

How COVID-19 impacted food access and food insecurity in Guelph and Wellington County

August 2021



Our access to nutritious food is closely tied to our work, family, and social lives – all of which have been profoundly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. These impacts have created new barriers to accessing food, while exacerbating existing barriers.

Recognizing that the COVID-19 pandemic may have impacted food access in Guelph-Wellington, Our Food Future, in partnership with Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health and Toward Common Ground, asked community members and social service providers about their experiences of food access and food insecurity during the pandemic.

What we learned is summarized over the next few pages and will be used to establish local priorities and identify and implement interventions to increase access to affordable, nutritious foods for everyone in Guelph-Wellington.

COVID-19 restrictions and the individual actions people took to keep themselves and others safe changed how we access food. A snapshot of what we heard:

- Many people stayed home to limit their exposure to COVID-19, while others who were caring for family members were unable to leave the home easily. This made it challenging to get to grocery stores and community organizations for food.
- Job loss and increasing food prices related to the pandemic impacted some households' ability to afford nutritious food, leading them to experience food insecurity for the first time.
- Community organizations that support people experiencing food insecurity noticed a change in demand for emergency food services during the pandemic. Forty-two percent of community organizations that were surveyed reported an increase in demand with new clients and more food needed by existing clients.
- While the barriers to affordable, nutritious food are perceived differently between people who are at increased risk of food insecurity and those who are not, both groups agreed that income-based solutions, such as guaranteed annual income and a living wage, would help to increase food access.

“Food insecurity, also called household food insecurity, is not having enough money to buy food. Individuals and families living on low incomes struggle to pay for basic living expenses such as rent, utilities, phone, childcare, clothing, medication, transportation and food.”¹



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Food insecurity, also called household food insecurity, is not having enough money to buy food.¹

Food insecurity was measured based on 7 experiences, ranging from worrying food would run out before there was money to buy more, to going hungry because there was not enough money for food.²

1+ experiences =
living in a food insecure household

5+ experiences =
living in a **severely** food insecure household

What we heard from community members

In November/December 2020, we asked a **representative sample of Guelph-Wellington residents** about their experiences with food insecurity and food access during the pandemic

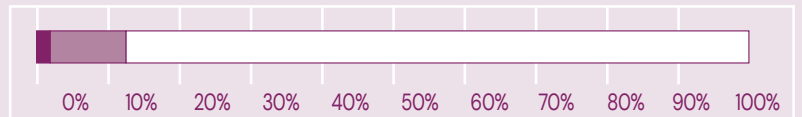


600 community members were surveyed by phone

People from each municipality in Wellington County and all 6 wards in the City of Guelph responded to the survey.



1 in 7 (14%) of Guelph households and 1 in 10 (10%) Wellington County households are food insecure



● Severely Food Insecure ● Food Insecure ● Food Secure

Some people are at increased risk of severe food insecurity due to their living conditions and identities (e.g., income, race, age). In March/April 2021, we asked community members at increased risk of severe food insecurity about their experiences.



95 community members at increased risk of severe food insecurity were surveyed by phone³



Of the 95 community members at increased risk of severe food insecurity who were surveyed, 72 (75.8%) reported living in a food insecure household of which 40 (42.2%) reported living in a severely food insecure household

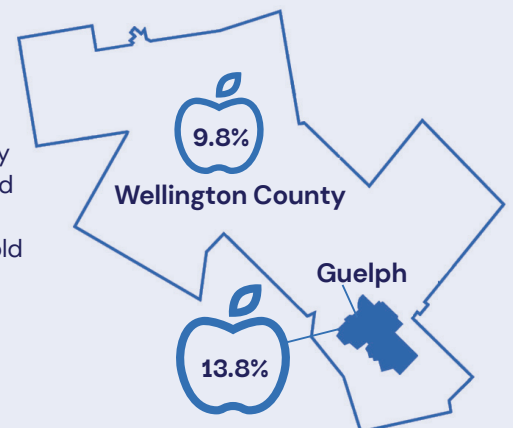
Food insecurity did not affect all households equally



Guelph-Wellington residents living in food insecure households were more likely to:

- Be **under 55 years of age**
- Be **single, separated, divorced, or widowed**
- Identify as **racialized**
- **Rent** their home
- Have an annual household **income of less than \$40,000**
- Be **precariously employed, or not employed**

More Guelph residents than Wellington County residents reported living in a food insecure household



The pandemic led some community members to experience food insecurity for the first time

Reasons for this included:



Job or income loss



Increasing food price



Inconsistent food supply

Community members (both those who were living in food insecure households and those who were not) faced a variety of challenges to accessing food



Isolating due to pandemic



Not having enough money to buy food



Lack of transportation



Living in a rural or remote area



Stores or community food organizations had limited stock or changed their hours



Not having support people to help with getting food



Difficulty leaving home due to a disability or being a single parent

Most community members thought that income-based solutions e.g., guaranteed income, living wage, higher social assistance rates, would help to increase food access

| What would help households access nutritious food? (1 means most commonly said) | Survey of representative sample of Guelph-Wellington residents | Survey of community members at increased risk of severe food insecurity |
|--|--|---|
| Income-based solutions | 1 | 1 |
| Food skills opportunities | 2 | 4 |
| Greater variety of food at no or low cost accessible from community food organizations | 3 | 2 |
| Improved physical access to food | 4 | 3 |
| Greater variety of cultural foods at stores | 5 | 5 |

¹ Ontario Dietitians in Public Health. (2020). No Money for Food is... Cent\$less. <https://www.odph.ca/centsless>

² The experiences from the six-item Household Food Security Survey Module short form were used with the addition of, "In the past 30 days, you and other household members worried food would run out before you got money to buy more" (often true, sometimes true, never true).

³ This was not a representative sample. Experiences of survey respondents cannot be generalized to all community members at increased risk of severe food insecurity.

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What we heard from social service providers



Food insecurity, also called household food insecurity, is not having enough money to buy food.¹

Organizations that provide emergency food (e.g., soup kitchens and food banks) offer temporary food relief and can provide many benefits to the community. But they do not address the root cause of food insecurity – not enough money to buy food.^{1,2}

In October 2020, we surveyed social service providers at 22 organizations in Guelph-Wellington

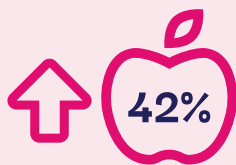
Who provided emergency food during the pandemic



Who provided services, but not emergency food

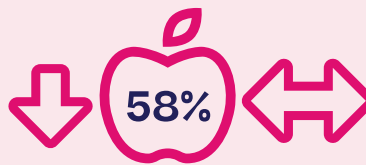
They told us how providing services to people experiencing food insecurity changed during the pandemic, the challenges they faced, and what can be done to improve physical and economic access to food in Guelph-Wellington.

Demand for emergency food services fluctuated during the pandemic



42% of the organizations that provided emergency food during the pandemic saw an **increase** in demand

- New clients
- More food needed by current clients, and more frequently



The remaining organizations noted that demand **decreased or stayed the same**. Or they were unsure if demand changed because they were offering a different service due to the pandemic.

Social service providers believed the increased demand for emergency food was due to:



Changing life circumstances caused by the pandemic (e.g., job loss, eviction, and inability to access other social services)



Increased promotion of emergency food services



Funding and donations which allowed for more and different emergency food services to be offered

Social service providers believed the decreased demand for emergency food was due to:



Financial assistance from the government which helped people who were experiencing food insecurity



More emergency food service options which meant less demand for each individual service

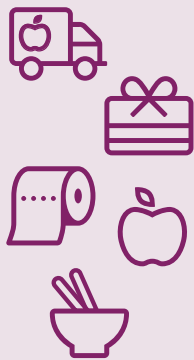


Post-secondary students who are at increased risk of food insecurity³, no longer living in Guelph-Wellington



People less willing to access in-person emergency food services due to COVID-19 risk

Households needed different food and services than before



- Gift cards
- Contactless delivery
- Household supplies (e.g., toilet paper and cleaning supplies)
- Fresh food
- Culturally appropriate food

Organizations faced operational and logistical challenges to providing emergency food

Services needed to **align with COVID-19 restrictions** to keep staff and clients safe, which created challenges:



Fewer staff to allow for physical distancing



Need for outdoor and larger indoor spaces to offer services



Delivering food all over town



Some organizations were no longer able to let clients choose food



More resources were needed, such as funding, physical space (e.g., storage, kitchens), transportation, and volunteers

Social service organizations are working to meet increased demand for emergency food and overcome the challenges of the pandemic



Many new partnerships were formed during the pandemic, and organizations plan to keep working together in the future.

100% of organizations that responded to the survey indicated they have been **collaborating and sharing resources** with other organizations that provided emergency food during the pandemic



COVID-19 related funding was used to serve more and diverse clients, and adapt to COVID-19 restrictions



Partnering to apply for funding, source food, and manage surplus

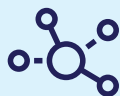


Sharing food, physical space, information, and expertise

Social service providers shared their ideas to improve physical and economic access to food in Guelph-Wellington:



Collectively advocate for system change and policies that **address the root causes of food insecurity** (e.g., affordable housing, decent work, and basic income guarantee)



Create more opportunities to network and enhance capacity to provide **emergency food services**



Where food access is problematic or household income is low, **prioritize opportunities for households to access food in their neighbourhoods** (e.g., delivery programs, transportation supports, and pop-up food stands)



Bring nutritious foods to areas where people of all income levels access food in the community (e.g., recreation centres)



Provide **food skills education on meal planning and recipes**

¹ Ontario Dietitians in Public Health. (2020). No Money for Food is... Cent\$less. <https://www.odph.ca/centsless>

² Dietitians of Canada. (2016). Addressing Household Food Insecurity in Canada: Position Statement and Recommendations. <https://www.dietitians.ca/foodinsecurity>

³ Silverthorn, D. (2016). Hungry for knowledge: Assessing the prevalence of student food insecurity on five Canadian campuses. Toronto: Meal Exchange. Retrieved from: <http://mealexchange.com>