due to unavoidable close contact with other

people (Yang & Aitken, 2021). Many resettled refugees were at risk in this way (Clarke et al., 2021). Another study found that while mortality rates were higher in general for racialized groups, due to unsuitable housing and unmet health needs tied to racism, mortality rates for Black identifying persons were three times higher than those for low-income non-racialized and non-indigenous persons (Gupta & Aitken, 2022). Other challenges faced by refugees during the pandemic included weak access to public health advisories and information on support programmes in different languages; social isolation; increased mental health risks, including fear and anxiety; weak online access because of the digital divide; and the combined difficulties of adjusting to their new circumstances in Canada and dealing with the consequences of the pandemic (Arya et al., 2021; Esses et al., 2021).

Despite representing only 25% of Ontario's population, immigrants, refugees, and newcomers represented 44% of the total number of COVID-19 cases in mid-June 2020 (Guttmann et al., 2020). Except for those working in the health sector, immigrants and refugees in the province had lower COVID-19 testing rates (3.4% compared with 4.4% for people born in Canada) and showed higher infection rates even with lower testing. Refugees had the highest positivity rates. Another report comparing vaccine coverage by neighbourhood coronavirus risk for various social groups in Ontario prior to April 2021 showed that the overall vaccine coverage for refugees was 22% (ICES, 2021). This figure was 28% for all other immigrants and 38% for Canadian-born/long-term residents over the age of 16. It was only 12% for newcomers to Ontario.

A multi-country study by the Center for Global Development, Refugees International, and the International Rescue Committee showed that, on a global scale, 60% of employed refugees were working in highly impacted sectors and were 60% more likely than the local populations of host countries to be financially impacted by the pandemic (CGD, 2020). Studies have also shown that racialized migrants in Ontario were at higher risk of contracting COVID-19 and faced higher levels of COVID-related hospital admissions (Arya et al., 2021; Bannerjee & Thomas, 2023; Rishworth et al., 2024; Tuyisenge & Goldenberg, 2021). Structural racism, manifested as severe gaps in healthcare access for racialized migrants, was reproduced as elevated health risks and related negative outcomes for this cohort during the pandemic. These gaps in health care access were the combined consequences of “limited health insurance eligibility, concerns about negative immigration consequences (for example, medical repatriation, requirement to present proof of status at point of care), and scarce culturally and linguistically appropriate care” (Tuyisenge & Goldenberg, 2021: 651). For Chinese Canadians, these health-based inequities were interconnected with experiences of increased racism since the onset of the pandemic. These new forms of pandemic-related prejudice and discrimination encountered by Chinese Canadians and the Asian community in Canada undermined their sense of belonging and

impeded their recovery from the pandemic (Lou, 2022).

When COVID-19 was declared a pandemic, the three-month waiting period to qualify for the Ontario Health Insurance Plan (OHIP) was waived for new registrants in Ontario. A report found that immigrants and refugees in Ontario had lower vaccination rates even after the vaccination strategy prioritizing high-risk communities was adopted and that these disparities were also evident in “hot spot” neighbourhoods (ICES, 2021). A combination of factors shaped these patterns including higher work-related exposure risks; greater exposure as the outcome of housing conditions (such as living in large apartment buildings); use of public transport; barriers to health-care access for under-served groups, including discrimination, exclusion, and racism; language barriers; pre-existing trauma, physical and mental health issues for refugees exacerbated by pandemic-related stressors; and technological barriers to virtual healthcare during the pandemic (internet access, cell phones, and digital literacy) (Arya et al., 2021).

## ECONOMIC IMPACT OF COVID-19

Canada’s GDP contracted sharply during the first two quarters of 2020, reaching a low of 37.1% in the second quarter (Standing Committee on Finance, 2023). Lemieux et al. (2020) estimate that across February to April 2020, a 15% downward slide in employment was accompanied by a 32% decline in aggregate weekly working hours of the economically active population between the ages of 20 and 64. Workers in the lowest earning segments were worst affected with industries such as accommodation and food services heavily hit by the shut-downs, sectors in which some immigrant and visible minority groups are heavily concentrated.

Ontario’s labour market experienced unprecedented negative changes in 2020 due to the lockdowns and other measures to curb the spread of COVID-19 (FAOO, 2021a). In 2020, Ontario lost 355,300 jobs, corresponding to a -4.8% decline in employment and the highest recorded employment loss in the province. Unemployment rose to 9.3% in 2020 – the highest level since 1993. In May, the province’s unemployment rate was at a record high of 13.6% and more than 1.2 million jobs had been lost since the first emergency was declared in March.

Kitchener-Cambridge-Waterloo ranked sixth among the top Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs) by total job losses between February and May 2020, recording a nearly 13% negative swing in total employment (Table 2). This was higher than the figure for Ontario as a whole (-11.7%) and slightly lower than that for Toronto (-13.3%). Significant job losses were recorded in education services,

transportation and warehousing, and accommodation and food services, many of which employ immigrants and refugees (Table 3).

**TABLE 2: Total Employment Decline in Ontario CMAs, February–May 2020**

| Census Metropolitan Area     | Change in total employment (%) |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Windsor                      | -19.1                          |
| St. Catharines-Niagara       | -15.6                          |
| Thunder Bay                  | -15.2                          |
| Peterborough                 | -13.8                          |
| Toronto                      | -13.3                          |
| Kitchener-Cambridge-Waterloo | -12.8                          |
| Ontario                      | -11.7                          |

*Source: FAOO, 2020a*

**TABLE 3: Key Labour Market Indicators for Kitchener-Cambridge-Waterloo, January–May 2020**

| Month    | Employment change (thousands) | Unemployment rate (%) | Participation rate (%) |
|----------|-------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|
| January  | 0.1                           | 5.4                   | 71.3                   |
| February | 3.6                           | 5.5                   | 72.3                   |
| March    | -2.9                          | 6.0                   | 71.8                   |
| April    | -16.4                         | 7.8                   | 69.2                   |
| May      | -20.2                         | 10.3                  | 66.1                   |

*Source: Compiled from FAOO, 2020a*

In late 2021, despite some recovery, Canada’s overall economic performance remained below pre-pandemic levels (Statistics Canada, 2021). Total employment numbers had reached pre-pandemic levels by September 2021, but the number of workers facing long-term unemployment remained higher than before the pandemic. The economic recovery was also uneven across different economic sectors. After the initial stages of the pandemic, economic losses continued to converge on lower-wage, high-contact jobs.

Using individual-scale monthly panel data from the Labour Force Survey, a Statistics Canada paper found that recent immigrants were more adversely affected by loss of employment (Hou et al., 2020). As in previous economic downturns, younger, less educated, and recently hired workers were much more likely to be made permanently redundant (Chan et al., 2020). However, average monthly layoff rates between February and April 2020 were significantly higher than in previous periods of recession. For example, 12.4% of workers were laid off on average and women (12.4%) were slightly more likely to have lost their jobs than men (12.2%). Overall average monthly layoff rates during the previous recessionary period (2008–2009) did not exceed 4%.

# POLICY RESPONSES TO ADDRESS COVID-19 IMPACTS

The various initiatives adopted by Canada's federal government to support individuals, businesses, economic sectors, organizations, provinces, and territories in March 2020 varied significantly across regions. This section reviews the policy measures at the federal level, in Ontario, and the Kitchener-Waterloo region.

The Canadian government provided direct financial support to people, businesses, and organizations affected by the pandemic through existing programs to help low-income communities including the Canada Workers Benefit, Employment Insurance, child benefit, pensions, and various other social benefits. A Mortgage Payment Deferral was made available to those who faced financial hardships because of the pandemic so that they could defer their mortgage payment based on an agreement with their lenders. The government also waived interest for students on the federal portion of their Canada Students Loans and Canada Apprentice Loans until March 31, 2023.

A major financial support program, the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) was introduced in early April 2020. It offered CAD2,000 every four weeks up to a maximum of 28 weeks to people who had lost their jobs, were working fewer hours, had no employment income, were sick with COVID-19, quarantined, or were taking care of someone infected with the virus. CERB applicants had to have earned a minimum of CAD5,000 in 2019, or within the previous 12 months, which made access challenging for some refugees and immigrants who were not eligible and encountered other barriers for other pandemic supports. Edmonds and Flahault (2021) have also argued that “language and cultural barriers, poor literacy levels, and unfamiliarity with Canada's financial and tax systems challenge[d] refugees' ability to successfully navigate the economic supports instituted to support people in Canada during the pandemic.”

The federal government made temporary changes to the Employment Insurance Act in late April 2020 to introduce the Employment Insurance Emergency Response Benefit for workers who could not work because of COVID-19. Claimants could receive additional amounts under the Family Supplement. On May 22, 2020, the Government of Canada launched a web-based benefits finder tool, Find Financial Help During COVID-19, for residents to identify programs that they were eligible for. Moreover, businesses could apply for a subsidy to cover part of their employee wages between October 24, 2021, and May 7, 2022, and were eligible for up to 180 days' support after the end of the claim period. These subsidies were provided through the Tourism and Hospitality Recovery Program, the Hardest-Hit Businesses Recovery Program, the Canada Recovery



Hiring Program, and the Local Lockdown Program. Through these programs, businesses were also eligible for support to cover part of their rent or property expenses. Businesses created after January 2020 could apply for the Job and Growth Fund which supports regional job creation and the long-term growth of local economies. The maximum duration of the Work-Sharing Program was extended to 76 weeks for employers affected by COVID-19 and remained in effect until September 25, 2022.

Government provided additional fiscal resources to organizations operating food assistance programs. In April 2020, it introduced the Emergency Food Security Fund which offered CAD200 million to national, regional, and local organizations across Canada to reach people and communities experiencing food insecurity (Agriculture & Agri-Food Canada, 2020). This fund supported the purchase and distribution of emergency food aid through 1,856 projects. Half of these resources were given to large organizations engaged in food assistance programs, such as Food Banks Canada (CAD50 million). An additional investment of CAD100 million was provided under this fund in October 2020. The federal government announced new support of CAD350 million for community organizations serving vulnerable groups and CAD50 million to support surplus food redistribution (Men & Tarasuk, 2021).

The government also introduced an Indigenous Community Support Fund (ICSF) on March 18, 2020, to address the immediate needs of First Nations, Inuit, and Metis national communities. Food insecurity was one of the critical issues to be addressed by this fund, including support for the purchase, transportation, and distribution of food, and access to traditional foods through hunting and fishing in the event of outbreaks. On December 18, 2020, a new CAD30 million food security fund was transferred to the ISCF by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada to improve access to food and increase food supply for indigenous communities. The Canada Community Revitalization Fund, a two-year national infrastructure program, was also provided to not-for-profit organizations, municipalities, public institutions, and indigenous communities for projects to revitalize communities across Canada. Farmers' markets, community gardens, and community development were eligible projects under the Fund.

Food Banks Canada (2022b) introduced a CAD200,000 Afghan Refugee Food Support Fund to help food banks and other food security organizations support the cultural food security of Afghan refugees. This program was introduced shortly after the federal government launched a humanitarian resettlement program for Afghan refugees.

On April 9, 2020, the Government of Ontario launched an Ontario Jobs and Recovery Committee for post-pandemic recovery. A list of essential workers eligible for emergency childcare was drawn up in April 2020 and in the same

month, it introduced a COVID-19 Action Plan for Vulnerable People under which the Guaranteed Annual Income System (GAINS) payment was doubled. Ontario also issued measures to extend emergency healthcare to uninsured communities and, in the first year of the pandemic, removed the 3-month wait period for new residents (Abji et al., 2020).

As part of the Region of Waterloo's (2020b) pandemic response plan, a Community Support Control Group was created in March 2020 to support the health and safety of vulnerable groups. Food hampers and meals were delivered to low-income households unable to leave their homes. This program was extended to homeless people outside of measures provided by emergency shelters.

## IMPACT OF PUBLIC HEALTH MEASURES ON FOOD SECURITY

This section analyzes the effects of COVID-19 and public health measures on Canada's food security. It adopts a food supply chain perspective, focusing on different components of the food supply chain, from production to processing, transport, imports, food retail, and food services, along with food access and utilization.

### Impact on Food Production

USDA (2020) reported that Canada's COVID-19 response measures helped food production transition to new modes of operation across the country, despite marked interruptions at the onset of the pandemic. Overall, the immediate impacts of COVID-19 measures were associated with agricultural labour shortages, tightened health and safety inspections, and food-service shutdowns, which led to significant disruptions in food production (LaMontagne, 2021).

Travel restrictions worsened agricultural labour shortages, especially for horticulture, as inbound travel was restricted for temporary foreign workers from March 2020 (USDA, 2020). A survey conducted by the Canadian Agricultural Human Resource Council found that, in 2020, 36% of employers in agriculture mentioned COVID-related labour shortages as an important challenge. Farmers who employed temporary foreign migrants were twice as likely to experience labour shortages as those who did not (CAHRC, 2021). In response, the Government of Canada provided funds such as the Mandatory Isolation Support for Temporary Foreign Workers Program to mitigate the costs associated with mandatory quarantine measures for arriving temporary foreign workers, which received generally positive feedback from producers (CAHRC, 2021).

The pandemic produced a setback to animal farms by disrupting the animal culling and processing industry. For example, over 70% of Canada's beef slaughter capacity was in two large slaughter facilities. Both were hard hit during the 2020 COVID-19 outbreaks, creating a slaughter backlog and increasing the costs of cattle feed on the producer end (USDA, 2020). In the same year, weakened capacities of pork processing in the United States caused financial losses to Canadian swine farmers (USDA, 2020).

Restrictions imposed on the food-service industry posed another significant challenge to producers. For food producers, temporary shutdown of the food-service sector between March and May 2020 reduced the overall demand for certain crops and animal products resulting in lower sales (USDA, 2020). Despite these pandemic-related disruptions, the agricultural sector had a good economic performance in 2020 at a 7.6% year-over-year GDP growth, compared to a 5.3% decrease in Canada's overall GDP in the same year (LaMontagne, 2021). During the same period, crop production and animal industry production expanded rather than shrank (LaMontagne, 2021).

## **Impact on Food Processing, Imports and Transportation**

The pandemic caused significant disruptions in food processing and the transportation of food across Canada. Even before the pandemic, food plants were experiencing a 10% shortage of labour, which increased to 20% due to factors such as travel restrictions on temporary foreign workers (Hui et al., 2022). Responding to these labour shortages, the Federal Government Canada modified regulations to allow food processing companies to hire up to 30% of their workforce as temporary foreign workers, representing an 10% increase in their share (Arnason, 2022).

Food transportation was also affected by the pandemic and public health measures, although it is debated whether the vaccine mandate significantly weakened food imports into Canada. On the one hand, the vaccine mandate on truck drivers crossing the Canada-United States border is believed to have added pressure on the trucking industry (Hui et al., 2022). As Charlebois (2022) argues, the trucking industry was already experiencing aging and labour shortages, and the vaccine mandate could have pushed some truckers to retire and exit the industry. These changes may have strained Canada's food supply, as 60-70% of agri-food products imported from the United States are transported by truckers. On the other hand, it has been argued that the mandate had no measurable impact on the number of truckers crossing the Canada-US border and was not a problem, especially for Canada's largest trucking company (Reynolds, 2022).

## Impact on Food Retail and Food Services

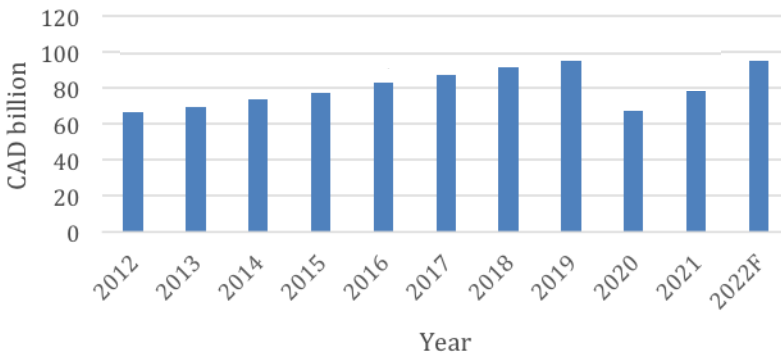
Between 2020 and 2022, labour shortages in the retail and food service sectors worsened. As Table 4 shows, the ratio of new hires to vacancies in the retail and food service and accommodation industries was significantly lower during the three years into COVID-19 than before the pandemic. Employers in these two sectors experienced increased difficulties in filling vacancies during the pandemic. It is important to note here that this Statistics Canada survey researched the retail sector as a whole rather than focusing specifically on food retail and food service.

**TABLE 4: Ratio of New Hires to Vacancies in Canada's Retail and Services Sectors, 2016–2022**

| Sector                                   | Ratio of new hires to vacancies (%) |                    |                    |                    |                    |                    |                    |
|--|-------------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
|  | First quarter 2016                  | First quarter 2017 | First quarter 2018 | First quarter 2019 | First quarter 2020 | First quarter 2021 | First quarter 2022 |
| Retail trade                             | 95.1                                | 83.3               | 92.3               | 95.0               | 79.5               | 69.6               | 48.8               |
| Accommodation & food services            | 81.0                                | 75.3               | 57.9               | 60.4               | 33.4               | 39.2               | 23.2               |
| <i>Source: Statistics Canada (2022a)</i> |                                     |                    |                    |                    |                    |                    |                    |

Nevertheless, food retail and food services were significantly affected by the pandemic. The ratio of new hires to vacancies reached its lowest level since 2016 in the first quarter of 2022, which is consistent with reports that the Omicron variant of COVID-19 exacerbated labour shortages in food retail (Table 4). Hui et al. (2022) highlight that the Omicron variant increased labour shortages at grocery stores by up to 20% at larger chains, and 25% to 30% at independent grocers in January 2022. This variant was highly transmissible and spikes in infections were associated with staffing shortages in January and April 2022 (Dawson, 2022; Reynolds, 2022b).

The early impact on Canada's food service sector was significant, especially in March and April 2020, with reduced sales and services leading to immediate retrenchments. According to an industry report by Restaurants Canada (2020), 615,000 employees in the food service sector were laid off, while over 200,000 employees in this sector were unable to put in any work hours despite being employed. Moreover, restaurants had to increase their expenditures to adapt the way they operated under the pandemic restrictions. A survey by Statistics Canada found that 96% of participating food-service businesses increased their expenditure on sanitization and cleaning and 88% increased their spending on personal protective equipment (PPE) (Sood, 2021). Short recovery was seen in May 2020, but the industry faced continuous challenges due to closures and re-openings throughout the COVID waves. Figure 2 shows sales in Canada's food-service sector plunged in 2020 but progressively recovered in 2021 and 2022.

**FIGURE 2: Total Food Service Sales in Canada, 2012-2022**

Source: Restaurants Canada (2022)

## Impact on Physical Food Access

Physical and economic access to food was affected by COVID-19 and public health measures. More specifically, COVID-19 lockdowns limited the mobility of Canadians and therefore their capacity to physically obtain food from grocery stores and restaurants. Pandemic-related economic challenges and rising inflation in the later waves and after the end of the pandemic reduced the amount of money some Canadian households, especially low-income households, were able to spend on food, impacting the quality, quantity, or variety of their food consumption.

At the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020, panic buying overstretched food supply chains and limited some shoppers' access to the food they regularly consumed, such as flour (Wakefield, n.d.). Numerous grocery stores reduced their operating hours in 2020 because of the public health restrictions, while some grocery chains dedicated hours specifically for vulnerable social groups such as disabled people and seniors (Versolatto, 2020). Overall, empty shelves and reduced operating hours weakened physical access to food. But these effects were soon relieved when COVID-19 outbreaks subsided.

In addition to these temporary events, long-term patterns were evident in Canadians' changing shopping behaviour, notably reduced frequency of grocery shopping in person and increased buying of groceries online. Many factors contributed to this transition, from the need to self-isolate to concerns about infection in crowded spaces to the rise of the remote working culture. According to Powell (2022), around 30% of Canadians were buying groceries online at the onset of the pandemic and 49% were doing so a year into the pandemic, a significant 19% increase. A survey of over 10,000 Canadians in May 2021 found that 22% intended to do their grocery shopping online on a regular basis in future (Charlebois & Music, 2021). In short, the pandemic and public health measures led

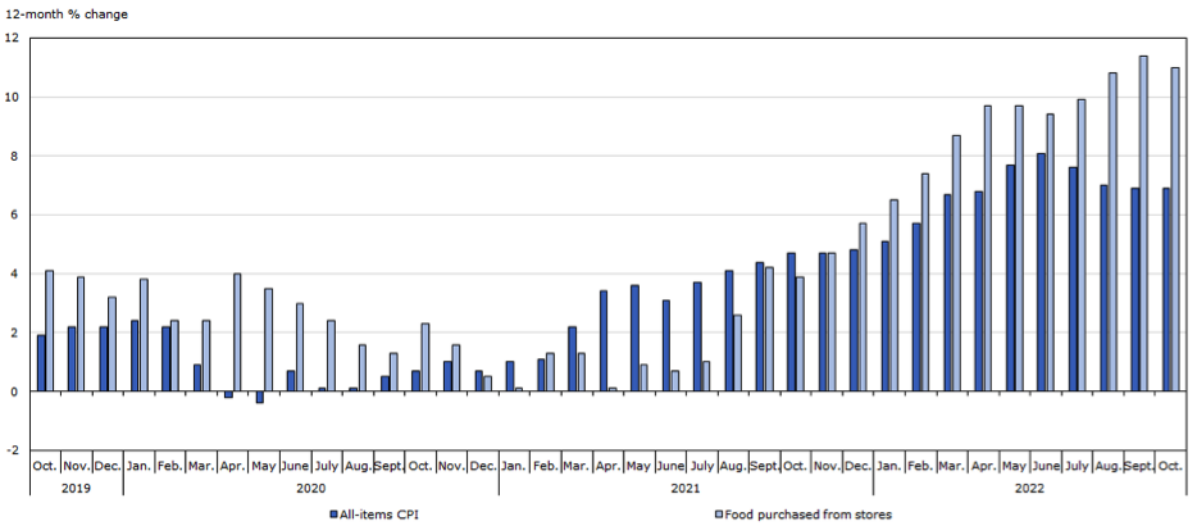
to some short-term disruption in physical access to certain foods while in the longer term, the pandemic reshaped Canada’s grocery sector by stimulating a transition from in-person to online grocery shopping.

## Impact on Economic Access to Food

The greatest factor affecting Canadians’ economic access to food has been food inflation and increased cost of living. The pandemic and related public health measures may have both played a role in inflation, but it is difficult to single out its effects and related policies on inflation. Instead, inflation has resulted from the complex interactions between a wide range of economic, political, social and ecological factors, including extreme weather events and geopolitical conflicts. Therefore, instead of attempting to associate the economic food access challenges only with the pandemic, this report highlights key economic challenges to food access since the initial COVID-19 outbreak by highlighting the trends of inflation since 2020 and factors contributing to inflation.

As Figure 3 shows, the 12-month food price increase percentage outpaced the overall CPI index since December 2021 and reached the highest level since 1981 in September 2022 at 11.4% (Fradella, 2022). 43% of Canadian participants in the Portraits of Canadian Society survey conducted in April 2022 agreed that they were affected by food inflation and 20% believed that they would need food aid from food banks or community organizations within the next six months (Statistics Canada, 2022b).

**FIGURE 3: Food Price Inflation, 2019–2022**



Source: Statistics Canada, table 18-10-004-01 - Consumer Price Index, monthly, not seasonally adjusted.

Source: Statistics Canada (Fradella, 2022)

Fradella (2022) analyzed a variety of factors contributing to food inflation in Canada since the pandemic, including food supply chain disruptions such as meat processing plants closures, extreme droughts and heat waves in the Prairie provinces, rise of input prices, and the Russia-Ukraine war leading to energy and fertilizer price hikes and higher expenses at food outlets. Using statistical modelling, the 2023 Canada Food Price Report predicted that all provinces could face price increases of up to 7% the following year, which raised significant concerns for food security among Canadian households in 2023 (Charlebois et al., 2022: 19).

The sharp growth in food bank visits in Canada since the onset of the pandemic reflects the food security challenges posed by food inflation and other economic pressures. The Hunger Count 2022 Report published by Food Banks Canada (2022a) reveals that, despite the unemployment rate being lowest on record in March 2022, food bank visits were approximately 1.5 million, breaking the historical record. High employment rates did not necessarily guarantee improved food security. Food bank visits increased by 15% in March 2022 compared to March 2021 and by 35% compared to the same month in 2019. Apart from surging food costs, low provincial social assistance and rising housing costs were the most cited reasons for the increased food bank visits. Canadian households in the lowest income quintile experienced a year-over-year income decrease of 7.5% in the first quarter of 2022, rendering their food security precarious in the face of rising housing and fuel costs, and the ending of pandemic-related social assistance. A 2023 report of the House of Commons' Standing Committee on Finance highlighted the marked outcomes of rising inflation and increased living costs on food insecurity in Canada: "Paycheques don't go as far as they use to. Canadians are cutting their diets as 11.4% yearly food inflation has left 20% of Canadians skipping meals, while half of Canadians are cutting back on groceries or choosing less nutritious options. We learned that 1.5 million Canadians visited a food bank on a single month last year, with one third of them being children."

## Ontario

Regarding food bank visits, the trends in Ontario were consistent with the national pattern. According to the 2022 Hunger Report, food bank visits in Ontario increased consistently for six years (King and Quan, 2022). Between April 1, 2021, and March 31, 2022, food bank visits in Ontario increased 42% over the last three years. Between January 2022 and September 2022, 24% more people visited food banks in Ontario than in 2021. Rising food costs was the most cited driver of food bank visits (45.8%), followed by increased housing costs (13.2%) and insufficient wages or work hours (9.9%). Based on the analysis, King and Quan (2022) recommended reducing the cost of living through affordable housing projects, increased social assistance, and improved employment protection for gig workers.

The Food Bank of Waterloo Region published a report in October 2020 highlighting the food insecurity challenges facing households in the Waterloo Region (Food Bank of Waterloo Region, 2020). The pandemic significantly reduced their number of community programs and agency partners from over 100 before the pandemic to a little more than 30. They also had to reduce the number of food distribution locations and numbers of staff, volunteers and community members accessing their facility. The report also highlighted the cancellation of fundraising events and gap in donations from grocery stores and other food industry partners. These partners had difficulties keeping their shelves stocked due to the supply chain issues in the early days of the pandemic. From March 23 to August 31, 2020, 21,274 individuals received emergency food and hunger relief support. Compared to the pre-COVID period, the Food Bank increased its weekly deliveries from 42 to 159 during the peak of the pandemic. In a blog, the Food Bank revealed that 1 in every 5 adults in the Waterloo Region in 2022 were forced to skip a meal either because they could not afford to purchase food or so that their children could eat (Food Bank of Waterloo Region, 2022).

## Impact on Food Utilization

As discussed earlier, food bank visits have escalated since the pandemic and those who use food banks may not be able to meet their nutrition needs and food preferences. However, the effects of the pandemic on food utilization were not entirely negative. For example, Polsky and Garriguet (2022b) noted that Canadians ate at home more often during the pandemic and this transition from eating out to home cooking may have generated positive nutrition benefits. The high frequency of eating out has been associated with higher consumption of unhealthy foods and with obesity and non-communicable diseases. However, at least one survey found that during the first year of the pandemic, Canadians increased their consumption of ultra-processed foods: 35.2% of Canadians surveyed between May 4 and May 10, 2020, reported increased frequency of eating junk food or sweets (Statistics Canada, 2020a). According to a report by the Agri-food Analytics Lab at Dalhousie University (2021), during the pandemic over 40% of Canadians unintentionally gained weight and these shifting eating habits were associated with pandemic-related stress. This finding suggests that eating more often at home could also lead to increased intake of sugar and ultra-processed foods, with negative implications for nutritional well-being and overall public health. Besides the nutritional impact, the pandemic affected Canadians' meal management. At the beginning of the pandemic, most Canadians reported experiencing difficulties managing mealtimes, while only 8.8% reported being able to have proper meal management (Agri-food Analytics Lab, 2021). The same report found that the pandemic's effect on dietary changes was more pronounced among younger generations than older ones.



## Impact on Food Security

An early assessment conducted during the second wave (September to December 2020) concluded that food security in Canada had not been negatively affected by the COVID-19 crisis (Polsky & Garriguet, 2022a). Using data from Statistics Canada’s annual Canadian Income Survey, a 2024 report released by the University of Toronto’s Food Insecurity Policy Research (PROOF) program shows that food insecurity declined, rather than the expected surge, through the first two years of the pandemic (PROOF, 2024). The share of population in food insecure households fell from 16.8% in 2019 to 15.9% in 2020 and 15.7% in 2021 (Table 5). The Household Food Security Survey module of the cross-sectional Canadian Community Health Survey displays somewhat similar results (Tarasuk & Mitchell, 2020). Accordingly, 9.6% of Canadian residents were facing some form of household food insecurity six to nine months into the pandemic in 2020. This level was lower than the estimates for 2017–2018 when 12.7% or 1.8 million households in Canada were food insecure. Some 4.4 million individuals, including children below the age of 18, were residing in food insecure households in 2017–2018. This figure was higher than any previous national estimate, with 819,900 households (5.7%) and 429,900 (3%) households facing moderate and severe forms of food insecurity respectively. The Canadian Health Survey of Children and Youth showed that 15.3% of children between the ages of 1 and 17 were residing in food-insecure households in 2019, of which 5.1%, 7.3% and 2.9% faced low, moderate and severe forms of food insecurity, respectively (Public Health Ontario, 2024).

**TABLE 5: Canadian Residents in Food Insecure Households, 2019–2023**

| Level of food insecurity | 2019        | 2020        | 2021        | 2022        | 2023        | % change (2022-2023) |
|--------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|----------------------|
|                          | (% share)   |             |             |             |             |                      |
| Low                      | 5.2         | 5.1         | 4.6         | 5.6         | 6.0         | 7.1                  |
| Moderate                 | 8.0         | 7.6         | 7.6         | 8.9         | 10.9        | 22.5                 |
| Severe                   | 3.6         | 3.2         | 3.6         | 4.0         | 6.0         | 50.0                 |
| <b>Total</b>             | <b>16.8</b> | <b>15.9</b> | <b>15.7</b> | <b>18.4</b> | <b>22.9</b> | <b>24.5</b>          |

*Source: PROOF (2024)*

Along the same lines, a scoping review concluded that the COVID-19 crisis had a slight negative effect overall on household food insecurity in Canada, although the vulnerability of certain cohorts was acknowledged (Idzerda et al., 2022). These findings on food insecurity in the context of the COVID-19 crisis are somewhat unusual. This is because the containment measures rapidly produced a sharp economic slump, as discussed in a previous section. The pandemic forced the Canadian economy in March 2020 into what has been characterized as a “medically induced coma” (Lemieux et al., 2020).

However, another survey conducted in the early period of the pandemic shows dissimilar results. Data collected by Statistics Canada (2020c) during the first wave (between 4 and 10 May 2020) under the new Canadian Perspective Survey Series revealed that 14.6% of Canadian residents were members of households that had faced some form of food insecurity within the past month. This timeframe refers to the second month of the lockdown (April and early May 2020) in the first wave of the pandemic when the greatest economic shocks were experienced by individuals and households following the introduction of public health measures to limit the spread of the virus. Food insecurity was measured in this survey using six indicators: available food had already been consumed and there was no money to purchase more food on some occasions or often; participant households could not afford to consume regular balanced meals sometimes or often; adult members in the household had skipped meals or eaten smaller portions; participants ate less or went hungry because they could not afford to purchase food (Statistics Canada, 2020c). Households with children were more likely to experience food insecurity compared to those without children (Table 6). Participants who could not work for reasons such as workplace closure, temporary or permanent retrenchment, and illness tied to COVID-19, were far more likely to be food insecure (28.4%) compared to those who were able to continue working through the pandemic (10.7%). It is important to note that the survey sample underrepresented certain groups at higher risk of food insecurity thus providing a “conservative estimate” of food insecurity in Canada during the period of data collection (Statistics Canada, 2020c). Men and Tarasuk (2021) analyzed this survey data to show that the vast majority (92.6%) of food-insecure households had not received food aid from sources such as food banks and other organizations. Only 4.3% had benefitted from free food more than once within the previous 30 days.

**TABLE 6: Food Insecurity Experiences of Households in Canada, April 2020 (% share)**

| Indicators of food insecurity   | Households with children | Households without children |
|---|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Food did not last and no money to buy more, sometimes or often          | 11.7                     | 7.3                         |
| Could not afford balanced meals, sometimes or often                     | 13.0                     | 8.8                         |
| Adults in household skipped or cut size of meals                        | 11.7                     | 8.1                         |
| Adults in household skipped or cut size of meals for three days or more | 3.5                      | 2.6                         |
| Participant ate less because not enough money to buy food               | 3.2                      | 2.2                         |
| Participant went hungry because they could not afford to buy food       | 9.1                      | 4.6                         |

*Source: Statistics Canada (2020c)*

In a similar vein, calculations by the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations suggest that the share of population in Canada unable to afford a healthy diet increased from 2.7% in 2019 to 3.2% by 2020, then declined to 3.0% and 2.7% consecutively in 2021 and 2022 (Table 7). Tarasuk et al. (2022) have contended that the different methodologies adopted by the main surveys organized by Statistics Canada and variable rates of participation by Canadian residents and provinces, have all likely contributed to these divergent results. For instance, the Canadian Perspectives Survey was conducted online with a truncated food security module in 2020. Besides, the large injection of fiscal resources in the form of monetary benefits and food aid also softened these shocks. The latest assessment by Idzerda et al. (2024) has confirmed that income supplements had a beneficial effect in reducing moderate and severe forms of household food insecurity. The Financial Accountability Office of Ontario estimated that of the CAD105.6 billion allocated by the province for direct COVID-19 relief measures, CAD51.5 billion (89%) was to be channelled to individuals who had to stop working due to the pandemic (FAOO, 2020b).

**TABLE 7: Food Insecurity in Canada, 2017–2022**

| Year | Share of population unable to afford a healthy diet (%) | Number of people who cannot afford a healthy diet (millions) |
|------|---|--|
| 2017 | 3.2   | 1.2  |
| 2018 | 2.7   | 1.0  |
| 2019 | 2.7   | 1.0  |
| 2020 | 3.2   | 1.2  |
| 2021 | 3.0   | 1.1  |
| 2022 | 2.7   | 1.1  |

*Source: FAO et al. (2024)*

A detailed analysis of CERB beneficiaries for 2020 for the country shows that, of the immigrants who arrived in Canada between 1980 and 2019, 41.2% received this type of support (Morissette et al., 2021). Visible minority workers were more likely to be badly affected by the pandemic, either forced to stop working because they were in sectors that were severely hit by the public measures or vulnerable to the infection. Table 8 shows that those accepted as refugees were most likely to have received this benefit (51.6%) followed by 46.2% of family-sponsored immigrants. A lower share of economic immigrants who were principal applicants received this type of pandemic support (32%). Immigrants admitted after 2000 were more likely to apply for and receive these benefits compared to those who had arrived earlier. The data also underscores the disproportionate adverse economic consequences of the pandemic on women, with a relatively higher share of women receiving CERB across most categories. However, fewer women refugees (50.9%) received these benefits compared to their male counterparts (52.1%). Other studies have reiterated that recent immigrants were more vulnerable to job losses compared to Canadian-born workers in March

and April 2020 since they were over-represented in low-wage jobs (Hou et al., 2020). Additionally, women recent migrants were more adversely affected during this period in terms of their employment rates and unemployment. Beyond that, it was seen that recent immigrants lost jobs at higher rates and faced weaker recovery through return to employment in comparison with Canadian-born workers (Hou & Picot, 2022).

**TABLE 8: CERB Recipients by Year of Entry into Canada, Immigration Category and Gender, 2020**

| Immigration category and year of entry    | Total | Female | Male |
|---|-------|--------|------|
| <b>Year of entry</b>                      |       |        |      |
| Immigrants admitted since 1980            | 41.2  | 42.7   | 39.9 |
| Admitted between 1980 to 2009             | 39.8  | 40.8   | 38.8 |
| Admitted between 1980 to 1989             | 35.6  | 35.1   | 36.1 |
| Admitted between 1990 to 1999             | 39.0  | 39.4   | 38.7 |
| Admitted between 2000 and 2009            | 41.8  | 43.8   | 39.8 |
| Admitted between 2010 to 2019             | 43.9  | 46.3   | 41.8 |
| <b>Immigration category</b>               |       |        |      |
| Economic immigrant                        | 35.8  | 37.8   | 34.0 |
| Principal applicant, economic immigrant   | 32.0  | 34.3   | 30.6 |
| Spouse or dependant of economic immigrant | 39.6  | 40.3   | 38.8 |
| Sponsored by family                       | 46.2  | 47.5   | 44.7 |
| Refugee                                   | 51.6  | 50.9   | 52.1 |
| <i>Source: Morissette et al. (2021)</i>   |       |        |      |

The contradictory findings on the state of food security in Canada across the first two years of the pandemic witnessed a marked change by 2022. Data from the Statistics Canada's Canadian Income Surveys shows an upswing in the prevalence of food insecurity in the country by 2022, which worsened further by 2023 (Table 5). The segment of Canadian residents in food-insecure households expanded from 15.7% in 2021 to 18.4% in 2022. The share of moderately food-insecure residents grew from 7.6% in 2021 to 8.9% by 2022. Residents facing low forms of food insecurity increased similarly from 4.6% to 5.6%. Severe forms of food insecurity saw a small negative change between 2021 and 2022. Analyzing this survey data for 2022, Li et al. (2023) underscored that the country witnessed the highest spike in food insecurity in its 17-year history of monitoring this crucial indicator. In 2022, 2.7 million households were food insecure, corresponding to 6.9 million residents and including nearly 1.8 million children below the age of 18.

Like the findings of the previous surveys, a predictable pattern of risks to food insecurity emerges. Li et al (2023) point out that household food insecurity is an important signifier of socioeconomic disadvantages and intimately connected to low household income, limited assets and resources, and other markers of

social and economic barriers faced by individuals, families and groups. Households with restricted incomes, lower educational qualifications of the earning adult members, and those belonging to historically marginalized groups, such as racialized communities including Black-identifying persons and Indigenous communities, faced significantly elevated risks of food insecurity. Food insecurity was the highest for families led by women parenting alone (41%), Black Canadian families (38%) and families relying on state support (such as Employment Insurance benefits, social assistance and Canadian Pension Plan benefits) as their major source of income (29%) (Uppal, 2023). These findings correlate with the identified socioeconomic predictors of food insecurity in the period before the pandemic (Tarasuk et al., 2019).

Another notable finding is that, while low-income households were far more prone to food insecurity, a higher segment of families (78%) who were experiencing food insecurity were above the poverty line (Uppal, 2023). As pointed out earlier, the surge in inflation can be accepted as an important determinant of household food insecurity from 2021 onwards (Statistics Canada, 2024). The inflation rate rose from 1.0% in January 2021 to 4.8% by the end of that year. Food inflation jumped from 1.0% to 5.2% over this same period. By June 2022, the overall inflation rate had risen further to 8.1% and food inflation had reached 8.8%. According to an annual food price report by the Agri-Food Analytics Lab, this change in food inflation was the highest annual change witnessed in Canada since the 1980s (Charlebois et al., 2023). Russia's invasion of Ukraine, higher energy costs, increased interest rates, labour shortages, supply chain disruptions and increased transportation costs have driven this extraordinary food inflation. By September 2022, food prices had surpassed (10.3%) the predicted growth of 5% to 7% for the year (Charlebois et al., 2023).

## CONCLUSION

Hunger and undernourishment constitute persistent public health challenges on a global scale (FAO et al., 2020, 2022, 2024). It is also evident that the COVID-19 crisis since 2020 and its aftermath have seen marked intensification of food insecurity and weakened access to nutritious diets across many countries and regions (FAO et al., 2024). An overview on the broad theme of food security has underscored that food insecurity is also a core governance issue for the high-income countries of the Global North: "It is... untrue to think that food security concerns only, or mostly, the Global South. While food security is critical to the Global South, it is becoming a massive concern in several countries of the Global North today" (Savary et al., 2022). Despite this, food insecurity has been largely treated as an enduring challenge for poorer developing countries in the Global

South and only weakly associated with the Global North. Consequently, the prevalence of food insecurity, its determinants, and conditions under which it grows, have received relatively less attention in the high-income national settings of the Global North, including Canada. For instance, the latest SOFI report shows that official data is unavailable on the prevalence of moderate and severe forms of food insecurity in Canada between 2014 and 2016 (FAO et al., 2024, p. 162).

New reports and studies have divulged that food insecurity and weaker access to nutritious foods are key, yet mostly hidden and poorly understood, dimensions of the lived realities of multiple social cohorts in Canada, including post-secondary students and international students (Daily Bread Food Bank, 2023; Wang et al., 2023). Building from these ideas and by paying attention to pandemic-related changes in the food systems, such as availability of labour and supply chains, we have examined the state of food security in Canada through the pandemic years (2020–2022) and thereafter. Our review shows that preexisting socioeconomic disadvantages were predictable markers of vulnerability for households to the health risks, along with economic insecurity and food insecurity during the pandemic. Refugees, new immigrant arrivals and women immigrants faced greater risks, as did racialized minorities, although emergency support in the form of CERB and food assistance may have softened some of these harsh outcomes (notably job losses and inability to work). Refugees and immigrants were also overexposed to the coronavirus because of their employment and housing conditions.

Food insecurity is now a significant problem in Canada. A troubling feature is the increased exposure to food insecurity of households that were not previously at risk. Tarasuk et al. (2022) argue that the prevalence and severity of household food insecurity demands careful monitoring across Canada, especially after 2022 when government pandemic supports and subsidies were phased out. This was also a period marked by rising inflation, including food inflation, and increased costs of living. These negative changes contributed directly to the further deterioration of household food insecurity in Canada from 2022 to 2023, when moderate and severe forms of food insecurity grew by 22% and 50% respectively (Table 5).

A new report has argued that “food insecurity has continued to fester and is at its worst it has ever been” and calls for “more effective, evidence-based policy responses by federal and provincial governments” (PROOF, 2024). Detailed assessments are needed into the ways in which the COVID-19 containment measures and socioeconomic changes during the pandemic affected the food security of households across various socioeconomic immigrant cohorts, including less studied aspects such as their cultural food security and physical access to preferred foods. More studies are needed to further unpack the categories

of “immigrants” and “new arrivals” and more work is urgently needed on the food security challenges faced by less documented groups, including irregular migrants and temporary migrants. We encourage researchers to engage with refugees and recent immigrants to identify effective policy measures and appropriate civil society support from their perspective. This will aid policy makers and civil society organizations in designing evidenced-based, targeted and grounded approaches to food security challenges.

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This policy audit explores the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on food security in Canada, with a focus on immigrants, refugees, and other marginalized communities, particularly in Ontario and the Waterloo Region. COVID-19 significantly exacerbated food insecurity in the country, adding to existing vulnerabilities especially in historically disadvantaged communities, who already faced barriers such as low-income employment, poor housing, and limited healthcare access. COVID-19 responses, including lockdowns and travel restrictions, disrupted food production, processing, and retail services. The supply chain disruptions, along with inflation, drove food prices to their highest levels in decades. Economic access to food became a pressing concern for low-income households, including those of migrants and refugees. Federal and provincial measures to mitigate the effects of the pandemic provided financial relief, increased food bank support, and targeted assistance to vulnerable populations. Yet, temporary support measures could not fully address structural food security challenges. The pandemic brought food insecurity to the forefront of public health concerns in Canada. Its long-term effects on food security remain significant, requiring ongoing monitoring and targeted policy interventions.



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