
The Reality of Basic Income as a Response to Food Insecurity in Canada

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My Perspective

I come to this work as a community developer with extensive experience in community based action research, social program and policy development, and as a senior leader in the non-profit charitable sector in Canada.

My perspective is based in a theory of change that is based in praxis - informing practice with theory and vice versa.



Basic Income Canada Network
Réseau canadien pour le revenu garanti

UBI  Works

common wealth
C A N A D A

Overview

Conventional thinking tells us that **food insecurity is actually a problem of income**, and can therefore be addressed through policies and programs that provide increased income.

Systems thinking provides a wider lens, allowing us to understand the complexity of food insecurity as a challenge integrated with other issues where income, while important, is not the only causal solution.

Understanding this complexity not only provides a more holistic approach to addressing food insecurity (and other complex social and economic issues), but **can act to strengthen the movement for basic income** by situating it as a foundational policy for broad social and economic change.

Conventional v. Systems Thinking [1]

Conventional Thinking

Connection between the challenge and its causes is obvious and easy to trace.

A policy designed to achieve short-term success will also assure long-term success.

In order to optimize the whole we must optimize the parts

Tackle many independent initiatives simultaneously.

Systems Thinking

Relationship between the challenge and its cause is indirect and not obvious.

Short term fixes can have unintended consequences and may in fact impede long-term success.

In order to optimize the whole, we must improve the relationships among the parts.

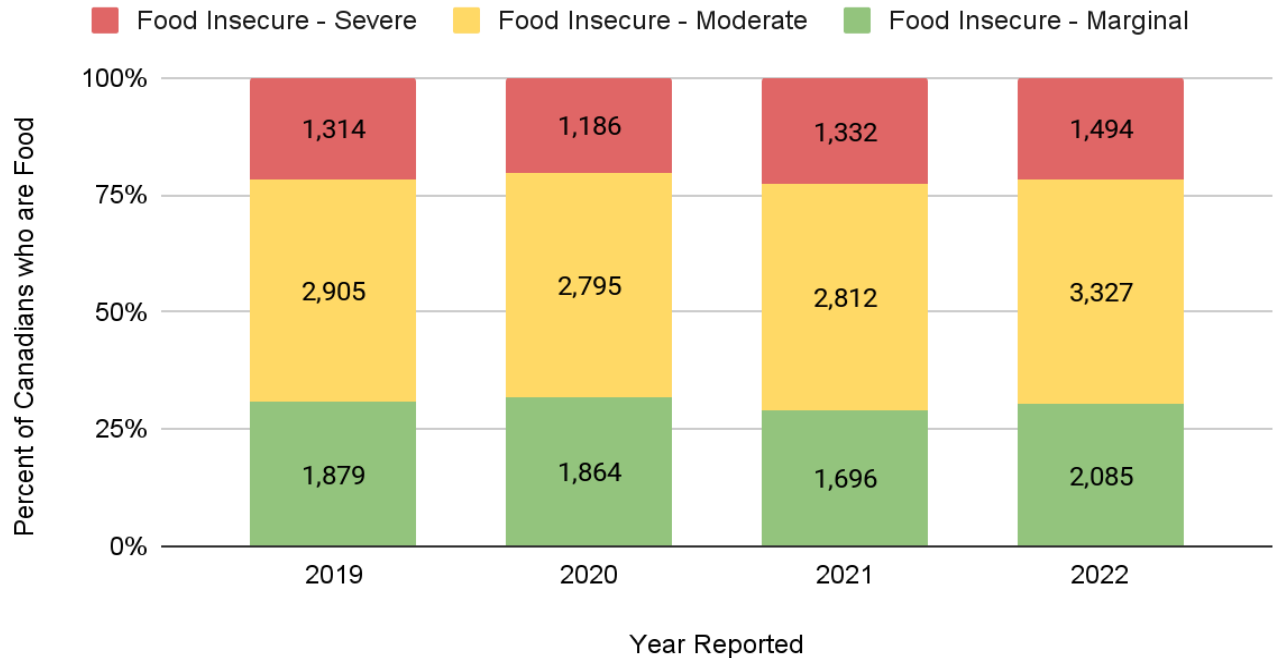
Only a few key coordinated changes sustained over time will produce systems change.

The Problem - Food insecurity in Canada

18.4 % of Canadians living in the 10 provinces lived in food insecure households in 2021 [2]

6.9 million people, including 1.8 million children [3]

Food Insecurity of Canadians in Economic Families (x 1,000) [4]



Accompanying Rise in Food Bank Use

Food bank use in Canada is at a historic high, with approximately, **1.46 million monthly visits to food banks in 2022** [5]; a 15% increase from 2021, and a 35% increase since 2019.

In my community, Durham Region, with a population of 700,000, there were 135,000 visits to food banks in 2022; a 58% increase from 2022 [6].

The primary reasons reported by people for their need to use a food bank in 2022 were



Rising cost of food



Rising cost of housing



Declining/stagnating wages

Defining Food Insecurity in Canada

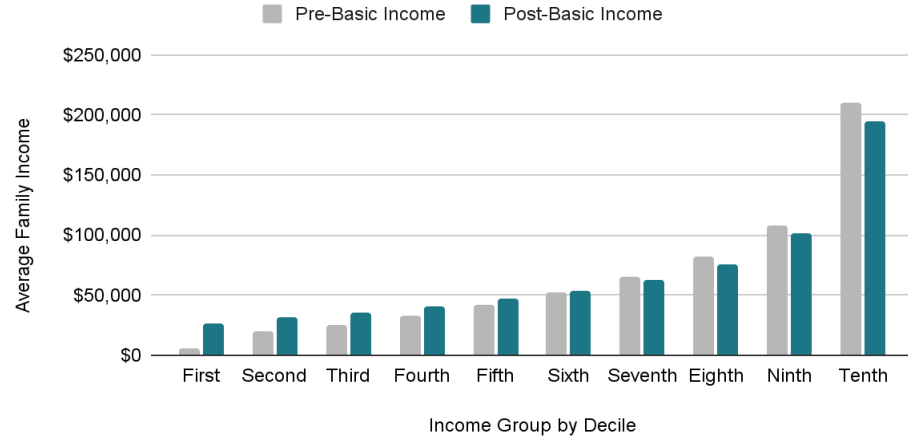
All people in Canada are able to access a sufficient amount of safe, nutritious, and culturally diverse food. Canada's food system is resilient and innovative, sustains our environment and supports our economy - Canada's National Food Policy Vision [8]

Conventional and accepted thinking in Canada defines food insecurity *as the inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints* [8] Household food security is thus linked to household resources.

How would a basic income impact the income security of Canadians, and by extension, their food security?

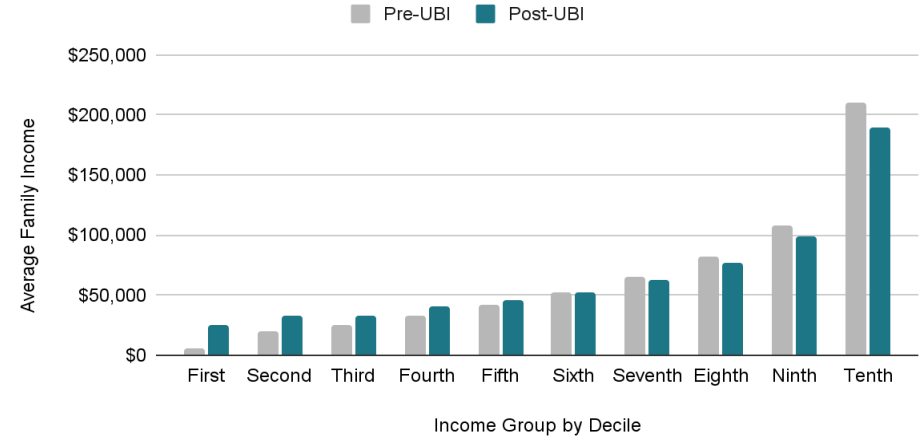
Impact of basic income on the incomes of Canadian families by income group (\$CN) [9]

Average Family Disposable Income in Canada by Decile, Pre- and Post-Basic Income (Income Tested Benefit, 2021 Income Year)



Based on an annual basic income of \$25,225 (\$CN) for single adults, and \$35,674 for adults in couple families

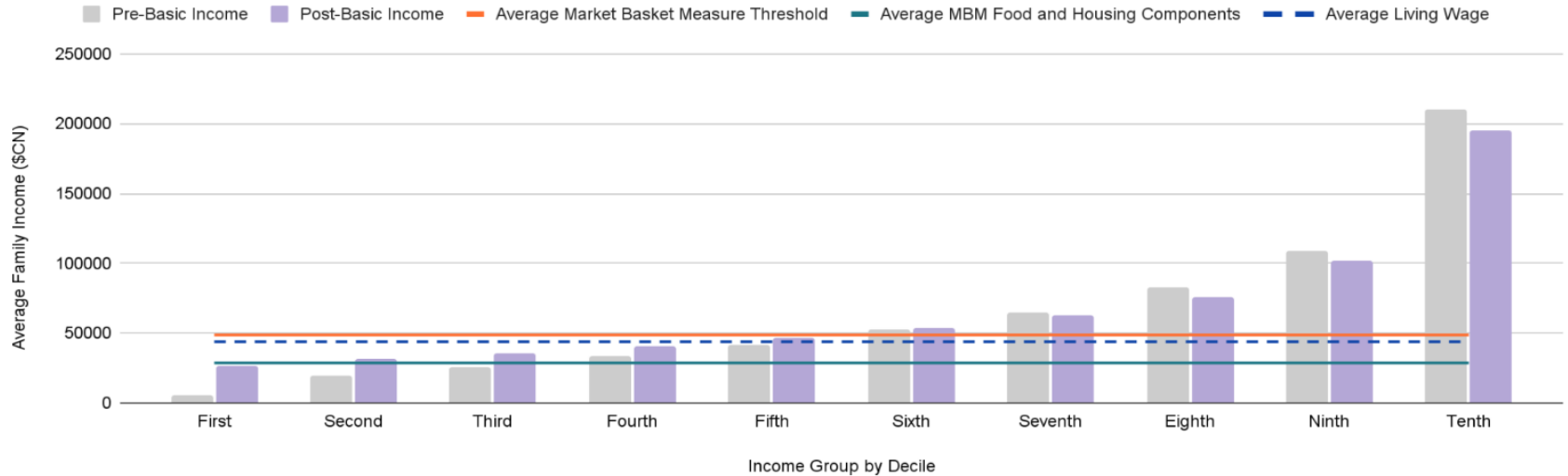
Average Family Disposable Income in Canada by Decile, Pre- and Post-UBI (Universal Demogrant, 2021 Income Year)



Based on an annual demogrant of \$25,225 (\$CN) for single adults

Impact of basic income on the incomes of Canadian families by income group compared to cost of living

Average Family Disposable Income by Decile, Pre- and Post-Basic Income (Income Tested Benefit, 2021 Income Year), Comparison to National Average Market Basket Measure [11] and National Average Living Wage [12]



The Market Basket Measure is developed across 53 MBM areas in Canada and ranges from \$43,022 (\$CN) in some small communities in Quebec, to \$81,150 (\$CN) in Sahtu, Northwest Territories in Canada's North. In Canada most populated cities, the MBM averages around \$55,000 (\$CN), including in Toronto, Vancouver, Ottawa, and Calgary.

Food Prices and Food Supply

A driving factor in the rise of food insecurity in Canada since 2020 has been the rapid rise in food inflation.

Food CPI: 9.1% (June 2023)

Shelter CPI: 4.8% (June 2023)

All Items CPI: 2.8% (June 2023)

This trend is expected to continue through 2023, with food prices rising an average of 7% through the year [17]

Consumer Price Index - Canada - July 2028 - June 2023 [16]



By taking a conventional approach to food insecurity, focusing on income security, we can reduce household food insecurity with a national basic income for Canadians, but we cannot eliminate it.

Connection between the challenge and its causes is obvious and easy to trace.

What can systems thinking tell us about food insecurity and how we can think about the problem in a more holistic way?

Relationship between the challenge and its cause is indirect and not obvious.

Canada is the 19th largest agricultural producing country in the world, and is its 5th largest exporter of agricultural products [13].

Canada is experiencing record levels of reported food insecurity and food bank use among Canadians, while also having the lowest unemployment rates since the 1970's.

58% of food produced in Canada is lost or wasted [14].

Diet related diseases are at an all time high in Canada, with, for example, 11 million people (29% of the population) living with pre-diabetes or diabetes, and this is expected to rise to 14 million by 2026 [15]

Indicators of Concern in our Food System

Grocery Retail Monopoly Power in Canada [18]



Canada's grocery industry is significantly concentrated, dominated by only with 3 national rails chains, who had \$4 billion in profit in 2022.

Canadians have been rightfully concerned about the lack of competition in grocery and its impact on food access and prices for many years.

This challenge is even more concerning in remote and northern communities where supply chains significantly affect food access

49%


Of Canadians shop at a store owned and operated by a single grocery retailer (Loblaws)

In Canada, and in much of the world for that matter, **agriculture has been positioned almost entirely in economic terms** with little regard to the fundamental role that food plays in the well-being of individuals, families, and communities.

In this context, **food insecurity has been situated almost exclusively as a DEMAND challenge**, and thus can only be addressed by improving access to existing food markets for consumers. Further, this framing tends to address SUPPLY challenges only insofar as they relate to the economics of food and consumption.

This way of thinking **may provide solutions to the problem of food insecurity**, like a basic income, that are well intentioned, based in justice, and actually do improve the security of individuals and families. But, **in doing so they can obscure the deep rooted, structural problems with our food system** that actually perpetuate food insecurity in its broadest sense.

Where does this leave us?



Our market based food system, with a focus on profitability, commodifies the food system and the food that it produces and processes

This may in fact be incompatible with the achievement of true food security for Canadians.

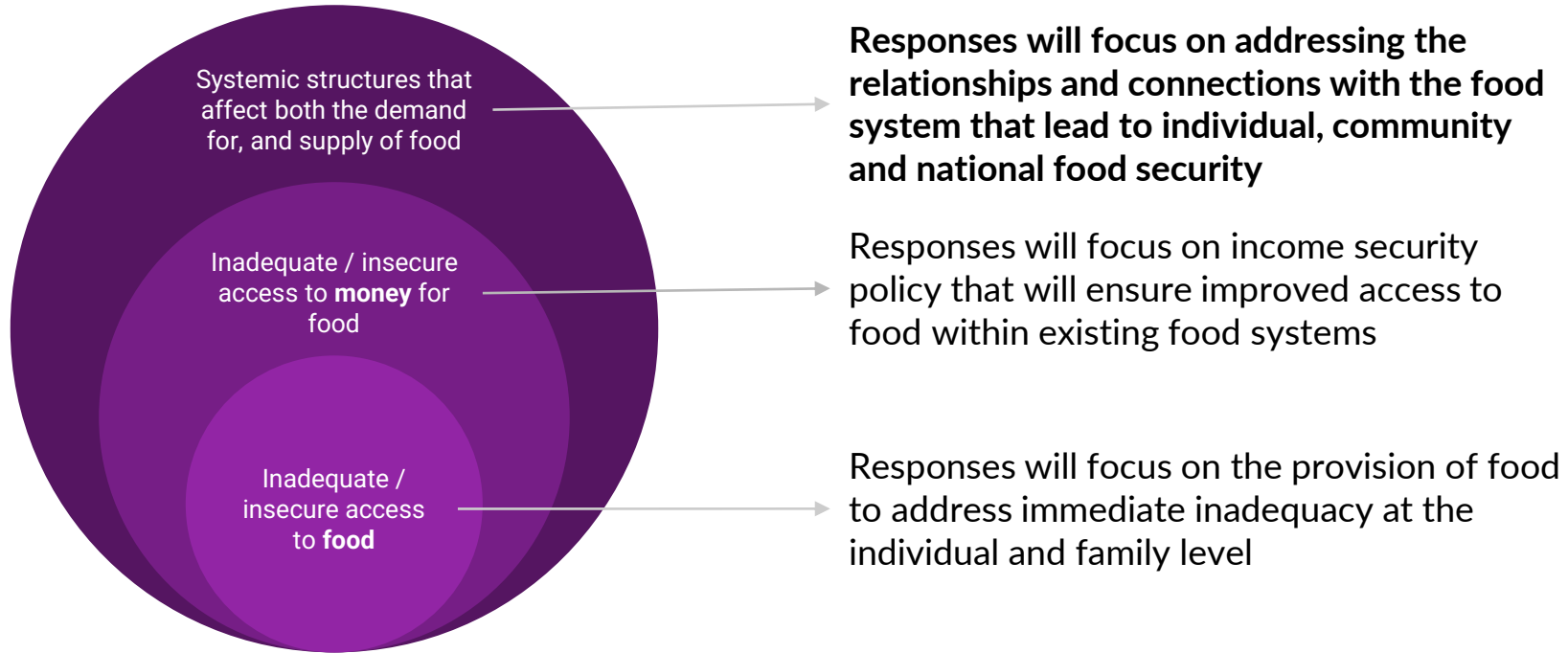
By taking a conventional approach to food insecurity, that rightly focuses on income security, we can reduce food insecurity with a national basic income for Canadians, but we cannot eliminate it.

A basic income also will not address the conditions that may result in continuous cycles of insecurity that are rooted in systemic issues with how we produce, aggregate, process and distribute food.

While a basic income will improve the food security of many Canadians, the achievement of true food security will only come from a systems thinking approach that situates income security as an important, but not exclusive, factor in food demand and access.

This approach must consider seriously the structure of our food system its focus on economics.

Systems Thinking Approach to Food Insecurity



Building on recommendations from Food Secure Canada that were submitted as part of the development of Canada's National Food Policy

01

Realize the right to food

- **BASIC INCOME to improve access to food**
- Food as Commons
- Food systems focused on people not profits

02

Champion healthy and sustainable diets

- **BASIC INCOME to improve access to food**
- National/Provincial school food program
- Policy that links agriculture, health and sustainability

03

Support sustainable food systems

- **BASIC INCOME that could support more small scale farmers as they build agri-businesses**
- Agri-food policy that supports sustainable food production

04

Make food part of reconciliation

- **BASIC INCOME to support First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples access to food, especially in remote communities**
- Food sovereignty for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples, ensuring access to traditional land-based foods and fishing and hunting rights.

05

Encourage diverse voices

- **BASIC INCOME to ensure that diverse and marginalized individuals and communities have the ability to participate in the good governance and policy process.**
- National food governance - e.g. National Food Policy Council

Thank you!

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Notes

1. Stroth, David Peter, 2015, *Systems Thinking for Social Change: A practical guide to solving complex problems, avoiding unintended consequences, and achieving lasting results*, Chelsea Green Publishing, White River Junction, VT. p. 15.
 2. Statistics Canada. [Table 13-10-0834-01 Food insecurity by economic family type](#).
 3. Ibid
 4. Ibid
 5. Food Banks Canada, 2022, *Hunger Count 2022: From a Storm to a Hurricane*. Online at: <https://hungercount.foodbankscanada.ca>.
 6. Feed the Need in Durham, 2022, *Durham Region Hunger Report: 2022*, Online at: <https://feedtheneedindurham.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/FTND-Hunger-Report-2022.pdf>.
 7. Ibid.
 8. PROOF...
 9. Author calculation based on parameters and assumptions in: Pasma, Chandra and Regehr, Sheila, 2019, *Basic Income: Some Policy Options for Canada*, Online at: https://basicincomecanada.org/policy_options/. The annual amount of both the Income Tested Model and the Demogrant Model has been adjusted to account for rising costs of living between the 2017 income year (from the original report) to the 2021 income year (the most recent available in [Statistics Canada's SPSD/M database](#) at the time of writing).
 10. Canadian Centre for Economic Analysis and UBI Works, 2020, *Potential Economic Impacts and Reach of Basic Income Programs in Canada*, Online at: <https://www.ubiworks.ca/groweconomy>.
 11. Statistics Canada. [Table 11-10-0066-01 Market Basket Measure \(MBM\) thresholds for the reference family by Market Basket Measure region, component and base year](#). The National MBM threshold is the official measure of poverty for the Government of Canada. It is based on the cost of a specific basket of goods and services representing a modest, basic standard of living. It includes the costs of food, clothing, shelter, transportation and other items for a reference family. For details see: Statistics Canada, 2023, *Market Basket Measure poverty thresholds and provisional poverty trends for 2021 and 2022*, Online at: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1110006601&cubeTimeFrame.startYear=2015&cubeTimeFrame.endYear=2022&referencePeriods=20150101%2C20220101>.
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Notes (continued)

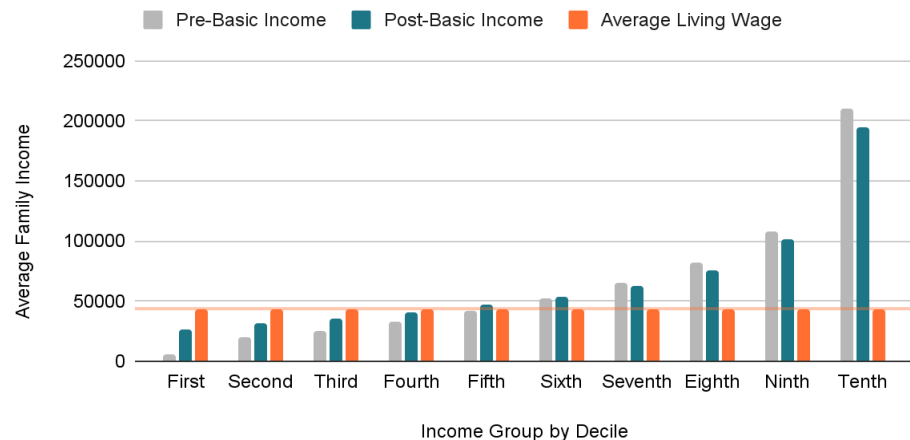
12. Living Wage Canada, 2022, *Living Wage Rates by City/Region*, Online at: <https://www.livingwage.ca/rates>.
 13. Statistics Canada, 2022, *Canada's 2021 Census of Agriculture*, Online at: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/220511/dq220511a-eng.htm?indid=22863-2&indgeo=0>.
 14. Second Harvest, 2019, *The Avoidable Crisis of Food Waste: The Roadmap*, Online at: <https://secondharvest.ca/getmedia/73121ee2-5693-40ec-b6cc-dba6ac9c6756/The-Avoidable-Crisis-of-Food-Waste-Roadmap.pdf>.
 15. Community Food Centres Canada, n.d., *Diet-related disease and healthy eating*, Online at: <https://cfccanada.ca/en/News/Publications/Backgrounders/Diet-related-disease-and-healthy-eating#:~:text=Rates%20of%20diet%2Drelated%20diseases,almost%2014%20million%20by%202026>.
 16. Statistics Canada, 2023, *Consumer Price Index Visualization Tool*, Online at: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/71-607-x/2018016/cpilg-ipcgl-eng.htm>.
 17. Charlebois, S., Somogyi, S., Smyth, S., Wiseman, K., et. al., 2023, *Canada's Food Price Report 2023*, Online at: https://cdn.dal.ca/content/dam/dalhousie/pdf/sites/agri-food/Canada%27s%20Food%20Price%20Report%202023_Digital.pdf.
 18. Competition Bureau Canada, 2023, *Canada Need More Grocery Competition: Competition Bureau Retail Grocery Market Study Report*, Online at: <https://ised-isde.canada.ca/site/competition-bureau-canada/sites/default/files/attachments/2023/CB-Retail-Grocery-Market-Study-Report-EN-2023-06-23.pdf>.
 19. Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2019, *Food Policy for Canada*, Online at: https://agriculture.canada.ca/sites/default/files/legacy/pack/pdf/fpc_20190614-en.pdf.
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Appendices

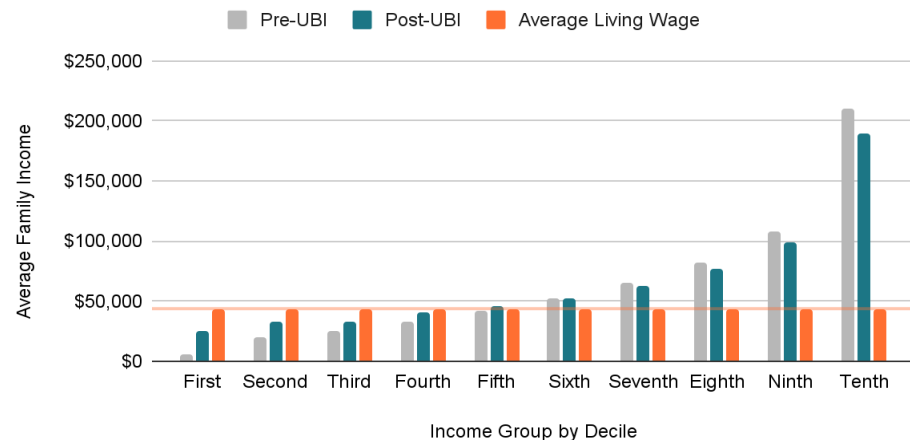
Appendix A:

Impact of basic income on the incomes of Canadian families by income group compared to average living wage

Average Family Disposable Income in Canada by Decile, Pre- and Post-Basic Income (Income Tested Benefit, 2021 Income Year)



Average Family Disposable Income in Canada by Decile, Pre- and Post-UBI (Universal Demogrant, 2021 Income Year)

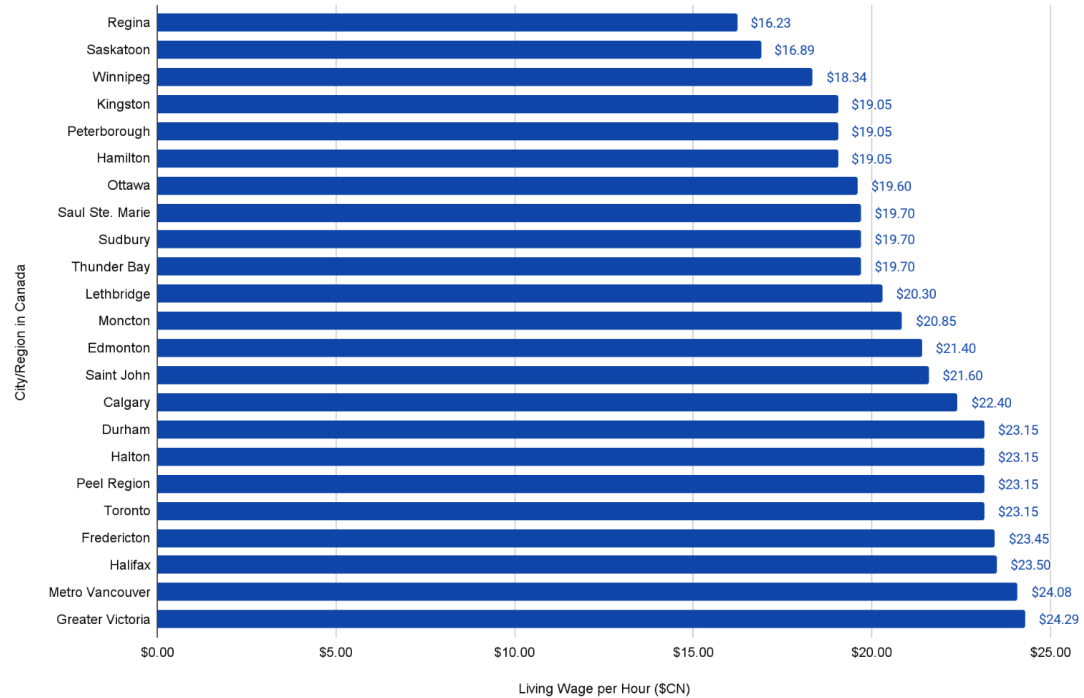


Based on an annual basic income of \$25,225 for single adults, and \$35,674 for adults in couple families [note]

Appendix B:

Living wage in select Canadian Cities/Regions, 2022

Living Wage Rates in 2022 by Key Cities/Regions (Wage per Hour)



Appendix C:

Geography and Food Insecurity: Northern Canada

Food Insecurity in Canada's North [13]:

16.9% Yukon Territory
21.6% Northwest Territories
57% Nunavut respectively.

“The high rates of food insecurity among northern and Indigenous populations can be explained by several factors, such as the relative remoteness and isolation of their communities, financial hardship and socioeconomic inequities, the legacy of colonial policies, climate change and environmental dispossession and contamination.” [14]

A basic income, while important for the people in these communities, will have limited impact on several of these factors.



Canada is 9,984,670 sq. km, while South Korea is 99,720 sq. km.



SOURCE: Leblanc-Laurendeau, O., 2020, *Food Insecurity in Northern Canada: An Overview*, Online at: https://lop.parl.ca/sites/PublicWebsite/default/en_CA/ResearchPublications/202047E.

Appendix D:

Geography and Food Insecurity: City of Oshawa

In my community:

11.4% of food outlets provide access to fresh and nutritious food (Avg. for Canada: 15.1%)

53.2% of all food establishments are fast food outlets (Avg. for Canada: 46.6%)

Location within cities matters when it comes to food access, and while a basic income will improve access, it cannot address all factors associated with geography.



Map created by the author

*Research from UBI Works and the Canadian Centre for Economic Analysis on the impacts of a national guaranteed minimum income for Canadians **could significantly increase the incomes the 4 million Canadian families in the lowest two income brackets [10].***

