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#### **ABSTRACT**

Better Beginnings, Better Futures is a community-based early intervention program that provides supports and services for disadvantaged parents and caregivers with children 0 to 5 years of age and pregnant women across eight Ontario communities. Upon analysis of data from the food insecurity and financial stress questions, the overall trend was such that the state of financial stress and food insecurity remained relatively stable over time. With the program itself remaining in effect during the entire time period, the lack of change on these constructs, point to a lack of improvement in the social policies that influence the families in question. An additional implication is with regards to the lack of fruits and vegetables parents are unable to provide to their children. Recommendations to food banks, government and academia were subsequently provided.

### *Introduction and Background Information*

As a result of the discovery of the devastating impacts of poverty, a number of prevention-based programs have arisen and are in various stages of development. One of these programs is called, "Better Beginnings Better Futures" (BBBF) which serves to study the "long-term impacts of early childhood prevention programming for disadvantaged children in Canada" (Anonymous, 2004).

BBBF is a community-based program that provides supports and services for parents and caregivers with children 0 to 5 years of age and pregnant women. Some of these services include family visiting, playgroup, community celebrations, nutritional supplement, assistance with immigration and settlement, and clothing banks (Anonymous, 2007).

The intention is that findings will help direct future primary prevention programs as well as that of social policy. The program is longitudinal in nature and follows families with children during and after their participation in BBBF prevention programs in eight low-income Canadian communities. Moreover, the study also follows children and their families in three comparison communities where demographic characteristics have been closely matched to communities with BBBF sites. During the period ranging from 1993 to 2003, data from over 1500 children as well as their families and teachers were collected from these sites (Anonymous, 2004).

The Better Beginnings Better Futures program has three main objectives: outcome evaluation research, economic evaluation research, program evaluation research and follow up research. In terms of outcome evaluation research, the following questions were posed:

"Are the Better Beginnings programs effective in:

- Preventing serious emotional and behavioural problems in young children?
- Promoting healthy child and family development?
- Enhancing the abilities of disadvantaged communities to provide for children and their families"?

Under this objective, it was found that children participating in BBBF programs had decreased anxiety and depression levels, better social skills, and benefited from improved dietary intake.

A second objective of the program was economic analysis research, which investigated the costs of the program on an annual basis. It was demonstrated that BBBF was affordable, costing \$1000 per child per year. In comparison to U.S. prevention programs that cost anywhere from \$4300 to \$16000 per year, this is a manageable program to implement in an economic sense.

Outcomes of BBBF programs also sought to explore project development and program model research. This research aims to investigate how the BBBF communities "develop and implement the program model" as well as to find the extent to which "local demonstration projects are characterized by parent and community involvement, integration of services, and comprehensive, high-quality programs" (Anonymous, 2004).

Lastly, study of BBBF programs aims to explore the long-term outcomes, which result from participation. This is in an effort to further address policy questions which long-term cost-benefit analysis can serve to be highly beneficial. Questions that were posed within this category included:

- “What are the medium and long-term effects and cost benefits for children and their families?”
- How sustainable are the local Better Beginnings projects? Do they change in terms of programs, organization, and budget? What changes in short-term outcomes for children, families and neighbourhoods occur over the first five years of annualized funding, i.e., 1998-2003” (Anonymous, 2004).

The following two sections aims to report on the change in prevalence of food insecurity among families participating in the Better Beginnings Better Futures through an analysis of financial stress and food insecurity within families participating in the Better Beginnings Better Futures program

#### *Food Insecurity Data*

A small portion of BBBF research surrounded food insecurity in parents and their children. It should be noted that parental respondents were primarily mothers (98%). There were two areas of questioning that are relevant to the current discussion of food. The first set of questions was regarding trends in financial stress and the second specifically involved assessment of food security. Questions regarding financial stress during the previous three months included whether there was enough money available to purchase food, whether the respondent was experiencing financial stress regarding bills, and if there was sufficient financial stress present such that it was necessary to visit a food bank. These questions were asked each year from 1995 to 1999 (n=784) as well as in 2002 during a follow up interview (n=724). These points in time corresponded with when the children were in Junior Kindergarten (JK) to grade three and subsequently grade 6 in the follow up. With regards to the question about financial stress involving inadequate money to purchase food, the proportion was highest during the middle of the time period. The proportions during the first and last assessment were identical, indicating no overall change throughout the duration of the study (See Table 1). In terms of the question pertaining to food bank utilization, the proportion again peaks in 1997, although does decline by approximately two percentage points by 2002. Lastly, with regards to financial stress regarding bills, once again the proportion peaked during 1997 and then returns to a rate identical to that at which it begun, again indicating no overall change.

Table 1. Trends in Financial Stress

Year	Food Bank (% Responding True)	Food Money (% Responding True)	Bills (% Responding True)
1995	N/A	18.9	21.9
1996	10.5	22.9	31.7
1997	11.9	26.4	34.0
1998	10.5	22.1	26.5
1999	8.4	18.5	24.1
2002	8.3	18.9	21.9

Next, with regards to the food insecurity questions, these were asked of respondents during each year from 1997 (children were in grade one) to 1999 (children were in grade three) (see Table 2). The questions were posed as follows:

1. I feel that my children get enough food to keep them from going hungry.
2. I feel that I have enough money to buy my children healthy foods (for example, fresh fruits and vegetables).
3. I skip meals, or cut down on the amount of food I eat to leave more for my children.
4. I feel that I have enough money to buy myself healthy foods
5. I worry about not being able to buy more food for my family when we need it.

Individuals were asked to score on a scale from one to five, with one being not true, to five being always true. Question three and five were reversed scored in the analysis. With regards to question one, the categories of 'not true', 'hardly ever true' and 'sometimes true' were collapsed for these analyses. This proportion reached the highest point during 1999, with the 1997 and 1998 being fairly close, that is with a difference of only 1%. For question two, the categories of 'not true', 'hardly ever true' and 'sometimes true' were again combined in terms of the analysis presented here. Overall, during the three-year period, the proportion of parents indicating that there wasn't enough money for healthy food for their children, increased, with the highest rate occurring in 1999. Pertaining to question three, there was a slight overall decline in the proportion of parents that indicated that their meals were skipped or reduced 'always' or 'almost always'. The highest proportion occurred during 1997, with the 1998 and 1999 rates measuring slightly, although incrementally less. With regards to question four and purchasing healthy food for oneself, the proportion of those food insecure peaks in 1998, with the 1999 value being larger than the initial 1997 data point. Lastly, in terms of question five that expresses worry within the context of food insecurity, the data peaked again in 1998, although the overall values remained fairly consistent, only fluctuating 0.1% from one year to the next.

**Table 2. Food Insecurity Questions (Proportion Food Insecure)**

Question	Year	Proportion (%)
Children get enough food to keep from going hungry	1997	1.0
	1998	2.5
	1999	1.3
Have enough money to buy children healthy foods	1997	13.1
	1998	12.6
	1999	14.1
Parents skipped meals/ cutting down the amount of	1997	11.3
	1998	14.4

food	1999	10.5
Have enough money to buy myself healthy foods	1997	17.5
	1998	18.1
	1999	17.9
Worry about not being able to buy more food when needed	1997	29.2
	1998	29.4
	1999	29.3

Overall, the findings paint a bleak picture of what is occurring within the eight low-income communities. Despite the program intervention, the overall trend was such that the state of financial stress and food insecurity remained relatively stable over time. With the program itself remaining in effect during the entire time period, the lack of change on these constructs point to a lack of improvement in the social policies that influence the families in question. An additional implication is with regards to the extent to which parents are able to afford healthy foods for their children, such as fruits and vegetables. The Canadian Food Guide utilized at the beginning of the study was the 1992 version that recommended 5 servings of fruits and vegetables per day. In contrast, the current Food Guide recommends a total of 8 servings per day for this food group (Evers, 2007). Despite the increase in need for such healthy food items, parents are consistently unable to meet these needs. The period from 1997 to 1999 showed that more parents found it difficult to provide such foods for their children. With a lack of improvement in such crucial areas, there is a definite need to reassess current social policy in order to improve the lives of women and their children.

#### *Review and Recommendations of our Current Approach of Addressing Food Insecurity in Canada*

After assessing the effects of the BBBF Program, it is logical to provide an overview of our current approach to the issue of food insecurity in Canada as well as provide recommendations to improve the situation. These aspects will be discussed in terms of the role of food banks, the government, and academia.

#### *Food Banks*

Food banks in Canada originated in the 1980s at first as a temporary response to the recession occurring at the time. When the economy improved, however, the usage of these agencies, not only failed to decline, but actually continued to increase throughout the 1980s and 1990s (Tarasuk, 2001a). In terms of accessing the food that they provide, individual clients do so in a number of ways ranging from direct access to indirect means through food pantries and churches, for example, that serve as their outlets (Riches, 2002). In 2006, over 330,000 individuals accessed food banks within a one-month period- the highest in the country (Spence, 2006). With food bank usage only increasing,

it is important to discuss the implications of such agencies. Both the Canadian and Ontario Association of Food Banks set out ethical standards for their members to follow. The Canadian Association of Food Banks, for example, states that “everyone has the right to their daily sustenance” and pledges that members will organize activities to “bring about the greatest degree of personal dignity possible” (Riches, 2002). Despite this, individuals have commented on the feelings of shame that clients experience upon their first visit to a food bank. There is no doubt that asking for help with regards to fulfilling a basic necessity for one or one’s family could be a humiliating experience. Due to this, it is not surprising that that majority of women feel degraded upon accessing a food bank for the first time (Tarasuk and Beaton, 1999). Aside from monumental changes in the stereotypes that are attached to food bank users, there is little agency staff and volunteers can do to avoid this initial feeling. They can, however, focus on providing a comfortable, respectful environment- as suggested by the CAFB and OAFB ethical standards- so that those feelings can soon diminish. This is something that can often be easier said than done- particularly because of the current structure of food bank operations. Despite food bank staff and volunteers being caring and compassionate individuals, the very nature of these people always being in the higher status role of the one that ‘provides assistance’, makes it very difficult for individuals not to feel highly uncomfortable.

An additional concern that has been raised by food insecurity researchers is that through the existence of food banks, poverty and food insecurity are depolitized and moreover, they emphasize the role of charity rather than social justice. This view is rooted in the concern that the existence of food banks relieves governments of their responsibilities toward those in need in our society. In other words, the government points to food banks as the ones that are ‘solving’ the issue of hunger in communities which conveniently places the responsibility out of their hands (Tarasuk, 2001a). In reality of course, the majority of food banks are not able to meet the current need, let alone be prepared for the growing demand in the future.

To address these proposed concerns, one can assert that the problem fails to be the existence of food banks, but instead at the lack of attention to their increasing use. There most definitely needs to be more than one approach to tackling the problem that goes beyond pure distribution of food. It is important to note that this thinking is supported by several individual food banks as well as umbrella associations representing them such as the Canadian and Ontario Associations of Food Banks. These organizations actively demonstrate this mentality through their commitment to lobbying the government for increased social spending (Riches, 2002; oafb.ca, 2007). Food banks need to be viewed as one important part of a multifaceted approach to combat food insecurity.

Moreover, ‘alternatives to food banks’ have been proposed, although in many cases, the recommendations suggested could be implemented in such a way that they would build upon and complement existing food bank infrastructure. Recommendations have included an increased focus on “self-help, mutual support, and community empowerment. Examples include community gardens, food-buying clubs, farmers’ markets, alternative food distribution networks, and community-supported agriculture” (Tarasuk, 2001a). Recommendations have also been made that encompass the notion of moving from private to public spaces which encourage more civic participation in decision making and policy development (McCullum et. al., 2005).

Additions and modifications such as these would help to integrate individuals within the larger community rather than segmenting them as the part that is 'in need'. Moreover, they "promote social cohesion and reduce inequities by building connections between local food production and consumption" (McCullum et. al., 2005). A new program in Quebec supports such initiatives that "go beyond emergency food assistance and [contribute] to the social development of a community, by supporting the development of autonomy, the responsibility of persons and the portion of a new solidarity that enables people to improve their living conditions" (Agriculture and Agri-food Canada, 1998, p.12, as cited by Tarasuk, 2001a).

Many working and volunteering within the realm of local hunger would be quick to point out that implementing such changes are likely to be difficult because of a lack of funding. Food banks are largely run through the work of volunteers, and them along with the few staff that they employ are heavily taxed when it comes to time and resources. Many such agencies find that the vast majority, if not all, of their resources are spent on the physical distribution of food to clients and fundraising just to meet a portion of the demand in terms of emergency food relief. With such severe financial restraints, it is difficult to envision an ability to implement the changes noted above that would benefit clients in such positive ways. It is likely that the solution to this financial conundrum will be found in seeking out outside forms of funding, as well as lobbying to the government for increased social spending. Although time constraints may prove to make the process difficult, investigating other forms of funding and placing pressure on the government for additional resources should be made a priority- as in the long run it is this funding that will provide a long term solution for food insecurity through the enabling of changes in how food banks are run.

### *The Government*

The fact that food banks are present in growing numbers two decades after they were first introduced as temporary aid underscores the failure of our government in providing adequate funding for the most vulnerable in our communities (Tarasuk, 2001a). As described in the last section, financial restraints are one of the largest problems facing food insecurity in this country today. Not only would increased government support reduce the time restraints attached to fundraising in social agencies and allow them to increase the breadth of their capacities, it also holds the ability to help those in need more broadly through changes in legislation.

Social policy in Canada has seen many fluctuations over the course of time and the passing of various governments in power. In recent history we have been experiencing a large shift in social policy towards "market-driven, neo-liberal concepts of social welfare" (Riches, 2002). Since the period of 1966-1973, which saw at least moderate social rights, there has been a transition toward the removal of such rights (Riches, 2002). The before-mentioned increase in food bank use in the 1980s served as proof of this trend, particularly emphasizing the increasing insufficiency of unemployment insurance and social assistance provided by the provincial government (Riches, 2002).

The election of the new liberal government in the early 1990s saw a commitment to the elimination of national debt as well as "a private sector led recovery based on a free trade agenda with the United States" (Riches, 2002). As a result, social welfare was

to soon see reform, including the reduction of unemployment benefits as well as its support to provincial social programs such as the Canada Assistance Plan (CAP) which had been introduced back in 1966. The program provided funding that was cost-shared with the provinces and territories in order to provide assistance to those it judged to be in need. Under the new system enacted in 1996, provinces were no longer required to provide assistance based on need and moreover, individuals lost the right to appeal. In contrast to the older program, social funding allotted by the federal government is now up to the discretion of the provinces to divide funds between health care, social welfare and post-secondary education.

There is a view supported by many within the government that food banks act as a second tier for social assistance in the country, allowing them to take lesser responsibility for it themselves. A question was posed by a United Nations monitoring committee to the provincial, territorial and federal governments regarding whether the existence of food banks in such an affluent country was consistent with article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights created by the United Nations and which Canada signed. The Covenant "recognizes the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family including food, clothing and shelter" and "the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger" (UN, 1998, as cited by Riches, 2002). It is interesting to note that greater than half of the governments that the question was posed to - including the federal government - failed to respond to the question suggesting "ambivalence, if not embarrassment, at the nature of the question" (Riches, 2002). It should also be noted that since the ratification of that article in 1976, Canada has also ratified the International Convention of the Rights of the Child, signed the World Declaration on Nutrition, the World Declaration on Social Development, and the Declaration on World Food Security (Riches, 2002). The problem, of course, lies in translating these treaties in to legislation. Moreover, a discussion involving the government's conflicting messages, cannot be conducted without mentioning the 1989 all party resolution to end child poverty in Canada by the year 2000. Underscoring the failure to meet this resolution is the fact that an estimated 60% of households accessing food banks are families with children (Canadian Association of Food Banks, 2002, as cited by Riches, 2002).

### *Academia*

Research in the realm of academia has pointed out time after time that serious changes need to be made in this country in order to make a commitment to the hungry women and children in this country. Policy recommendations based upon scientific literature are vast and include child nutrition programs, initiatives to help low income individuals, increases to social assistance, and better access to healthier foods. Particular recommendations have been made regarding attention to school meal programs such as a universal breakfast, lunch or after school snack program (Winicki and Jemison, 2003; Ashiabi, 2005; Alaimo, Olson and Frongillo, 2002). Summer food programs have also been recommended (Alaimo et. al., 2002)

Improving the plight of low-income individuals is another important recommendation cited by numerous researchers. Those that are living in low income households are 8 times more likely to experience food insecurity in comparison to be food insecure than those living in upper-middle or high-income households (Che and

Chen, 2001). One way in which to improve the lives of low-income individuals is through an adequate minimum wage. Alaimo et. al. 2005) described that working families are just as likely to experience food insecurity as non working families which indicates that “welfare reform’s focus on moving parents to work will not increase a poor family’s food security if the jobs they find do not pay living wages or provide health insurance” (Alaimo et. al., 2001). The importance of an increased minimum wage has been echoed by findings from Alaimo et. al. (2002) as well. In addition to minimum wage, attention and resources also need to be focused on the issues of affordable housing and support payments (McIntyre et. al., 2003). By reducing the costs individuals have to expend on these necessities, it frees up money that could otherwise be put toward purchasing food.

Closely related to the issue of low-income are social assistance rates. Unfortunately, there will always be individuals in our communities who are unable to work for a myriad of reasons. Whether it be an accident, disability, mental illness, or unemployment, it is essential that these Canadians be adequately cared for. The fact is, however, that social assistance falls thousands of dollars below Canada’s Low Income Cut Offs. Furthermore, the prevalence of food insecurity was highest among those who rely upon social security in comparison to other sources of income (Che and Chen, 2001).

Lastly, it is essential for food insecure individuals to be able to access, not only enough food, but also enough healthy food to lead healthy lives. Social policies should move towards greater integration that would ensure that “all community members have the capacity to buy healthful foods rather than rely regularly on charitable food sources”...as well as serve to ensure that “the proportion of the locally-based food supply increased over time for the entire population, which may be achieved through land-use policies, market promotion, and subsidies, tax incentives and financing mechanisms” (McCullum et. al., 2005). Socially conscious urban planning such as adequately positioning farmer’s markets, as well as making healthy food staples such as dairy products and fresh fruits and vegetables more affordable is vital in the fight against food insecurity and its numerous negative repercussions (Broughton et. al, 2006; McIntyre, et. al., 2003).

Academia has other roles within the context of food insecurity over and above that of research. It is well known that policy formation is largely indicative of the values and beliefs of those that inform and create it. Many misconceptions about food insecurity exist. Stereotypes about the poor and those who utilize social agencies are widespread. Scientific research has the ability to counteract these conceptions readily by providing accurate information about the prevalence, outcomes and determinants of food insecurity in this country. That being said, too often the world of scientific inquiry occurs in a bubble, without fully realizing its potential impact on the policy makers of this country. It is of course the role of a scientist to be objective and neutral in ones procedures, although when results that conclude repeatedly the devastating presence and consequences of this social ill, it is crucial for scientist to readily communicate their findings to voters, as well as areas in government which create social policy.

### *Closing Remarks*

As one of the richest countries in the world, one would not place hunger amidst this country’s most devastating social ills. Unfortunately, food insecurity is a stark

reality in Canada, with particularly damaging impacts for women and children. It will take nothing less than the strengthened and combined efforts of community agencies, the government, academia and the Canadian public to take a stand for the most vulnerable in our society and place the issue of food insecurity where it belongs: in the past.

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