

Research Profile: Food Security

"Food security is a condition in which all people at all times can acquire safe, nutritionally adequate and personally acceptable foods that are accessible in a manner that maintains human dignity."

Food Security in Guelph & Wellington

- In the County of Wellington (including the City of Guelph) there are over 40 agencies or organizations that offer emergency access to food or assistance to individuals whom may be experiencing barriers to accessing food.ⁱⁱ
- The use of food banks has increased in both Wellington County and the City of Guelph over the past 4 years.ⁱⁱⁱ
- A survey completed by all member agencies of the Ontario Association of Food Banks (OASFB) shows that there was an increase of 28.1% in the number of individuals served through the food banks in all of Wellington County (including the City of Guelph) between March 2005 and March 2008. This was a dramatic difference as the province as a whole has seen a 7.1% reduction in overall number of individuals served during the same time frame.^{iv}
- The cost of a Nutritious Food Basket for a family of 4 is \$149.09 for the Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health Unit coverage area compared to the average cost for Ontario which is \$141.44.^v
- A single person on Ontario Works receives \$212 per month for basic needs. To eat a healthy diet as per the NNFB guidelines a single male aged 25-49 years would need to spend approximately 80% of that allocation on food. A woman of the same age would need to spend approximately 59% (based on a 4 week month).

Food Security in Ontario^{vi}

- 31% of Food Banks have seen a decrease in both Corporate and Individual monetary donations.
- In 2009, 73% of Food Banks have seen more money spent on food compared to 2008.
- 54% of Food Banks are estimating that they will be over their food purchasing budgets in 2009.
- 37.3% of Ontario Association of Food Bank members do not have enough food to meet the needs of their clients.

Collective Kitchens

Collective kitchens are food programs that exist in hundreds of communities across Canada. While the format can be different based on the needs of the community and resources available, collective kitchens generally involve opportunities for people to meet once or twice a month to cook food in bulk for their families.

Research suggests that the benefits of collective kitchens include a way for people to save money or buy higher quality food by purchasing and producing in bulk, learning about nutrition and cooking, social support, and increased feelings of self-esteem.^{vii}

Recently scholars from the University of Montreal and University of Saskatchewan conducted research with participants of collective kitchens in Saskatoon, Montreal and Toronto. The following highlights some of the main benefits of collective kitchens as reported by low-income participants.

Increased Variety & Quality

The research notes that overall, the majority of participants interviewed felt that the food produced in the collective kitchens, much of which contained large amount of vegetables, increased the variety of their diets.^{viii} In fact, the number of participants who reported eating at least five vegetables and fruits each day increased by 20% after joining a collective kitchen.^{ix}

Besides an increase in the variety of food being accessed by participants of collective kitchens, some noted that they joined in an effort to obtain higher quality food. In particular, they claimed to be particularly concerned with the safety of the food from the food bank, because they had fallen ill after consuming donations in the past.^x

Decreased Dependency on Food Banks

The number of food banks rapidly increased in Canada during the 1980s as communities tried to respond to problems of hunger as a result of Canada's worst recession since the Great Depression began. Although initially viewed as temporary, emergency relief operations, food banks now appear to be accepted as a necessary community resource.^{xi} However, research notes that problems of poor food quality and limited selection available make food banks an inadequate solution to household food security.^{xii}

The research completed on collective kitchens in Canadian cities found that some people no longer needed to use food banks, whereas others used these charities less but continued to do so periodically, as a result of their participation.^{xiii}

Improved Cooking Skills

The skill associated with the preparation of vegetables is often cited as a barrier to healthy eating among low-income households.^{xiv} While Canadian governments and health agencies promote limiting the

consumption of processed foods, there are few public health programs that aim to increase one's ability to obtain and prepare healthy meals.^{xv}

Research on collective kitchens has found that participants reported learning about cooking from scratch and how to follow recipes. It is suggested that since nutritious prepackaged and pre-prepared foods can be more expensive than cooking from basic ingredients, an increased consumption of foods cooked "from scratch" might mean increased food security for collective kitchen members.^{xvi}

Social Opportunity & Empowerment

The research indicates that participation in collective kitchens can be both individually empowering and create group empowerment. This is thought to be the result of skill building, increased food security, and the development of a critical understanding of food security issues that resulted in increased self-esteem and self-confidence.^{xvii} In addition it was found that participants became more involved in other organizations and community groups and expressed an increased interest in participating in public life as a result of their collective kitchen involvement.^{xviii}

In addition to this increased empowerment, participants whose opportunities to socialize with other adults were limited by childcare responsibilities and low incomes, reported that they considered their participation in the collective kitchens as a valued social outing.^{xix}

Brant Avenue Neighbourhood Group Collective Kitchen

The Brant Avenue Neighbourhood Group, which serves east of Victoria Road and North of Eramosa Road in the City of Guelph, started a collective kitchen in September 2008 in partnership with New Life Church. Sonia Singh-Waraich, a Community Development Worker with Brant Ave. NG, was motivated to start the collective kitchen as a way to bring community members together and provide the opportunity for some to try new foods and recipes. Singh-Waraich notes that there can be conflicts in the community stemming from differences in class, culture and race, but notes that "food builds bridges across these differences and helps community members build supportive networks."

New Life Church provides space for the collective kitchen, does the shopping, sets up cooking stations and provides childcare. The cost of participating is approximately \$1 per serving, but this is subsidized for those living on a low income.

Today, the collective kitchen has approximately 6-10 participants, the majority of whom are mothers with young children. The cooking sessions are characterized by laughter and foster a true sense of community building in action.

Jen, a young mother who lives in the Brant Avenue area, notes that participating in the collective kitchen allows her to get to know her neighbours better, provides her with some stress relief and has introduced her and her kids to new foods. In addition, Jen explains that there is no need to worry about being a great cook – the collective kitchen sessions teaches cooking skills, how to read a recipe and regardless of your skill level, there are always others to help you out.

Interviews with Jen and Sonia were conducted on August 26th 2009 at 35 Algonquin Street, Guelph, ON.

Collective Kitchens – Action Items

Fresh Choice Kitchens, an educational resource centre for community kitchens based in B.C., provides excellent tools and resources for those looking to start a collective kitchen in their community. Please visit www.communitykitchens.ca for more information. A particularly great document, *Basic Steps – How to Start a Community Kitchen*, can be found at <http://www.communitykitchens.ca/ckfinder/userfiles/files/pdfs/BasicStepsJuly2009.pdf>.

The following action steps are recommended for Guelph & Wellington:

1. Gather participation from the Food Security Action Group
2. Introduce idea to all neighbourhood groups/food pantries/community gardens, etc.
3. Review what others are doing (use the template “Basic Steps – How to Start a Community Kitchen” as a starting place).
4. Subcommittee to develop a plan to gather information on all community kitchen spaces within Guelph/Wellington
5. Subcommittee to actively reach out to groups with kitchens and begin to talk about the idea with them – What do they presently do? What is the need in their area? What would they be willing to do with the space and perhaps a new ‘partnership’?
6. Determine what is needed to move forward – funds, resources, volunteers, plans, etc.
7. Begin the planning stages and apply for funding if required

ⁱ Engler-Stringer, Rachel and Shawna Berenbaum. “Exploring Food Security With Collective Kitchens Participants in Three Canadian Cities.” *Qualitative Health Research* 17.1 (2007): 75.

ⁱⁱ Guelph and Wellington Food Roundtable (2009), Community Resource

ⁱⁱⁱ Ontario Association of Foodbanks Annual Survey results. Information retrieved: January 2009.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Weekly Cost of a Nutritious Food Basket (NFB), Ontario 2008, Ministry of Health Promotion.

^{vi} Ontario Association of Food Banks. “In the Midst of the Storm: The Impact of the Economic Downturn for Ontario’s Food Banks in 2009.” October 2009. Accessed 8 November 2009 from <http://www.oafb.ca/assets/pdfs/SpecialReport.pdf>

^{vii} Dietitians of Canada. “Cooking together as a vehicle for new knowledge and skills to promote healthy eating.” *The Canadian Journal of Dietetic Practice and Research Highlights*. N.d. Accessed 06 November 2009 from http://www.dietitians.ca/news/highlights_research_collective_kitchens.asp.

^{viii} Engler-Stringer, Rachel and Shawna Berenbaum. 2007: 80.

- ^{ix} Engler-Stringer, Rachel and Shawna Berenbaum 2007: 81.
- ^x Engler-Stringer, Rachel and Shawna Berenbaum 2007: 81.
- ^{xi} Engler-Stringer and Shawna Berenbaum. “Collective Kitchens in Canada: A Review of the Literature.” Canadian Journal of Dietetic Practice and Research 66.4 (2005): 11.
- ^{xii} Teron, Adrienne C. and Valerie S. Tarasuk. “Charitable Food Assistance: What are Food Bank Users Receiving?” Canadian Journal of Public Health 90.6 (1999): 382.
- ^{xiii} Engler-Stringer, Rachel and Shawna Berenbaum 2007: 81.
- ^{xiv} Fisher, Andy. “Hot Peppers and Parking Lot Peaches: Evaluating Farmers’ Markets in Low Income Communities.” Community Food Security Coalition (1999): 4. Accessed 08 November 2009 from <https://we.riseup.net/assets/5078/HotPeppersPeaches.pdf>
- ^{xv} Broughton, Margaret, Patricia Janssen, Clyde Hertzman, Sheila Innis and C. James Frankish. “Predictors and Outcomes of Household Food Insecurity Among Inner City Families with Preschool Children in Vancouver.” Canadian Journal of Public Health 97.3 (2006): 215.
- ^{xvi} Engler-Stringer, Rachel and Shawna Berenbaum 2007: 81.
- ^{xvii} Engler-Stringer, Rachel and Shawna Berenbaum 2005: 249.
- ^{xviii} Engler-Stringer, Rachel and Shawna Berenbaum 2005: 249.
- ^{xix} Tarasuk, Valerie and Randi Reynolds. “A Qualitative Study of Community Kitchens: A Response to Income-Related Food Insecurity.” Canadian Journal of Dietetic Practice and Research 60.1 (1999): 13.