

## **Food charities outnumber grocery stores in Canada four-to-one. That should bother you**

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For every Loblaws, Metro, Safeway or Northern grocery store in your community, there are four churches, temples, mosques, senior centres, schools or social programs providing food for people who may not have the means to buy it.

What's more, the \$33-billion dollars in food these organizations distributed last year would make them the second-largest grocery store chain in Canada, having served about 6.7 million Canadians. This represents 18 per cent of our population, roughly equivalent to the population of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta combined.

The numbers should bother you. It means there are roadblocks for making food affordable, accessible and abundant on the tables of every Canadian in a country where more than half of the food we produce ends up in landfill.

When Second Harvest's [latest research](#), Canada's Invisible Food Network, uncovered a patchwork system of more than 61,000 charitable groups providing food, it shocked me to realize the scale of the effort – and broke my heart to know that in spite of the good work being done by staff and volunteers at these organizations, there is more demand for food than they can meet. In conversations with people working to help, they have shared their feelings about the stress of food and resource shortages. Of feeling dispirited and lacking hope.

Most people have no idea the scope of the problem we're facing in our food system. We need solutions, fast. We need to demystify, destigmatize and disrupt the charitable food sector in Canada so it can better achieve its purpose of providing fresh, healthy food (that would otherwise be wasted) to people who need it. Because as COVID-19 has shown, millions of Canadians are one paycheque away from food insecurity.

The term food insecurity means a lack of regular access to enough safe, nutritious food to meet a person's dietary needs. It is associated with poor diet quality and basic hunger that leads to physical and mental health problems, as well as lower educational outcomes.

In 2019, Statistics Canada found that an estimated 1.2 million households in Canada were food insecure. Data from May 2020 showed that number increased dramatically during the pandemic, with one in seven Canadian families struggling to put food on the table.

Food insecurity is worse in Northern Canada than other regions, where remoteness and community isolation add cost to food distribution and Indigenous peoples are particularly at risk due to socioeconomic factors, climate change and a legacy of government policies that affect their wellbeing.

It may surprise you that so many Canadians need help putting food on the table. What's even more surprising is that we are mostly unaware of the tens of thousands of charitable food organizations trying to help. Yet these groups exist in every community, hiding in plain sight.

Canada's Invisible Food Network quantifies the scale of the problem. It shines a spotlight on the work being done and highlights gaps in the system that need fixing. Now that we have mapped this network, we need a plan to tackle the inequities that require it to exist in the first place.

This plan should include enacting policies at all levels of government to support the work being done. We need investments in distribution infrastructure and a good start has been made with logistical networks that sprung up during the pandemic. These need to be solidified and made permanent through spending allocation so we can deliver more goods to remote, rural and northern communities.

We also need economic shifts like more affordable rental housing, accessible, affordable childcare and improved social benefits. An obvious step would be to transform the Canada Emergency Response Benefit from a temporary pandemic response into permanent anti-poverty legislation that secures a universal basic income for Canadians.

The invisible food network may distribute enough food to be the country's second-largest grocery store chain, but it's still not enough to meet the demand. Too much edible food is being wasted when people are going hungry.

It is time for bold political action to solve this problem. The system needs to change – fast – so we can reduce food insecurity and cut down on food waste at the same time. It means a circular food economy instead of the linear one we have, which has proven to be a failure on many levels. The health of all Canadians and the future of our planet depend on taking action, now.