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Food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic, May 2020

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Food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic, May 2020

Almost one in seven Canadians report food insecurity

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought major changes to the financial stability of Canadians, with extensive job loss and reduced hours of work. Experts in food insecurity have signalled that the financial impacts of this pandemic could lead to an increase in the number of Canadians living in a situation of food insecurity.

During the week of May 4 to 10, Statistics Canada collected the second wave of the new web panel survey, the Canadian Perspectives Survey Series. This web panel survey included a series of questions aimed at assessing the levels of food insecurity being experienced by Canadians.

Almost one in seven (14.6%) Canadians indicated that they lived in a household where there was food insecurity in the past 30 days. This is based on a scale of six food experiences, ranging from food not lasting before there was money to buy more, to going hungry because there was not enough money for food. Most Canadians reported only one negative experience, but 2.0% reported the most severe food insecurity, with five or all six experiences reported.

Studies in the USA, where both the 30-day and 12-month questionnaires have been used, show that the 30-day time frame tends to obtain a lower rate of food insecurity. Also, an evaluation of the web panel sample finds that the survey underrepresents certain populations that are known to be vulnerable to food insecurity (e.g. those who are divorced/widowed/separated, those who are renters, as well as those in the types of occupations in industries where working from home is less possible). Given these two factors, the estimate from the web panel likely constitutes a conservative estimate of food insecurity in Canada at the time the data was collected.

It is interesting to compare the results from the web panel to those from the 2017-2018 Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS) which included a more detailed 18-item food security module. While the CCHS questions were based on the past 12-month experiences, when accounting for the six common questions between the CCHS and the web panel, the results show that food insecurity is significantly higher during COVID-19 in comparison to the 2017/2018 results; respectively 14.6% vs. 10.5%.

Canadians living in households with children more likely to be food insecure

The web panel results found that there was a higher rate of food insecurity being reported among Canadians living in a household with children (19.2%) compared to those living with no children (12.2%). In particular, when compared to households with no children, Canadians living in households with children were more likely to be worried about food running out before there was money to buy more and having difficulty affording to eat balanced meals (Table 1).



Table 1

Percentage of Canadians reporting food insecurity experience in their household, by presence of children, as reported during the collection period of May 4 to 10

Food insecurity experience in the past 30 days	Children in household	No children in household
	percent	
Food didn't last and no money to get more, sometimes or often	11.7*	7.3
Couldn't afford balanced meals, sometimes or often	13.0*	8.8
Adults in household skipped or cut size of meals	11.7 ^E	8.1 ^E
Adults in household skipped or cut size of meals, 3 days or more	3.5 ^E	2.6 ^E
Personally ate less because not enough money to buy food	3.2* ^E	2.2 ^E
Personally was hungry but didn't eat because couldn't afford food	9.1 ^E	4.6 ^E

^E use with caution

* significantly different from corresponding 'No children in household' estimate ($p < 0.05$)

Notes: The reference period of the past 30 days refers to the 30 days prior to collection during the week of May 4 to 10.

Status of having children in the household is taken from when the respondent was part of the rotational sample group for the Labour Force Survey, between April and July 2019.

Source: Canadian Perspectives Survey Series 2 (May 2020).

Canadians who were absent from work due to COVID-19 were almost three times more likely to be food insecure than those who worked

Canadians who were employed during the week of April 26th to May 2nd, but absent from work due to business closure, layoff, or personal circumstances due to COVID-19, were more likely to be food insecure (28.4%) than those who were working (10.7%). The rate of food insecurity for those who were not employed during the reference week was in between these two rates at 16.8%.

The pandemic continues to have a significant impact on the health, finances and social activities of many Canadians. The pandemic will likely generate enduring social and economic changes, and the impacts will be different for various groups of Canadians. Statistics Canada will continue to monitor the impacts of COVID-19 on Canadians.

Methodology

To obtain up-to-date information on how Canadians are reacting to the COVID-19 pandemic, Statistics Canada developed a new online panel survey: the Canadian Perspectives Survey Series (CPSS). From May 4 to 10, 2020, 4,600 respondents from all 10 provinces participated in the CPSS. Because the CPSS targets a subsample of the Labour Force Survey (LFS) sample, the variable indicating presence of children in the household was drawn from the LFS data. All of the differences presented in this release between the population subgroups are significant at the 5% level ($p < 0.05$). Bootstrap weights were used for significance tests.



Notes

Due to the sample size of this web panel, an estimate of food insecurity by those who made a claim to the Canada Emergency Response Benefit by employment status could not be assessed.

The food security data from the web panel survey uses a short form (6-item) version of the Household Food Security Survey Module (HFSSM), an 18-item questionnaire which has been used to measure household food security in Canada since 2005. The short form questionnaire asks about past 30-day food insecurity experiences, while the full HFSSM on the CCHS asks about experiences based on the past 12 months. The CCHS collects from a sample of 130,000 Canadians every two years and most recently collected the HFSSM in 2017-2018. With the larger sample, the CCHS data allows for more detail on the populations with increased vulnerability to food insecurity. The most recent results from the Canadian Community Health Survey are available in the Health Fact Sheet [‘Household Food Insecurity, 2017/2018’](#).