

Study: Association between food insecurity and stressful life events among Canadian adults

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The COVID-19 pandemic and the related business closures and lockdowns have given rise to a series of unprecedented socioeconomic and health-related challenges, one of which is increasing food insecurity.

Throughout the pandemic, Statistics Canada has continued to collect and release data on food insecurity in Canada—including exploring the link between food insecurity and [mental health](#), [financial stability](#) and [Indigenous people living in urban areas](#).

A new study, "[Association between Food Insecurity and Stressful Life Events among Canadian Adults](#)," looks at the characteristics of food insecure Canadians, focusing on how losing a job, suffering an injury or illness, or a combination of events can increase the risk of food insecurity. This release compares the food security outcomes of two different subpopulations: those who had experienced a stressful life event and those who had not (see note to readers).

The data in this release are from the fourth wave (2018) of the Longitudinal and International Study of Adults. Respondents were interviewed in 2018, asked about their food security situation, and asked if they experienced a stressful life event over the previous two years (2016 to 2018). Although the data were collected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, these findings are especially relevant today, as [food insecurity has increased](#) during the pandemic.

Stressful life events related to income are more frequently associated with food insecurity

Canadian adults who had experienced a worsening financial situation from 2016 to 2018 were about nine times more likely to be food insecure than those who had not. In 2018, almost one-third (30.2%) of adults whose financial situation worsened over the previous two years were food insecure, compared with 3.4% of those whose situation remained stable.

Getting laid off or losing a job because of business slowdowns or closures is also related to food insecurity. In 2018, 15.1% of Canadian adults who had lost their job over the previous two years were food insecure—three times the rate of those who had not lost their job (4.5%).

Food insecurity was also more prevalent among the unemployed than the employed. Approximately one in eight (12.1%) adults who were unemployed at some point from 2016 to 2018 were food insecure, compared with one in twenty (5.0%) who had not been unemployed over that period.

Understanding the relationship between food insecurity and labour market stress is vital during the pandemic-induced economic slowdown, given that approximately 3 million Canadians lost their jobs and the unemployment rate reached a record high of 13.7% in May 2020.

By December, [the unemployment rate had fallen](#) to 8.6%, but 1.1 million Canadian workers remained affected by the COVID-19-related economic shutdown at year end. However, the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit and other pandemic relief programs may have alleviated food insecurity. These exceptional programs were not in place when the survey was conducted.

The link between food insecurity and being the victim of a crime

In 2018, Canadians who had been the victim of a non-violent crime (e.g., theft or property damage) or an act of physical violence (e.g., assault) over the two previous years were three times more likely to be food insecure than those who had not. Over one in seven (15.6%) adults who had been the victim of a crime from 2016 to 2018 were food insecure, compared with about 1 in 20 (4.9%) adults who had not.

These findings provide a pre-pandemic baseline for assessing the association between being the victim of a crime and food security. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, lockdowns have led to a decline in some types of crime and an increase in others. For example, [police-reported incidents](#), such as residential breaking and entering (-22%) and sexual assaults (-27%) were down sharply during the first four months of the pandemic, while calls for service, such as wellness checks (+12%), domestic disturbances (+12%) and mental health-related calls (+11%) all rose. The link between these recent changes in police-reported incidents and food security status is unknown and should be examined further using more current data.

The prevalence of food insecurity among Canadians suffering a serious injury or illness

In 2018, almost 1 in 10 (9.3%) Canadian adults who suffered—or had a close relative or friend who suffered—a serious mental or physical injury or illness were food insecure, which was over twice the rate (4.2%) of those who had not.

Food insecurity and family- or relationship-related stressful life events

Earlier research suggested an association between food insecurity and stressful life events, such as the death of a loved one, the start or end of a legally recognized partnership (marriage and common-law, as well as widowhood), a new child in the home, or retirement.

However, this study found no statistically significant differences in the rate of food insecurity between Canadians who experienced a family- or relationship-related stressful life event from 2016 to 2018 and those who had not (see note to readers).

Canadians experiencing multiple stressful life events are almost three times more likely to be food insecure than those who had experienced one event

While Canadians who experience a stressful life event are more likely to be food insecure, those who experience multiple stressful life events are even more so.

In 2018, 11.9% of Canadian adults who experienced two or more stressful life events from 2016 to 2018 were food insecure, almost triple the rate of Canadians who had experienced only one stressful life event (4.1%).

Over the same period, 3.0% of Canadian adults who had not experienced any stressful life event were food insecure.

Table 1
Percentage of food insecure adults in 2018, by stressful life events

	Not experienced	Experienced
	%	
New child in household	5.3	4.5
Marriage or common-law	5.3	4.2
Death in family	5.4	4.9
Retirement	5.2	5.0
Divorce, separation or widowhood	5.2	7.5
Injury or illness to relative, friend, self ¹	4.2	9.3
Unemployed ¹	5.0	12.1
Lost job ^{1,2}	4.5	15.1

Table 1
Percentage of food insecure adults in 2018, by stressful life events

	Not experienced	Experienced
Victim of a crime ¹	4.9	15.6
Worsening finances ¹	3.4	30.2

1. Difference between rates for experiencing and not experiencing a stressful life event is statistically significant.

2. Lost a job (lay off, job loss due to a business closure or a decline in business activities, etc.).

Source(s): Longitudinal and International Study of Adults (5144).

Table 2
Percentage of food insecure adults in 2018, by number of stressful life events experienced

	%
No event	3.0
One event	4.1
Two events or more	11.9

Source(s): Longitudinal and International Study of Adults (5144).

Note to readers

This study uses data from Wave 4 (2018) of the Longitudinal and International Study of Adults (LISA)—a biennial household survey that follows the same individuals over time, collecting social and economic data on the Canadian population. It targets individuals living in the provinces as of 2012 and is administered to all household members aged 15 and older.

This release examines the 2012 Canadian population that reported their food security status in 2018 and uses individuals aged 20 and older who responded in all subsequent LISA waves. Non-respondents to the stressful life events questions experienced from 2016 to 2018 were excluded from the analysis.

Around 1 in 20 (5.2%) Canadian participants aged 20 and older experienced food insecurity in 2018. The survey uses Health Canada's definition of food insecurity: "the inability to acquire or consume an adequate diet quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways, or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so."

A stressful life event is defined as either an expected or unexpected event that could have adverse effects on an individual and their family (e.g., retirement, unemployment, divorce, injury in the family).

Starting or ending a legally recognized partnership is reported as two separate stressful life events. These include starting a marriage or common-law relationship and experiencing a divorce, separation or widowhood.

A new child in the household includes the birth or adoption of a child, or beginning to raise a stepchild.

The proportions shown in this release do not sum to 100%, as two different subpopulations are used: those who had experienced a stressful life event and those who had not.

Small sample sizes for the food insecure respondents who experienced a family- or relationship-related stressful life event may have impacted the ability to reach statistical significance.

Definitions, data sources and methods: survey number [5144](#).

The research paper "[Association between Food Insecurity and Stressful Life Events among Canadian Adults](#)" is now available as part of the *Longitudinal and International Study of Adults Research Paper Series* ([89-648-X](#)).

For more information, contact us (toll-free 1-800-263-1136; 514-283-8300; STATCAN.infostats-infostats.STATCAN@canada.ca).

To enquire about the concepts, methods or data quality of this release, contact Alexander El-Hajj (343-543-0836; alexander.el-hajj@canada.ca) or Emmanuel Benhin (613-862-7638; emmanuel.benhin@canada.ca).