

Measures to Mitigate the Effects of the Pandemic on Food Insecurity

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Notice

This document was written in the context of the COVID-19 health emergency. Produced in a short period of time, it is based on a summary analysis of a non-exhaustive review of the scientific and grey literatures. Its content may need to be revised according to the evolution of scientific knowledge related to the current pandemic or to deepen certain sections.

Context

- ▶ **What is food insecurity (FI)?** Food insecurity is inadequate or uncertain access to healthy food to support a healthy and active life. It is mainly associated with a lack of financial resources (1, 2).
- ▶ **Has the pandemic exacerbated FI?** Yes. At the onset of the pandemic in April 2020, a reported 26% of Québec adults were living in households experiencing FI (3). By the end of May 2020, this rate decreased to 15%. By comparison, this rate was 11% in 2015-16, based on a survey using a different methodology (4).
- ▶ **Who is most affected?** Households of four or more people, with children, or with members who have lost their jobs as well as people living alone and young adults have reported higher FI since the start of the pandemic (3, 5).
- ▶ **How does the COVID-19 pandemic influence FI?** The prevention measures associated with the pandemic, as well as their consequences such as individual confinement, job loss, and disruption of food assistance services, may increase the prevalence and severity of FI (6, 7). The pandemic has also caused shortages (8, 9) and an increase in the price of some foods (8–12), making them less accessible.
- ▶ **How are FI and COVID related?** People experiencing FI seem more likely to develop COVID and its complications (6, 13, 14) due to their precarious living conditions and the fact that they more often suffer from chronic illnesses (15). Researchers expect that the pandemic's impact on FI will persist after the prevention measures for the pandemic have been lifted (13). In the long term, impacts are to be expected on the morbidity and mortality of people experiencing FI, generating an avoidable health and economic burden (13, 16).

Measures and means to mitigate the effects of the pandemic on food insecurity

- ▶ **What methodology was used to identify the measures?** A review of the grey and scientific literatures was conducted (see details in *Appendix*). The measures identified and their level of scientific support in the literature are presented in the table below (first column). The level of scientific support was assessed by taking into account the number and type of publications, as well as the consistency of results between them. The individual quality of the publications was not taken into account in assessing the level of support. It should also be noted that each of the measures was not subject to a specific literature review on its effectiveness.
- ▶ **What methodology was used to identify the means?** Several of publications from the literature search included means associated with the measures. A selection was made among the means according to their relevance in the context of a pandemic (third column of the table). Data from the community (see details in *Appendix*) were also used to enrich the means. It should be noted that unlike the measures, the level of scientific support for the means was not evaluated in this analysis, contrary to what was done for the measures.

	Measures	Proposed means in a COVID context	Possible level of intervention	
			Local/Regional	Provincial/Federal
<p>Conventional food assistance services</p> <p>Level of support: Moderate</p>	<p>Food assistance services such as food banks have a role to play during a severe food crisis according to one systematic review (17), one non-systematic review (18), one study (19), one expert report (20), and one policy brief (21). Strengthening emergency food assistance could protect those at risk of FI during the COVID-19 pandemic (19).</p> <p>However, the ability of these measures to reduce FI is limited by the small volumes of food received relative to needs, as well as the difficulty of obtaining nutritious foods (17, 18). It should also be noted that even before the COVID-19 pandemic, food banks were struggling to meet the demand (22).</p> <p>Conventional food assistance services include food banks, emergency grocery assistance, and the regular distribution of food packages.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Innovate to maintain food assistance services (e.g., mobile food banks, drive-through services, deliveries) (23, 24). (Data from the community). ▶ Invest in the assets of food assistance organizations (e.g., freezers, cold rooms, trucks). (Data from the community) ▶ Linking producers with food banks (24). 	X	X

		Possible level of intervention	
Measures		Local/Regional	Provincial/Federal
<p>Local, resilient, healthy, and sustainable food systems</p> <p>Level of support: Moderate</p>	<p>Measures to build local, more resilient, healthier, and/or more sustainable food systems to strengthen food security are proposed in one expert report (20), one policy brief (21), and one study (19).</p>	<p>▶ Maintain access to food stores (e.g., maintain public transit). (Data from the community).</p> <p>▶ Make food shopping safe for vulnerable customers (e.g., reduce the number of customers, dedicated hours, free delivery) (24).</p> <p>▶ Protect workers in the bio-food sector from exposure to COVID-19 and improve their working conditions; pay special attention to migrant workers (20).</p> <p>▶ Implement mechanisms to protect small scale producers from uncertainties and losses in income (20).</p>	<p>X</p> <p>X</p> <p>X</p> <p>X</p>
<p>Structured dedicated food assistance programs</p> <p>Level of support: Moderate</p>	<p>The positive impacts of dedicated food assistance programs on the prevalence and severity of FI are emphasized by a literature review (25) and several policy briefs and expert opinions (7, 20, 21, 26, 27). However, FI rates among recipients of governmental programs (e.g., the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program [SNAP] in the US) remain high (18). During the COVID-19 pandemic, these programs could be adapted and their eligibility criteria widened to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic on FI (6, 26).</p> <p>Dedicated food assistance is sometimes criticized as it can perpetuate the misconception that low-income households prioritize other expenses over basic expenses like food (22, 28).</p> <p>Dedicated food assistance programs include governmental programs like OLO in Québec, and SNAP, Women, Infants and Children (WIC), and Electronic Benefit Transfer prepaid cards in the United States.</p>	<p>▶ Set up a food coupon or prepaid card program (21, 24, 28).</p> <p>▶ Implement alternative means of maintaining school meals where they exist in the event of school closures (20, 21, 24).</p> <p>▶ Expand the eligibility criteria of dedicated food programs (e.g., Nutrition North Canada) (6, 26). (Data from the community).</p> <p>▶ Set up a free, universal school food program (29).</p>	<p>X</p> <p>X</p> <p>X</p> <p>X</p>

		Possible level of intervention		
	Measures	Proposed means in a COVID context	Local/Regional	Provincial/Federal
<p>Income support</p> <p>Level of support: Moderate</p>	<p>Income support is a structuring measure recognized as the most important measure for sustainably reducing FI in Canada (22) as it addresses the root cause, insufficient income. Before the pandemic, income support measures to reduce FI had been proposed in two non-systematic reviews (18, 25). Similarly, in a pandemic context, income support was also put forward as a solution to FI in one expert report (20), one study (19), and published expert opinions (7, 22, 28).</p> <p>Some authors recommend implementing a series of social programs addressing housing, childcare services, income security, and job security to sustainably reduce FI (18, 20).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Introduce a guaranteed minimum income (7, 28). ▶ Increase the minimum wage (19, 28). ▶ Provide financial benefits that are not reserved for food use to vulnerable groups (18, 22, 25). 		<p>X</p> <p>X</p> <p>X</p>
<p>Centralized coordination of food-related actions</p> <p>Level of support: Moderate</p>	<p>Coordinating actions related to FI and healthy diets has been named an essential measure in one literature review (28), one expert report (20), and one expert opinion (28).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Identify an entity responsible for coordinating food assistance services (26). ▶ Create a centralized database shared with food assistance organizations to facilitate the coordination of requests from beneficiaries, food surpluses, and specific food requirements (31). ▶ Develop a policy framework to address FI (30). 	<p>X</p> <p>X</p>	<p>X</p> <p>X</p>

Appendix Methodology Documentarary research

A literature review was conducted to identify measures mitigating the effects of the pandemic on food insecurity (FI). To do so, the following websites of recognized organizations were consulted:

- ▶ World Health Organizatin (WHO),
- ▶ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO),
- ▶ Food insecurity policy research (PROOF),
- ▶ High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE),
- ▶ National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE),
- ▶ *La pyramide des 6 S (Base de données Trip, Portail canadien des pratiques exemplaires, Guide to community preventive services, Health evidence, Public Health +)*

Keyword searches related to the topic of food insecurity, food security, and COVID-19 were also conducted in the PubMed database and Google Scholar and Google. In addition, a PubMed search was conducted to identify literature reviews and meta-analyses on the topic of FI without regard to COVID. The INSPQ's COVID food scientific watch was also consulted.

Community data

Data from the community were also used to enrich the document. Following the reception of this urgent request, data was collected through: 1) a meeting with two public health professionals and a recognized food security researcher; 2) a meeting with a professional who is currently conducting interviews with disadvantaged people in FI situations as part of a food coupon research project; and 3) an interview with a nutritionist working in a First Nations community.

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