



## 3.4 Sustainable food | Focus on food security

Sustainability extends well beyond environmental matters. A sustainable food system ensures equitable access to safe, nutritious foods and produced by people treated fairly. The Index includes 10 indicators and many more metrics that measure the social sustainability of food. As well, Indigenous Nations have unique considerations for sustainable food, including a relationship with traditional food systems. The results of the Index reflect that food insecurity – the focus of this paper – is increasing in Canada (11% of Canadians are moderately or severely food insecure) and varies widely across Canada’s population.

**Food insecurity vs. food security:** “Food insecurity” is a measure of a household’s economic access (addressed below). “Food security” is much broader, including the stability of the entire food system, the state of supply and infrastructure and sustainable production. Overall, this Index – as presented by all 20 indicators – reports on this latter and overarching concept.

### Results from the Index: Societal Well-Being Indicators

Social sustainability can include many topics which extend well-beyond agriculture and food policy. The Index, therefore, must take a limited approach to measuring this salient issue. The Index lists seven metrics on food security and affordability, but data is only available for four. The most recent data available is 2020 and therefore does not reflect more recent trends relating to affordability (nor the recent impact of COVID and other economic stresses). Selected findings include:

- Food security is not uniform across Canada or by demographic segment (see Figure 1):
  - Food insecurity is worse for northern and remote communities, and Indigenous peoples are particularly vulnerable.
  - Food insecurity is higher for children than adults.
  - Seniors (65+) have the lowest food insecurity but is trending upward.
- According to Statistics Canada, food prices have risen faster than overall inflation over the past five years.
- Food insecurity rates are impacted by factors outside the food system, including income levels and the cost of housing.

### Interpreting the results

#### ■ Food insecurity

Statistics Canada’s measure of food insecurity relates to food affordability in the previous 12 months. Households are considered moderately food insecure if they compromise the quality or quantity of food they consume. Severe food insecurity is when households report disrupted eating patterns or reduced food intake. Figure 1 provides an overview of recent changes in food insecurity in Canada, with the highest rates in children younger than 18.

The Index reports the rates of food insecurity but not the drivers of food insecurity, many of which fall outside the scope of the Index, including social, education, geographic and economic factors. As a result, the Index largely focuses on outcomes within the domain of agriculture and food policy. Future versions of the Index will need to consider how to further assess food-related issues and reporting.

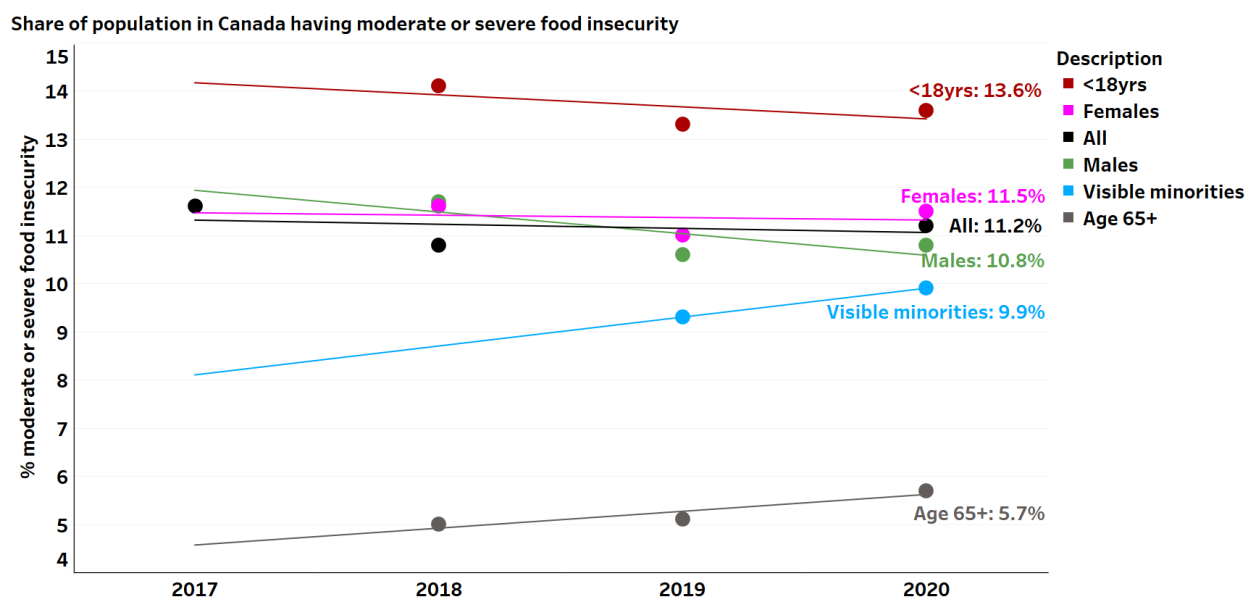


Figure 1: Measures of food insecurity, by demographic segment

## ■ Indigenous Nations and food security

The issues of food affordability and accessibility are pressing for Indigenous Peoples. They have a unique relationship with food security which involves accessing food in remote communities and meeting food security needs through traditional food systems.

While a significant majority of Canada's population has access to and a broad choice of safe, quality, and nutritious foods, food insecurity is worse for northern and remote communities. The Index measures expenditures on the Nutrition North Canada which is a federal program that facilitates access to food in northern Canada. Expenditures on the program were \$152.9 million in 2020-21, an increase of 103% (over double) since 2016-17.

## ■ Cost of food

The cost of food for individuals and families is a significant and increasing driver of food insecurity. According to the Canadian Centre for Food Integrity, the number one concern with respect to food security is the cost of food, with 69% of Canadians expressing this concern in 2022. The food segment of the consumer price index (CPI) in Canada increased 16% between 2018 and 2022. The food CPI is Canada-wide; however, food affordability is sensitive to factors such as geography and food types. Overall inflation rose by 13% during that time (Statistics Canada, 2023).

The Index does not include the cost of components of food such as commodity prices, transportation costs or retail margins nor other contributing economy-wide cost drivers (e.g., labour, fuel, etc). There is a lack of credible, reliable, public data and the components of the cost of food vary more significantly than the variation in the overall cost of food.

## Additional context

Food security is both a national and global priority. The UN Sustainable Development Goal 2.1 seeks to end hunger and ensure food access by all people year-round by 2030. Canada, as one of a handful of net exporters of food, has the potential to play an important role in meeting global food security needs sustainably.

When comparing the Index to other selected global indices, the Index has a greater focus on food sovereignty and Indigenous well-being than most other evaluated standards and indices and a clearer breakdown of affected demographics. The Index also includes tracking the incomes of temporary foreign workers which can be extrapolated as a measure of access to food for this sub-set of workers.

**Food security** helps portray social sustainability within a sustainable agri-food system.

**The National Index on Agri-Food Performance is a first-of-its-kind Canadian initiative to define and report on a comprehensive and consolidated picture of sustainability from food production to retail.**

Complete Index results along with references to global practices are available at [agrifoodindex.ca](https://agrifoodindex.ca). All information in this paper is sourced from the Index (Part 2) unless otherwise stated. This paper is one of seven published together as Part 3 of the Phase 3 Final Report, May 2023.