

Hunger in Inuit Communities Food Security in Inuit Communities: A Discussion Paper

Introduction

Inuit families across Canada continue to face significant challenges in accessing adequate nutritional food. Low income, changing dietary habits, high cost of food, lack of awareness of healthy eating habits, and a number of other factors have combined to ensure hunger and poor nutrition continue to impact many Inuit families. The long-term effects of these factors on Inuit health raise a number of serious concerns for both Inuit communities and agencies (government and non-government) charged with providing health care programs and services to Inuit.

This discussion paper provides an initial overview of some of the issues concerning Inuit food security. The primary issues addressed within the paper are:

- A review of the major findings of a recent report on a pilot Food Mail Program in Kugaaruk, Nunavut;
- Health implications of food insecurity; and
- Factors impacting food security:
 - Retail food operations in the North,
 - Country food,
 - Community/regional initiatives related to food security, and
 - Government initiatives related to food security.

The methodology for the development of this discussion paper consisted primarily of a literature review and contacting a number of individuals who are knowledgeable about issues impacting Inuit food security. The following list is not comprehensive, but provides an indication of the primary people approached during the research phase:

- Fred Hill, Manager, Food Mail Program;
- Gabriel Nirlangayuk, Director, Nunavut Harvesters Support Program;
- Dr. George Wenzel, Professor, McGill University;
- George Berthe, Vice-President, Makivik Corporation;
- Emily Angnatuq, Food Basket Co-ordinator (volunteer);
- Judy Chapman, Manager of Public Relations, Arctic Co-operatives Limited; and
- Elsie DeRoose, Nutritionist, Government of the Northwest Territories Department of Health and Social Services.

The Food Mail Program

An important source of information on the current status of Inuit food security is the pilot project done in Kugaaruk, Nunavut, by the Food Mail Program.¹ The project was initiated by the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND) in co-

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operation with Health Canada (HC), the Government of Nunavut (GN) and the hamlet of Kugaaruk.² The primary aim of the pilot project was to encourage the development of healthy eating habits and to make nutritious, perishable foods more affordable, thus increasing food security for the community.

The Food Mail Pilot Project achieves its objectives by applying a uniform postage rate of 80 cents per kilogram in addition to a flat rate of 75 cents per package for “priority perishables” which includes fresh and frozen fruits and vegetables, frozen fruit concentrate, most fresh dairy products, and eggs.³

Food shipping companies, and not necessarily the retail outlets operating in northern communities, apply for the subsidy. For example, the Northern and Arctic Co-operatives Ltd. would establish accounts with the Food Mail Program through their wholesale shipping departments located in the South. If an individual living in the North wished to access the program, s/he would have to do this by having his/her food-shipping agency apply to the program. Individual accounts make up about five per cent of the program. The amount of paperwork and the need for a credit card limits the number of people who can access the program.

The Food Mail Project also distributes nutritional information brochures and posters provided by the province or territorial health departments. Training retail operations in proper food handling and storage is also a component of the project in addition to the application of labelling to clearly identify priority perishables.

The Kugaaruk Pilot Project gathered data through a household and a nutritional survey. The household survey focused on gathering information about food purchasing practices; opinions on the quality, cost, and quantity of certain foods; food preferences; household food security; etc. The nutritional survey asked what had been consumed over the past 24-hour period. The response rate was high and Inuit women were the primary respondents.

The project highlighted the severity of the food security issue in the community—five out of six (83.3 per cent) Inuit households were classified as “food insecure” and more than half of the families had experienced hunger in the past year. This compares to the findings of a 1998-1999 National Population Health Survey⁴ that reported food insecurity in 10.2 per cent of Canadian households.

Reasons given for the lack of food in Kugaaruk included lack of sufficient money to buy adequate amounts of food. Lack of sufficient income was, in turn, caused by a lack of employment opportunities and overall low-income levels. At the time of the study, more than 33 per cent of families in the community were on social assistance.

Other key findings from the report included the fact that nearly 50 per cent of households surveyed indicated they were “extremely concerned” about having enough food to feed their family. In regards to the purchase of the most perishable foods, the quality of these items was an issue (fair to poor). Expense and availability were also important factors in limiting the purchase of these types of food.

The surveys also indicated a number of serious health issues that were evident. More than one in four respondents felt their health was fair or poor—nearly four times that reported by similar groups in southern Canada. Of particular concern, nearly all women surveyed, including all pregnant women, smoked. Obesity, high waist circumference measurements, and low levels of physical activity combined to suggest high-risk levels for heart disease and diabetes.

Compared to previous surveys⁵ done in Inuit communities, country food consumption in Kugaaruk was lower, providing only 10 per cent of energy intake. This was primarily from char and caribou. Little fat, seal, walrus, muktuk, or organ meat consumption was reported. This is of particular interest as Kugaaruk has been considered one of the communities with the highest level of harvesting activity in Nunavut. As well, the study indicates that people are consuming greater amounts of non-traditional fats and oils in their diet.

Overall vitamin intake was low for non-pregnant women with 91 per cent not consuming sufficient magnesium, 57 per cent for vitamin B6, and 54 per cent for vitamin C. Vitamin A, calcium, and fibre consumption was also low. Saturated fat levels were higher than recommended levels. Inuit women reported eating few fruits and vegetables (one per day) and less than one-fifth of a serving of dairy products per day. The Canada Food Guide recommends five to 10 portions of fruits and vegetables and two to four servings of dairy products. Fresh or UHT (ultra high temperature) milk consumption was negligible as neither was available in the community during the survey period. Adequate vitamin consumption was not being obtained through country food as described above.

The study raises a number of important concerns for Inuit health and food security:

- Hunger continues to be a reality for far too many Inuit families. According to the Kugaaruk study, 80 per cent of Inuit women surveyed in earlier Food Mail Program projects (Pond Inlet and Repulse Bay in 1992 and 1997) said they had run out of money to buy food in the previous month. More than 60 per cent of households with children were hungry in the previous 12 months. In Labrador, 28 per cent of households reported that they on occasion did not have enough to eat with seven per cent stating that they often had insufficient food.⁶
- The level of food insecurity becomes more severe the lower the family income. People on social security and the working poor reported the most concern about food security (84 per cent reported “food insecure with hunger”).⁷ This can have a notable impact on the type of food people eat and the vitamins they consume. In the Pond Inlet study, for example, women on social assistance had significantly less folate in their diet than those women not on social assistance.
- While there is little documentation on how Inuit families cope internally with food shortages, it is common that in such households, parents (particularly mothers) will forgo meals so their children can eat. One study revealed that in the hungry families studied, one-third reported that the parent skipped meals or ate less. This was six times more frequent than the child skipping meals or eating less.⁸ Patterns in food consumption of hungry families tie the level of maternal

hunger closely to the social assistance payment cycle. At the beginning of the month, there is little hunger. However, as the month progresses, budgets get stretched, food becomes limited, and mothers tend to go hungry.⁹

- There are shifting patterns of country food consumption. While the Kugaaruk study did not focus specifically upon country food consumption patterns, there are indications that young people and women of childbearing age are not consuming country foods to the same degree as previous generations. There are not only important food security and nutritional aspects to this trend, but social and cultural implications as well.
- Smoking, poor diets, and vitamin deficiencies combine to present a broad range of health issues for pregnant women and their unborn children.
- Inadequate food and nutrition among school-age children reduces psychosocial functioning and can worsen other developmental problems these children may have.
- Studies indicate that people who do not have food security tend to reduce their intake of fruits and vegetables leading to vitamin deficiencies and increases in related health problems. This would be particularly true in the Arctic where fruits and vegetables are more expensive than other types of food and are not part of the traditional diet.
- Food costs remain substantially higher than those in the South. Food basket studies indicate northerners' pay far more than southerners for the same basket of food (for one week for a family of four, the Northern Food Basket in Kugaaruk costs \$327, double that of Edmonton). Three-quarters of the families would have incomes insufficient, or nearly insufficient, to cover the cost of a healthy diet and other necessary family costs.
- The Kugaaruk study, using information from the Government of Nunavut, found that a family of four in Kugaaruk would be eligible for a total of \$1,562.34 in after-shelter income, various forms of social assistance/tax credits, etc. The study estimated that after the family had paid for their food and shelter, they would have had \$146 remaining to cover all other expenses. At the time of the study, there were 55 social assistance cases a month in the community of 600.
- High levels of junk food are being consumed including soft drinks, no-vitamin fruit drink crystals, and chocolate bars. The results of the above study would have likely been even more disturbing had potato chips been available at the time.

Health Implications of Food Insecurity

The Kugaaruk study indicated that there was a range of vitamin and mineral shortages in the diets of the people interviewed. Vitamins and minerals are critical elements of a healthy diet, particularly for pregnant women and their fetuses. While some levels of vitamins, such as vitamin C, were found to be adequate, a number of others were insufficient and raise a number of health concerns including:

- Vitamin A – night blindness, lung defects in embryos, higher risk of respiratory infections and diarrhea, may aggravate anaemia;

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- Vitamin B6 – skin problems, anaemia, depression and confusion, convulsions in babies whose mothers were vitamin B6 deficient during pregnancy; and
- Folate – problems with formation of red blood cells that can cause a number of problems in fetal development including spina bifida, higher risk of spontaneous abortion (particularly when combined with smoking).

Other Issues Impacting Food Security

Retail Food Operations

Given the high cost associated with the retail food market in the Arctic, there are often concerns raised in the communities about the degree to which retailers may be making a profit on the sale of food. While a comparison of the costs of northern and southern food baskets reveals a considerable difference, retail merchants in Inuit communities face a number of substantially higher costs than their southern counterparts including:

- There are much higher operating costs including shipping costs (even with the Food Mail Program subsidy for selected perishables). The costs of doing business in the North is considerable, particularly when one considers the costs of labour, maintenance and repairs, power, insurance, etc. Gasoline and other fuel costs in particular have gone up considerably in the last year and recently went up an additional eight cents in Nunavut. Fuel costs have a direct impact on shipping and operations costs for northern retailers. These costs have to be factored into the prices consumers pay for goods as all retail operations are based on creating a profit.
- Fresh food has a higher spoilage factor and requires a greater degree of “soft” food handling and storage to ensure it arrives at its destination in a reasonable condition. Combined with the fact that many Inuit do not consume adequate amounts of fruits and vegetables, this increases the amount of food likely to be discarded and raises the overall cost of the food to the retailer. As the Labrador study pointed out, inadequate food handling and shipping, delayed flights, and a number of other variables can sometimes make the delivery of an unscarred banana or an unblemished cauliflower an expensive challenge for retailers.
- Increasing competition from other sources including competing retailers (Northern Stores, co-operatives, and privately-owned stores) and from increasing numbers of northern residents using southern-based wholesalers for large sea-lift purchases, all make the northern retail climate challenging.

The profit motive is a common objective for all retailers in the North. They are there to generate a profit for their shareholders/owners. Initial research for this discussion paper revealed some differences in how the ownership of retailers can determine how these profits are distributed and to whom.

- The Northern Store is one of several retail chains owned by the Northwest Company. It operates on a for-profit basis with dividends being paid regularly to its shareholders, who are private investors. Dividends are ongoing and are paid from the net profits from its operations. While the objective is profits,

- competition, a somewhat standardized price increase on products, and corporate ethics are the primary means by which prices are held in check. This leaves the burden on the retail operator to set prices that provide a fair mark-up to the retailer while ensuring customers get reasonable value for their food dollar—a situation that may be open to abuse in some communities.
- Private retailers are now operating in many communities. They are often owned and operated by a local person and offer a variety of products, but often do not have the variety of fresh produce available at other retailers. Profits go directly to the shareholders/owners of the business. These operations have a certain advantage in being able to more quickly fill specialty customer needs and can be more accessible and convenient for some people in the community.
 - Co-operatives (Arctic Co-operatives Ltd. and the Fédération Co-opératif du Nouveau Québec) are operating in many Inuit communities and differ substantially from their competitors in their ownership structure. The members who live in the community own the co-ops. While the co-ops are oriented towards profit, a portion of the profits earned each year are returned to the membership in direct relation to the amount the member spent at the co-op during the year. As a result, a portion of the profit stays in the community, either through re-investment in the co-op operative or directly in the hands of co-op members. This difference in how profits are distributed acts as a self-imposed restriction on the co-ops. They try to make enough money to cover their costs while any extra profit is distributed to the members. Earning excessive profits, or price gouging, does not make sense, as these excess profits would simply be distributed back to the members who most likely were the same people who paid the higher prices.

There is no apparent check on whether price gouging does occur. Price fluctuations in operations and management costs, inflation, spikes in fuel costs, and a wide variety of other factors greatly limit stability in food prices. While in general the major food retailers tend to mark up their products at a standard amount above their landed cost, these prices can vary among retailers and communities making it challenging to determine the exact cause of specific price variations.

The Food Mail Program does not monitor the prices of products it subsidizes. However, the program does monitor general food prices through the 30 to 40 food basket comparisons it does annually. The program relies on competition to keep prices reasonable and will respond to reports of price gouging from consumers. This begs the question of how food prices are controlled in those communities where only one food retailer exists. Although only initial research was conducted on this issue, it was not apparent that any northern governments provided any consumer price protection services or monitored food prices other than conducting food basket surveys.

Another issue raised in discussions was the fact that, anecdotally at least, there were occasions when packaged food was sold beyond the expiration date. As well, it is unclear whether the majority of northern consumers are aware of expiry date stickers or their implications.

Country Food Issues

One of the more disturbing findings from the Kugaaruk study was the general drop in the amount of country food that was included in the respondents' diet. While one might be tempted to explain this by a possible lack of country food at the time of the survey, the report states that country food was available, although it was not the peak of any harvesting season.

The changing diet of Inuit has been a process that began with first contact with Europeans. Today, Inuit youth and young Inuit adults have diets that are distinct from their parents and grandparents and tend towards higher levels of junk food and less nutritious country food.

A number of factors have influenced harvesting practices and the consumption of country food. Often climate change has been cited as having a substantial negative impact on harvesting activities as thinning ice conditions, shifting animal migration routes, and generally changing weather patterns place significant limitations on harvesters.¹⁰ In addition, concerns about environmental pollutants and the contamination of the Arctic food chain have raised a number of concerns relating to the consumption of country foods among health care professionals and Inuit organizations alike.

In part, this transition away from a traditional diet of country food reflects the decline of traditional skills and knowledge of the younger Inuit population in general. Concern about the decline of traditional skills has been a concern of Inuit communities and organizations for decades. High costs associated with harvesting have continued to limit the ability of many Inuit harvesters to continue their activities. The Nunavut Harvesters Support Program (NHSP) estimates it costs more than \$200 in operating costs to conduct a weekend hunt (for gas, ammunition, food, etc.). Unfortunately, this amount is too high for many families dependent on social assistance and yet this forces them to continue their dependence upon store-bought food. As the costs of harvesting rises and more harvesting skills are lost, further pressure is placed on communities and families to provide enough country food for themselves.

The need to provide support for Inuit harvesters has long been recognized by Inuit organizations. A number of programs exist that support harvesting in Inuit communities:

- Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. runs the Nunavut Harvesters Support Program. It provides funding support to Inuit hunters to help purchase equipment including snowmobiles, rifles, and survival suits.
- The Government of Nunavut has several programs that support harvesters including:
 - Community Harvesters Program provides funding for the purchase of harvesting equipment;
 - Community Organized Hunts provides funding for hunter and trapper organizations in each community to hold a community hunt. Meat from

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- the hunt is distributed free of charge to Elders and those families most in need; and
- The Community Initiatives Program provides discretionary funding to each hamlet that can be used to purchase country food.
- In Nunavik:
 - The Kativik Regional Government (KRG) runs the Inuit Hunting, Fishing and Trapping Support Program. Funding is distributed to communities to support harvesting activities.
 - KRG also provides support to communities to purchase community boats for harvesting and for the operation of community freezers.

Community/Regional Initiatives on Food Security

Inuit communities have also responded to the issue of food security through a number of initiatives.

- Many communities have access to community freezers. Depending on the specific region and community, these freezers are operated by the hamlets or the local hunters and trappers organizations. In the case of Nunavut and Nunavik, these freezers play a critical role in providing storage facilities for community hunts.
- In Nunavik, Makivik Corporation donates a substantial amount of money (\$205,194 in 2000 and \$500,000 in 2003-2004) to communities to provide food, money, and gifts to families in need. There is considerable flexibility in how these funds are used, but they are often used to produce baskets of goods to be distributed to families considered to be in need.
- In Nunavut and Labrador, community agencies—often in co-operation with church groups—provide food baskets to families in need. These are often informal efforts relying on volunteers and donations. A person in Nunavut noted that this level of activity and co-ordination seemed to be more typical in smaller communities.
- Some communities have active community members trying to address food insecurity. In Kuujjuaq, for example, Emily Angnatuq co-ordinates and organizes donations of food and money from businesses, organizations, and people for an annual Christmas food basket program. She said people most often acutely felt in need during the holiday season. In 2003, she gave more than 150 baskets out to the elderly and single mothers in need, providing them with nutritious food and coupons to local stores. She made it clear that the coupons were only to be used for healthy purchases and not for cigarettes, junk food, etc. She has been working to expand her list of volunteers and felt that a greater effort was needed to teach people how to eat healthier.

Government Initiatives

Governments have a clear responsibility to ensure their citizens have access to appropriate and adequate foods. A number of international conventions provide strong

direction to governments. These conventions have said that both children and adults have “an inalienable right to adequate nutritious food” (1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights); and “the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger” (World Food Summit, Declaration of World Food Insecurity, 1995).

In Canada, a number of specific government initiatives impact nutrition and food security. Most of the initiatives are federal programs that are delivered in the provinces and territories. There was scant indication that the territories and provinces with large Inuit populations have developed many substantive programs to deal with the issue of food security. The programs identified so far include:

- Healthy Children’s Initiative and Aboriginal Head Start in combination with Brighter Futures support early childhood development in the North. Health Canada funds both of these programs.
- Brighter Futures Program
 - The Brighter Futures Program assists First Nations and Inuit communities in developing community-based approaches to health programs. The program aims to improve the quality of, and access to, culturally sensitive wellness services in the community. These services will in turn help create healthy family and community environments, which support child development.
 - While the program is intended specially for First Nations and Inuit children up to age six, it is recognized that children’s needs cannot be separated from those of their families and community. For this reason, Brighter Futures funds a number of program areas that directly and indirectly support child development. The program is flexible enough to allow communities to incorporate nutritional food and education into programming.
- Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program (CPNP)
 - CPNP funds community groups to develop or enhance programs for vulnerable pregnant women. Through a community development approach, the CPNP aims to reduce the incidence of unhealthy birth weights, improve the health of both infant and mother, and encourage breastfeeding.
 - CPNP enhances access to services and strengthens intersectoral collaboration to support the needs of pregnant women in risk. As a comprehensive program, the services provided include food supplementation, nutrition counselling, support, education, referral, and health and lifestyle counselling.
 - In 2001-2002, 96 per cent of projects reported offering food supplements,
 - 95 per cent offered vitamin supplements,
 - 87 per cent offered breastfeeding support, and
 - 86 per cent offered one-to-one nutrition counselling.Other services offered include education and counselling on lifestyle issues, food preparation training, transportation, childcare, and referral to other services. In Holman Island, NWT, for example, CPNP and Brighter

Futures combined to enable community hunters to get food for a daycare program.

- Various Government of the Northwest Territories' Department of Health and Social Services staff indicated there was interest in providing a more direct response to some of the impacts of food insecurity. These included some effort made to develop and promote a "Breakfast for Learning" program that provided food for children in school. As well, the staff were aware of the "Little Grizzly" program in Kugluktuk where nutritious snacks were offered for sale to students in school.

Conclusion

Inuit food security remains elusive for too many Inuit families. While Inuit were the last people in Canada to experience starvation, they continue to experience hunger more often and more severely than the vast majority of Canadians. Food insecurity has significant negatives implications for Inuit health, family dynamics, and community functioning.

This initial discussion paper has reviewed a number of the factors that impact food security in Inuit communities, but it is apparent that a more detailed and comprehensive effort may be needed to provide direction and recommendations to address the issue.

Endnotes

1. Judith Lawn and Dan Harvey, Nutrition and Food Security in Kugaaruk, Nunavut (Ottawa: INAC, 2003) The study took place in October-November 2001.
2. Formerly Pelly Bay.
3. Effective Dec. 2, 2001, the postage rate for shipping the most nutritious perishable foods to Kugaaruk was reduced from 80 cents to 30 cents plus the 75 cents per parcel charge.
4. Statistics Canada. 1998-1999 National Population Health Survey.
5. Similar studies were conducted in Pond Inlet and Repulse Bay in 1992 and 1997. A Labrador study was conducted in 1997, although this study focused on food handling and food safety issues.
6. L.L. Ladoucuer and F. Fill, Results from the Survey on Food Quality in Six Isolated Communities in Labrador (Ottawa: INAC, March 2001).
7. Judith Lawn and Dan Harvey, Nutrition and Food Security in Kugaaruk, Nunavut (Ottawa: INAC, 2003) p. 26.
8. Statistics Canada and Human Resources Development Canada. National Longitudinal Study of Children and Youth Ottawa: 1996).
9. Lynn McIntyre MD. Social Inclusion and Food Security. A presentation to the Canadian Council on Social Development/Human Resources Development Canada Conference "What Do We Know and Where Do We Go: Building a Social Inclusion Research Agenda", Ottawa, ON, March 27-28, 2003.
10. Sheila Watt-Cloutier, Looking North: Climate Change in the Circumpolar Arctic, Chair Inuit Circumpolar Conference (presentation), Conference of the Reducers, Toronto, May 12, 2004.