

# Unique Get Together Society (UGTS) and Urban Indigenous Food Insecurity in British Columbia

A systematic analysis of the disproportionate rates of food insecurity experienced by Indigenous communities in British Columbia



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# Introduction

# INTRODUCTION

## Executive Summary

Over **half a million** British Columbians experience food insecurity (Tarasuk & Mitchell, 2020). In British Columbia (BC), off-reserve Indigenous households experience one of the **highest rates of household food insecurity** compared to other ethnicities (Li et al., 2016). In 2012, this equated to **1 in 3** off-reserve Indigenous households (Li et al., 2016). In 10 years, the **number of food-insecure people in Canada increased by 1 million** (PROOF, n.d.). We can only assume that with COVID-19 this number has increased. Despite the high prevalence, urban Indigenous food insecurity is often underrepresented in food insecurity discourse. The aim of our research is to investigate the complex interplay between oppressive systems that firmly hold urban Indigenous food insecurity in place.

Review Appendix 1 for terms used throughout the report.

## Positionality

Our team consists of three researchers of Asian descent with no lived experience with food insecurity. Our understanding of positionality is a methodology requiring researchers to identify degrees of privilege as an intersection of “race, class, educational attainment, income, ability, gender, and citizenship” (Duarte, 2017, p. 135). Acknowledging positionality and complex power dynamics in society is a step in decolonizing research (Feminist Research Ethics, n.d.).

## Research Methods & Unique Get Together Society (UGTS)

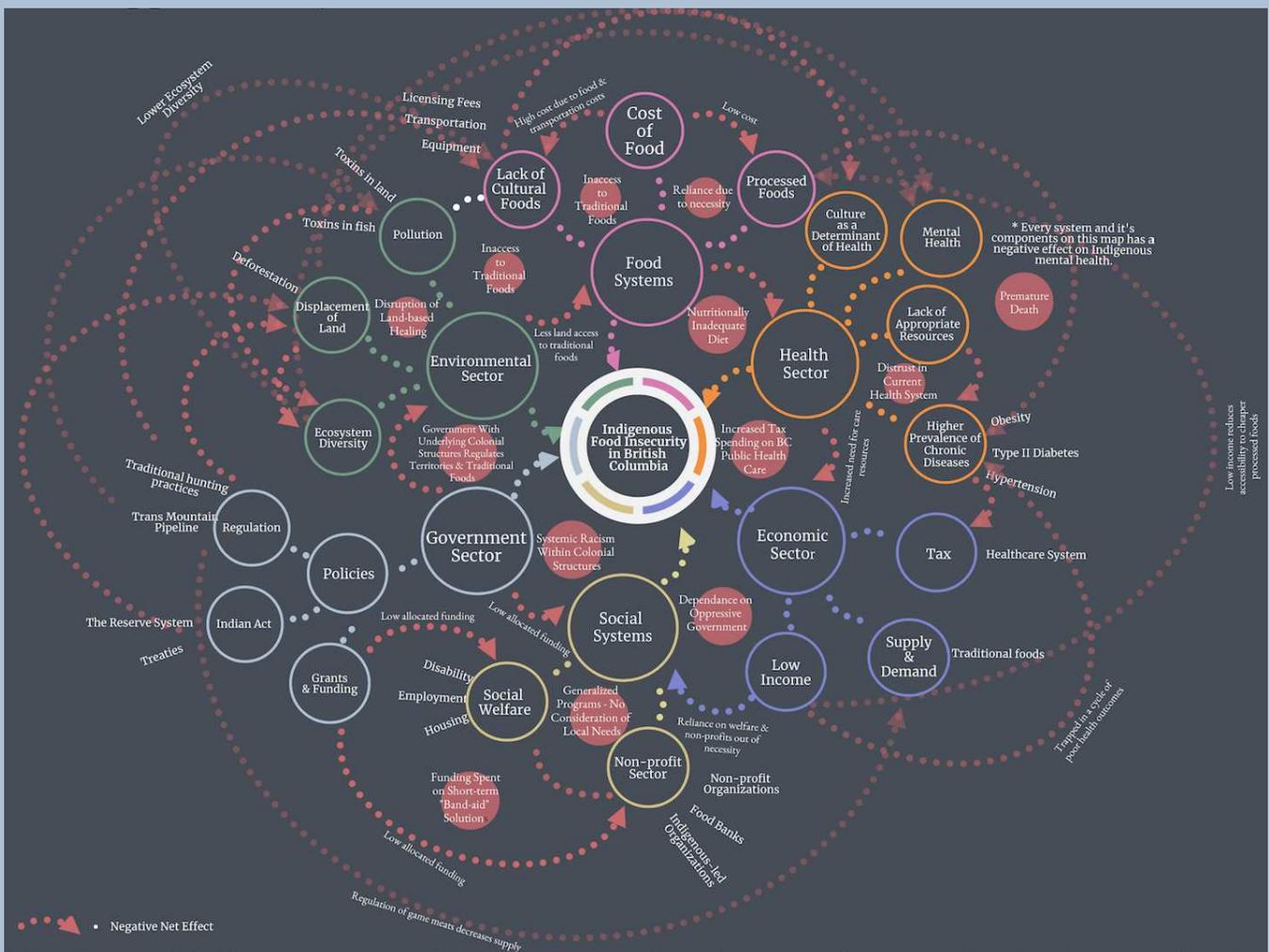
Our team developed a relationship with an individual from the Gitxsan and Wet'suwet'en First Nations. We consulted with them throughout our project and valued their lived experience with food insecurity which informed our research. In addition, we collaborated with UGTS, a Vancouver-based, Indigenous-led non-profit organization focused on empowering Black, Indigenous, People of Colour (BIPOC) communities. We partnered with UGTS to evaluate their Essential Food Basket program which aims to provide fresh food weekly to BIPOC families in the Lower Mainland. Additionally, we conducted a literature review and interviewed five stakeholders from UBC, UGTS and FoodMesh.

To avoid perpetuating harm on communities, we chose not to interview other Indigenous Peoples that we did not have an existing relationship with.

## UGTS Essential Food Basket Survey

To evaluate the UGTS' Essential Food Basket, we conducted a survey of 20 anonymous users in the Lower Mainland, an urban area, to collect information on their access to cultural foods, level of food insecurity and barriers to accessing food (Appendix 6).

# Challenge Landscape



# CHALLENGE LANDSCAPE



Source: Elliot et al., 2012

## Root Causes

### 1. Governmental Policies

Public policies have been unable to sufficiently address **upstream factors** contributing to food insecurity and have not prioritized reducing its **high prevalence in Canada** (Lang & Rayner, 2012; Tarasuk & Mitchell, 2020). In BC, income assistance has been found to be inadequate in providing financial stability for recipients, and many food-insecure households rely on social assistance as their main source of income (Petit & Tedds, 2020; Li et al., 2016).

Currently there is **no unified policy** in response to food insecurity (Food Secure Canada, 2019). Food insecurity is primarily addressed by initiatives, programs and frameworks led by various organizations from different sectors, resulting in minimal impacts when tackling this issue (Food Secure Canada, 2019).

### 2. Environmental

The cost of basic living expenses in urban centres is often higher than on-reserve and the food environment consists of multiple components, including affordability and accessibility (Richmond et al., 2020; Skinner et al., 2016). Accessibility to larger grocery stores may be diminished due to reliance on public transit. Furthermore, Indigenous Peoples living in urban areas may struggle with balancing their traditional values and living in a fast-paced urban environment (Elliot et al., 2012). Urban Indigenous Peoples have fewer opportunities to form relationships with Elders and can lose connection to cultural food practices, skills and traditional knowledge (Elliot et al., 2012). This loss results in fewer skilled hunters and fishers, which impacts food security (Elliot et al., 2012). A **lack of access to cultural foods**, which can include traditional foods, may also impact their food security, physical, mental, spiritual and emotional wellbeing, and diet quality (Elliot et al., 2012; Kerpan et al., 2015).

### 3. Social & Indigenous Determinants of Health (Income & Employment)

**Income** is a key determinant of food security (Nord, 2014), and a key predictor of food insecurity with low-income households at high risk (Ramsey et al., 2012). In Canada, Indigenous Peoples' median total income is \$11,000 lower than the median total income of non-Indigenous Peoples (Statistics Canada, 2015). Compared to non-Indigenous peoples in Canada, First Nations women and men experience a 24% and 23% lower employment rate, respectively (Hu et al., 2019). In regards to impacts by COVID-19, 36% of Indigenous Peoples reported that their ability to "meet financial obligations or essential needs" was affected (Statistics Canada, 2020, Table 3).

# Symptoms of Food Insecurity

## 1. Poorer Health Outcomes

Food insecurity can have detrimental effects on dietary quality and result in an inadequate intake of various nutrients (Davison et al., 2017; Davison & Kaplan, 2011). This can impact mental health, as Indigenous Peoples experiencing food insecurity are more likely to have **poorer mental health** and experience more stress than those who are food-secure (Willows et al., 2011). Poor health outcomes are reflected by **low life expectancy** with 75.1 years for First Nations, 77 for Métis and 68.5 for Inuit compared to 81 years for non-Indigenous peoples (Raphael et al., 2020).

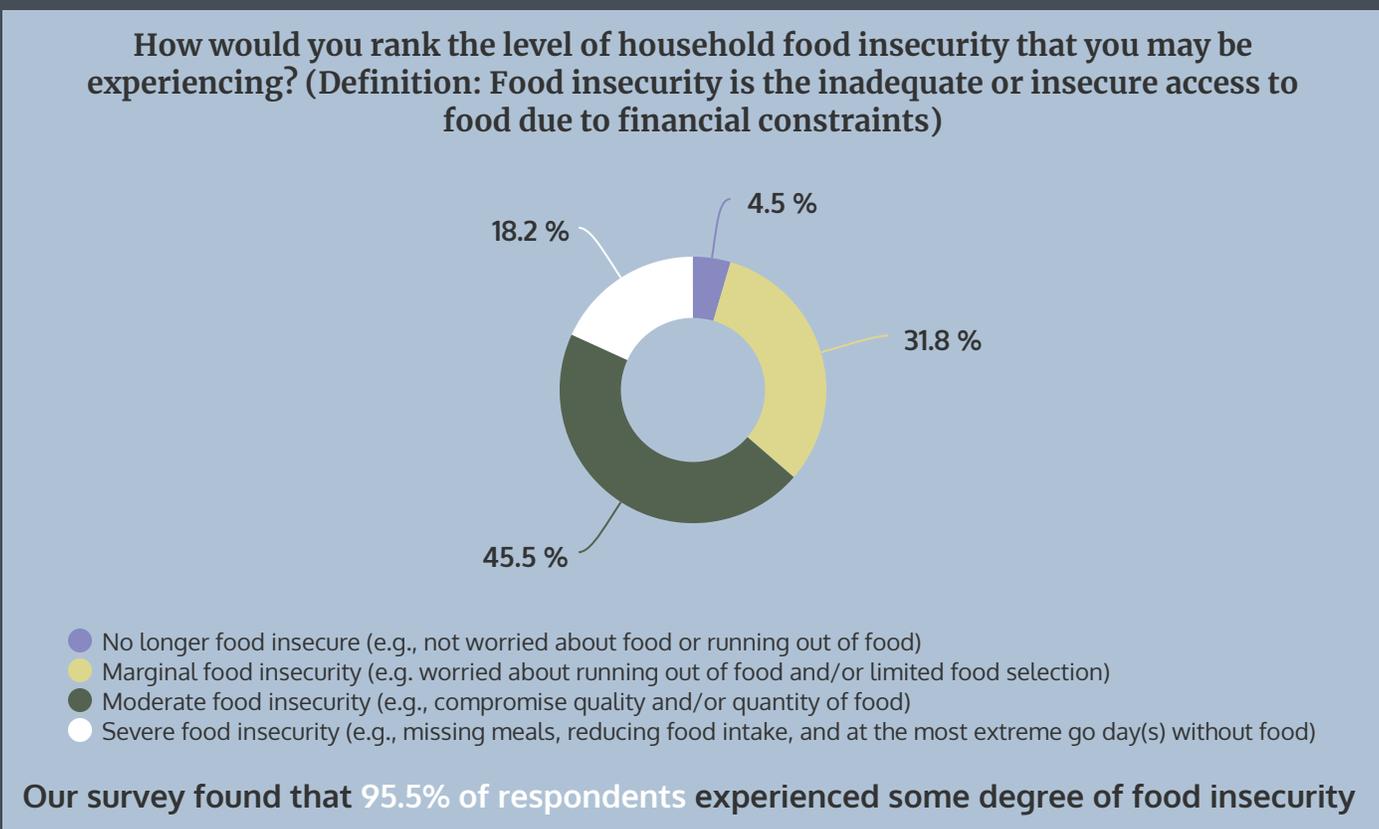
## 2. Loss of Tradition and Culture

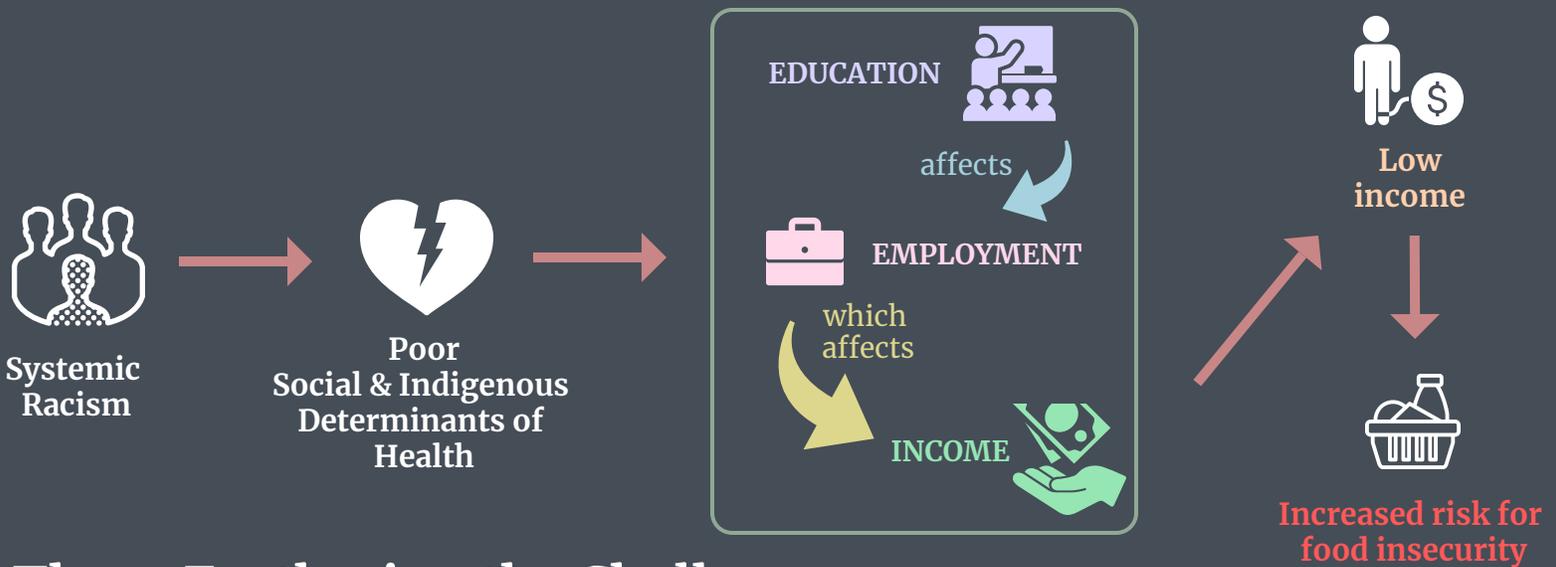
Indigenous Peoples from rural areas residing in urban areas are often **further away from their home communities**. This can decrease the ability to share traditional foods and knowledge within families, in addition to living in an environment that heavily promotes purchasing over sharing foods (Elliot et al., 2012). Increasing opportunities to share Indigenous knowledge and practices is one step that can facilitate Indigenous Peoples' connection to their traditions and culture within an urban setting (Elliot et al., 2012).

# Power Dynamics Between Those Impacted

Indigenous Peoples wellbeing are significantly influenced by **structural (historical, political, societal, economic) determinants** (Greenwood et al., 2015, p.3). The oppressive colonial governmental system that Indigenous Peoples live in exacerbates social and material inequities, resulting in disparities that can persist **intergenerationally** (Greenwood et al., 2015, p.3).

Figure 1. Data from UGTS Essential Food Basket Survey, Users' Household Food Insecurity Levels





## Those Furthering the Challenge

### 1. Systemic Racism

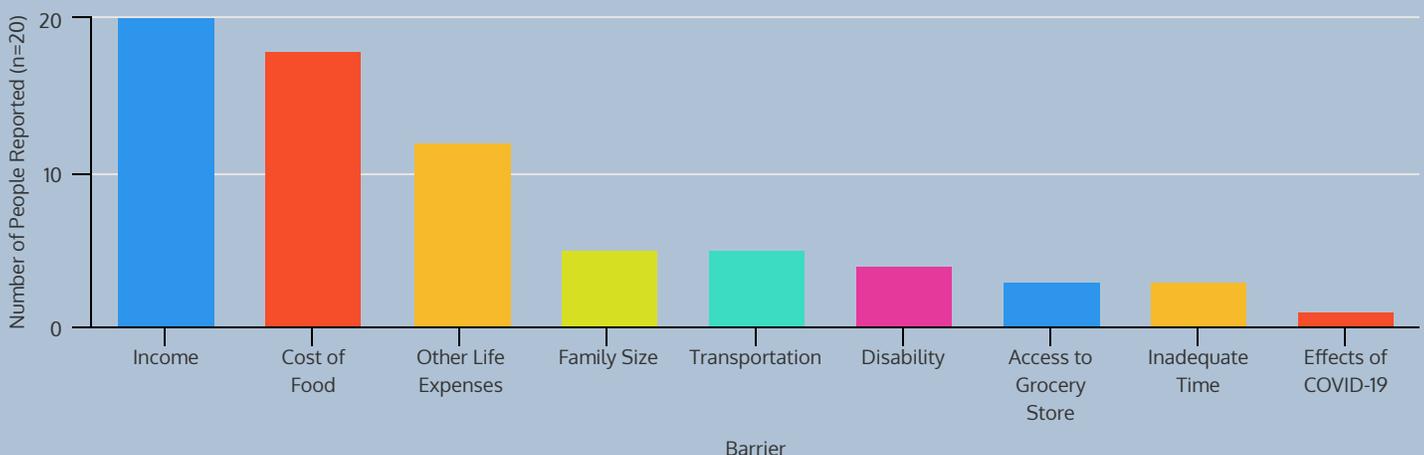
Food insecurity for Indigenous Peoples is perpetuated by systemic racism, which is closely related to the ongoing impacts of colonization (Paradies, 2018). Systemic racism is widely present in areas such as employment (Arceo-Gomez & Campos-Vazquez, 2014; Booth et al., 2012; Hughes & Davidson, 2010) and education (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2013), which are social determinants of health.

In addition, there is consistent growth of Indigenous populations in Canadian urban areas as Indigenous Peoples may move to these locations for greater opportunities relating to education and employment (Place, 2012). While education and employment rates are positively correlated, Indigenous and non-Indigenous individuals do not experience equal rates of employment despite having the same level of education (Appendix 2; OECD, 2018).

In Canada, within Indigenous groups there is unequal labour market participation with First Nations experiencing the lowest labour market outcomes at 47% (Appendix 3; OECD, 2018). Employment barriers are high for Indigenous Peoples and those who are employed experience disparities in wages and income (Appendix 4; Appendix 5; OECD, 2018). Additionally, many employers still do not practice inclusive hiring practices and contribute to exacerbating systemic racism within Canadian labour markets faced by Indigenous Peoples (OECD, 2018).

Figure 2: Data from UGTS Essential Food Basket Survey, Barriers to Accessing Food

### Barriers to Accessing Food



100% of respondents emphasized income as a significant barrier to food security

# Those Furthering the Challenge, Continued

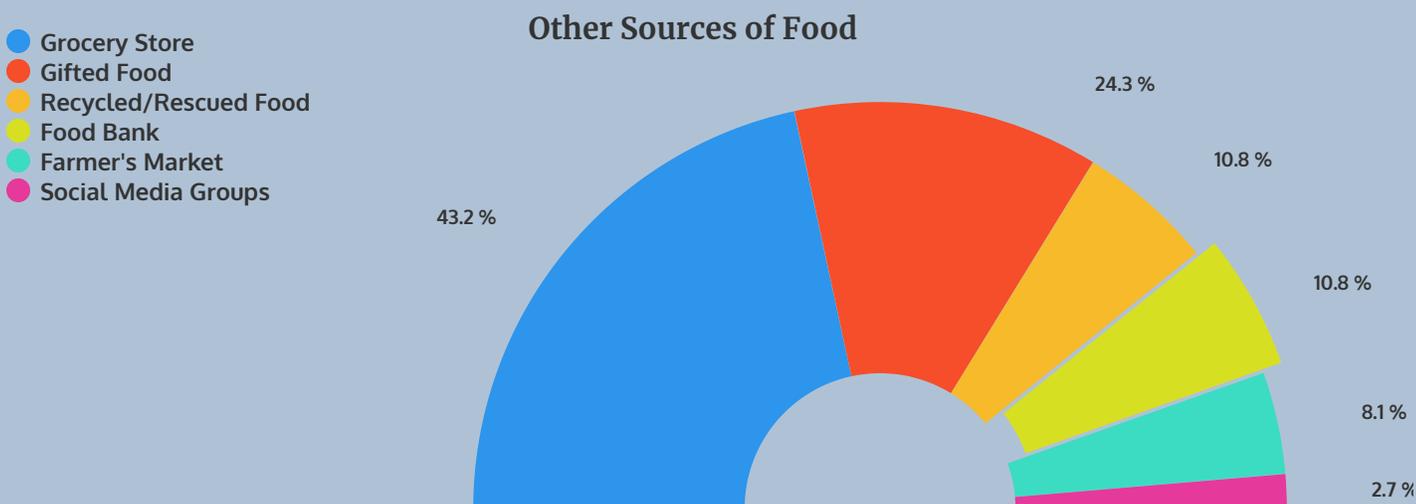
## 2. Food Banks

Food banks remain the primary response to food insecurity in Canada and worsen the situation (Tarasuk et al., 2020). They do not address the underlying issues such as income and systemic racism. The use of food banks are often seen as the exception and not the norm for those who are food-insecure (Tarasuk et al., 2020). Food insecurity is correlated with low income and many either seek support from family or friends, pawn possessions, or skip meals before utilizing food banks (Gundersen et al., 2017). Food banks also give the illusion that a solution exists, resulting in less attention being brought to this issue.

Food banks have been found to be ineffective in resolving food insecurity due to barriers such as stigma and therefore cannot be fully depended on (Tarasuk et al., 2020). A food bank study in Vancouver found that 55% reported no change in hunger, 36% reported reduced hunger, 9% reported increased hunger and 62% reported that food banks were insufficient in meeting household needs (Holmes et al., 2018).

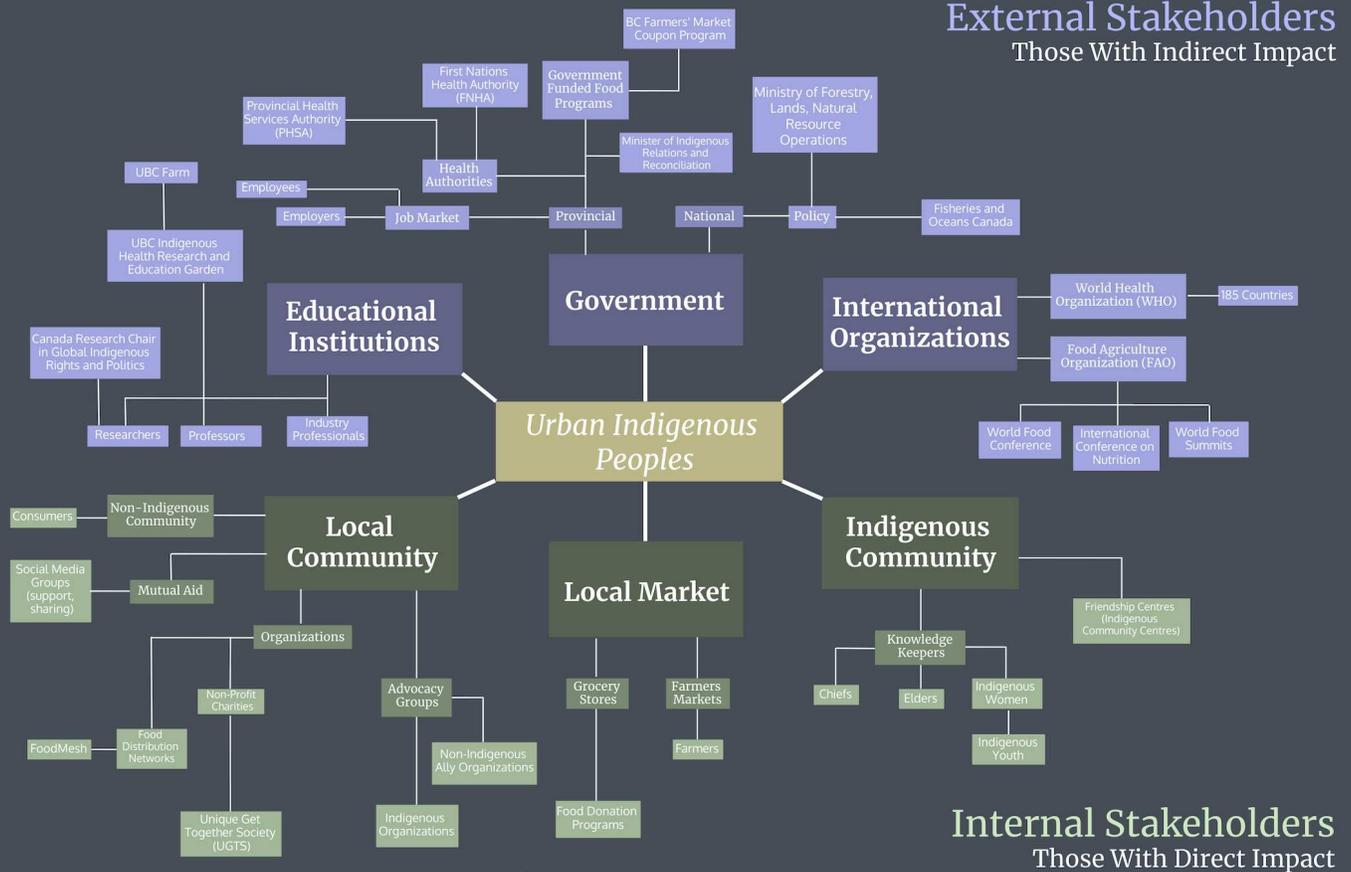
Until more sustainable initiatives are implemented, food banks will still be relied on. UGTS' Essential Food Basket has implemented strategies to help reduce barriers and stigma by delivering food. However, UGTS is limited due to underfunding, and is currently operating at full capacity while continuing to receive more applicants than they can serve throughout COVID-19 (Interviewee 1, UGTS Representative).

Figure 3. Data from UGTS Essential Food Basket Survey, Users' Sources of Food



Our survey found that **food bank** use was one of the most unpopular coping strategies. Many respondents had to supplement the food basket from other sources to sustain their needs.

# Stakeholders Map



## Most Power to Create Change

### 1. Government

The government has the power to impact urban Indigenous food insecurity through addressing the **root causes** through policy change.

#### Dietitians of Canada (2016) recommends:

- A pan-Canadian government initiative with **coordinated policies and programs** ensuring consistent, sufficient income for all basic necessities including food
- Implementation of **federal strategies** that **comprehensively** addresses Indigenous household food insecurity including food sovereignty (access to lands and resources for traditional foods) and improved access to affordable healthy store-bought/market foods in all communities
- Commitment to **annual monitoring and reporting** of marginal, moderate and severe household food insecurity in all provinces and territories, frequent evaluation of impacts of poverty reduction and protocols for screening
- Support continuous research in **addressing gaps in literature** regarding under-researched populations experiencing high prevalence and severity of household food insecurity. Use findings to inform strategies and policies to eliminate household food insecurity in Canada

Food insecurity researchers believe that **Basic Income (BI)** can be an effective strategy against food insecurity in Canada (Tarasuk, 2017). An Ontario study exploring the impacts of BI found that food security improved with 86% reporting a better diet, 85% reporting more frequent nutritious feedings, 69% lower meal-skipping behaviour and 68% lower food bank usage (Ferdosi et al., 2020). The BI pilot resulted in overall improvements in physical and mental health, food and housing security, financial and social well-being and labour market participation (Ferdosi et al., 2020). While the project was considered very successful, the new conservative government cancelled the project due to the high cost (CBC News, 2018; Ferdosi et al., 2020).

### 2. Allies

Allies of Indigenous Peoples have tremendous power to create change, especially those with existing privilege in society. Together, allies can **advocate for support** for Indigenous Peoples.

# **Solutions Landscape**

# SOLUTIONS LANDSCAPE

Food insecurity is a **complex and ongoing challenge** that has impacted the international, national, provincial and community levels of governance. To address food insecurity, multi-dimensional interventions are needed (BC Ministry of Health, 2013).

Initiatives must be approached **holistically** — to assume that all Indigenous Peoples want to participate in traditional practices and eat traditional foods would be a **colonial projection** to what an “Indigenous person” should want (Interviewee 4, UBC Indigenous Relations Advisor). **Initiatives that are most successful prioritize self-determination and co-create** with Indigenous Peoples to support food sovereignty (Interviewee 3, UBC Land and Food Systems Professor; Interviewee 4, UBC Indigenous Relations Advisor)

## International Initiatives

### Australia

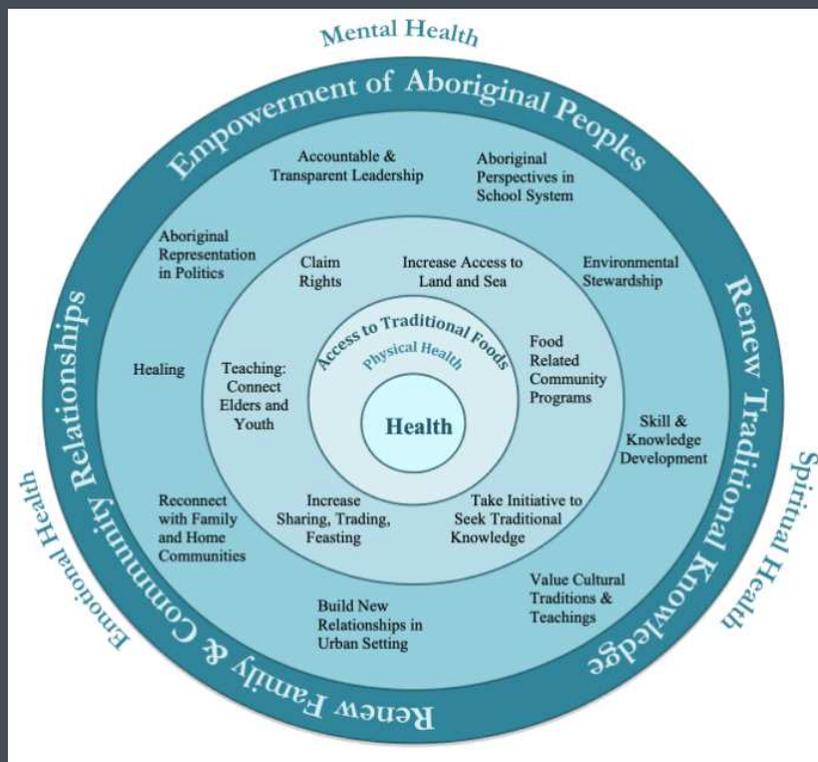
The federal government implemented **welfare “quarantining”** so that a portion of payments could only be used for food. However, food could only be purchased at government-approved stores, resulting in **longer travelling distances** (Davy, 2016). This also forced small community stores **out of business** and resulted in many issues, including insufficient store vouchers and vouchers at lower values than people were entitled to (Davy, 2016). While this may seem like an effective strategy in addressing food insecurity, many individuals would **rather sacrifice purchasing food** for other needs like medicine and housing (McIntyre et al., 2016). Forcing food-insecure individuals on welfare to allocate specific amounts to food is ineffective as purchasing food is often **not a priority** compared to other expenses.

## National Initiatives

**Nutrition North Canada (NNC)** was a program launched in 2011 by the Government of Canada that was intended to help make nutritious food affordable and accessible in northern communities (Government of Canada, 2020). They aimed to provide support through the NNC subsidy, a harvesters support grant and nutrition education initiatives (Government of Canada, 2020). However, research found that after the full implementation of NNC, **the rate of food insecurity increased by 13.2%** and has made food insecurity even more prevalent, affecting 46.6% in 2014 compared to 33.1% in 2010 (St-Germain et al., 2019).

## Provincial Initiatives

**The BC Farmers’ Market Nutrition Coupon Program (BCFMNCP)** provides low-income families and individuals coupons that can be redeemed for fresh produce, meat and dairy at local farmers’ markets (Ottem, 2010). In 2020, they reached ~16,000 individuals with **22% of users identifying as Indigenous** (BC Association of Farmers’ Markets, 2020). This program reported that 99% of participants ate more fruits and vegetables, 70% felt healthier and 61% felt connected to their community (BC Association of Farmers’ Markets, 2020). In addition, the coupon program supports farmers’ markets, strengthens food security and has been a powerful food security tool over the years (BC Government News, 2020). Although initiatives like BCFMNCP are not specifically for Indigenous Peoples, they **support self-determination** (Interviewee 4, UBC Indigenous Relations Advisor).



Source: Elliot et al., 2012

## Community Initiatives

### Charitable Food Programs

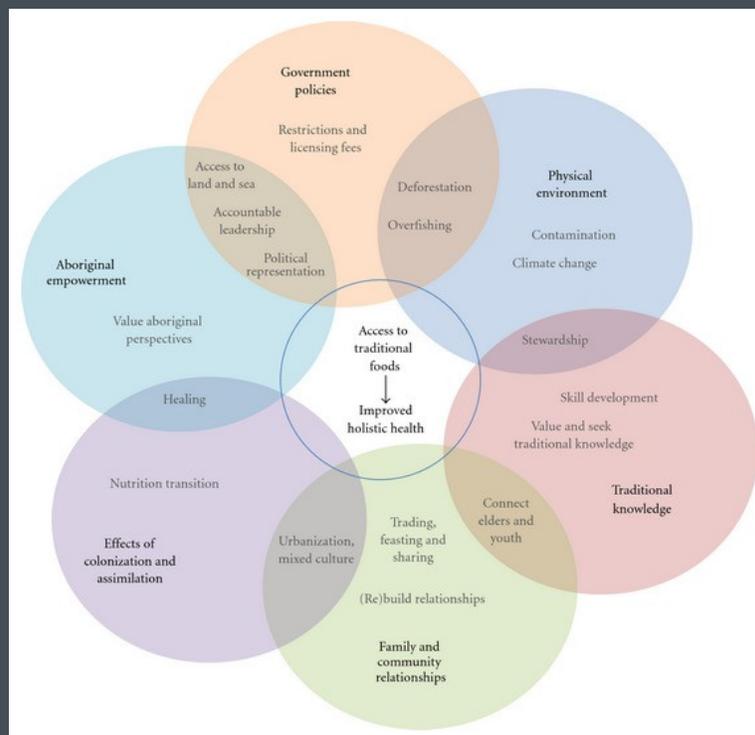
Charitable food programs include food banks, soup kitchens and meal programs that provide **short-term relief** to communities, individuals and families experiencing food insecurity (BC Ministry of Health, 2013). These programs focus on **temporary food relief rather than addressing the root causes** (Bocskei & Ostry, 2010; Tarasuk & Dachner, 2009). Many barriers exist in accessing food banks including transportation, stigmatization and policies which limit how often an individual can receive assistance (Dietitians of Canada, 2012). In addition, food banks often provide **insufficient quantities of food**, leaving the needs of households unmet (Holmes et al., 2018).

### Non-Profit Organizations

**The UGTS Essential Food Basket Program delivers food** across the Lower Mainland to BIPOC families and individuals who are food-insecure (Interviewee 1, UGTS Representative). This program allows individuals to request foods and can provide foods that are often inaccessible from other food programs such as **meat and dairy products** (Interviewee 1, UGTS Representative). It also **reduces the stigma** associated with charitable food programs by delivering food directly to homes and eliminating proof of need (Interviewee 1, UGTS Representative).

### Food Recovery Programs

Food recovery has been adopted by organizations to collect excess perishable food and redistribute it to people through food banks, shelters and social service agencies. FoodMesh is an organization that supports food recovery by connecting local organizations, such as UGTS, to grocery stores (Interviewee 2, FoodMesh Representative). However, while food recovery reduces food waste and provides food to those who are food-insecure, **the evidence does not support food recovery as a method to improve food insecurity** (Dachner & Tarasuk, 2017).



Source: Elliot et al., 2012

## Community Initiatives, Continued

### Urban Agriculture

**Community gardens** can improve nutrition and provide environmental and economic benefits in neighbourhoods, but are limited when addressing those living in severe poverty (BC Ministry of Health, 2013). Community gardens in cities also **do not benefit those who are the most food-insecure** (McElroy, 2019), however, according to Food Secure Canada (n.d.), when individuals have knowledge, land and the ability to grow their own food, they can rely less on outside sources and increase availability and affordability of fresh food in urban areas which can reduce food insecurity. But, the **evidence is mixed** as there are no studies linking community gardens with specific household food security measures (BC Ministry of Health, 2013).

A downfall of community gardens is that developers often turn vacant lots into community gardens to **save on taxes**, which has resulted in an **increased number of community gardens with no benefits to the community** (Molko, 2019).

## Private Sector

### Corporations

The **BC Farmers' Food Donation Corporate Income Tax Credit** is an incentive to encourage farmers and farming corporations to **donate produce** to food banks and school meal programs where farmers can receive a **credit of 25%** of the donation (Government of British Columbia, n.d.). However, we know many individuals experiencing food insecurity do not use food banks, therefore, **increasing donations to food banks are ineffective** at addressing food insecurity (Kinach et al., 2019). In addition, with increased donations to food banks from private food producers, suppliers and retailers, the food donated is often of **low nutritional value or quality** resulting in high costs for food banks to dispose of inedible food (Pawson, 2015).

# Gaps & Levers

# GAPS & LEVERS OF CHANGE

Before stakeholders approach Indigenous communities, it is essential to **build a relationship** and establish **trust and respect** to avoid initiatives being ineffective (Interviewee 2, FoodMesh Representative). Stakeholders approaching Indigenous communities must be informed of historical trauma, and empower those in the community with a voice and a choice (Zgoda et al., 2016).



Many government programs such as NNC fail to alleviate the prevalence of food insecurity and **ultimately worsen** the situation (St-Germain et al., 2019). For the NNC in particular, it was **ineffective** due to the lack of collaboration and consultation with community members, restrictive eligibility requirements, refusal to invest in the health of Indigenous communities, lack of self-determination and no respect or support for Indigenous traditions and culture (Chin-Yee & Chin-Yee, 2015). The program **ultimately failed** due to its **exploitative and colonial strategy** towards northern food insecurity where the aspirations of northern Indigenous Peoples was **largely ignored**.

## Stakeholder Action

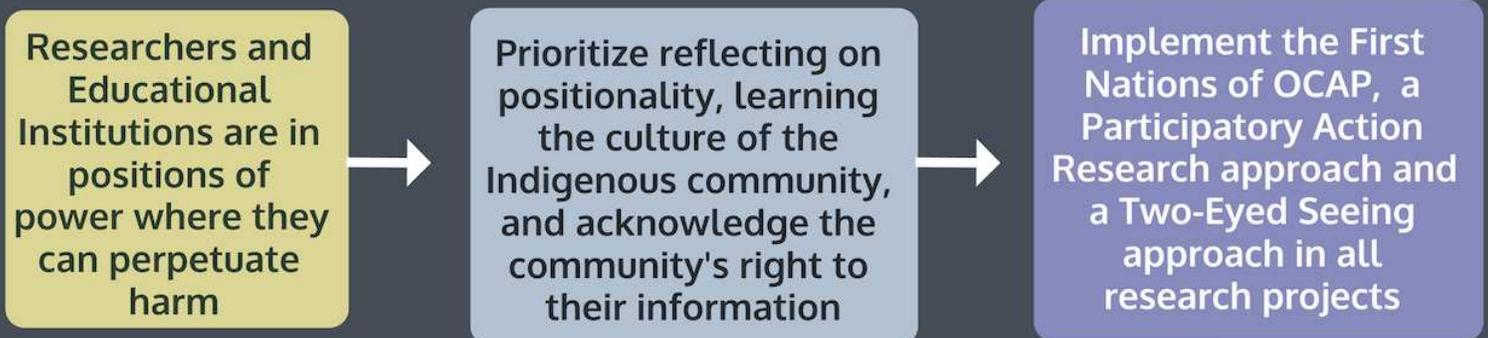
### Government, Educational Institutions & Non-profits

- Indigenous communities and stakeholders must co-create interventions together with involvement of Elders, Chiefs and councils (Interviewee 3, UBC Land and Food Systems Professor; Interviewee 4, UBC Indigenous Relations Advisor; Interviewee 5, BC Community Project Manager)
- Acknowledge that Indigenous communities are diverse in culture, thus have different needs and preferences
- Implement Two-Eyed Seeing approach, support self-determination and respect Indigenous traditions and culture

## GAP

## LEVER

## INTERVENTION



Research on Indigenous communities led by non-Indigenous researchers are often one-sided where **knowledge is taken** with no benefit being returned, resulting in Indigenous Peoples being neglected in the process (McClelland, 2011). Indigenous research initiatives must implement the **First Nations Principles of OCAP** (First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2021), a **Participatory Action Research approach** (Baum et al., 2006; Peltier, 2018) and a **Two-Eyed Seeing approach** (Iwama et al., 2009; Peltier, 2018) to avoid exploiting and taking advantage of Indigenous knowledge (McClelland, 2011; Coram, 2011). In addition, data collected should be strengths-focused and relevant to urban Indigenous Peoples experiencing food insecurity.

### Stakeholder Action

#### Educational Institutions

- Include Indigenous perspectives and take time to learn each Nations' customs
- Ensure outcomes benefit the community and findings are disseminated back
- Acknowledge positionality of researchers
- All research policies involving Indigenous Peoples must implement the First Nation Principles of OCAP
- Incorporate sharing circles in research and teaching methods
- Distinguish research between urban, rural and specific Indigenous communities
- Allow Indigenous Elders and other knowledge keepers to also be knowledge translators (Interviewee 3, UBC Land and Food Systems Professor)
- Advocate for strengths-based research, as current colonial perspectives on Indigenous Peoples are deficit-based



Without policy intervention focused at the **root causes**, food insecurity will persist (Tarasuk et al., 2020). Actions such as implementing **basic income**, improving benefits for low-income workers, increasing funding for social welfare programs and affordable housing will contribute to **long-term alleviation** of food insecurity (Dietitians of Canada, 2016).

### Stakeholder Action

#### Government

- Policies must focus on addressing the social and Indigenous determinants of health
- Prioritize reducing food insecurity for urban Indigenous Peoples
- Instead of only consulting Indigenous Peoples as a stakeholder, make Indigenous communities co-developers when co-creating initiatives together (Interviewee 3, UBC Land and Food Systems Professor).

#### Organizations

- Advocate for policy action together

## GAP

## LEVER

## INTERVENTION

Inconsistent funding or underfunding of Indigenous-led and BIPOC organizations



Prioritize continuous funding for Indigenous-led and BIPOC-led organization



Create low barrier funding opportunities and expand funding for current successful initiatives

Indigenous-led and BIPOC non-profits can **act quickly to support their local community** due to their own lived experience with systemic racism and involvement in the community (Interviewee 1, UGTS Representative; Interviewee 5, BC Community Project Manager). However, these organizations often **struggle to receive funding** to continue and expand their programs due to prioritizing taking action instead of establishing logistics and collecting data, which are needed for funding (Interviewee 1, UGTS Representative; Interviewee 5, BC Community Project Manager).

### Stakeholder Action

#### Government

- Allocate low-barrier funding specifically for BIPOC-led non-profits
- The Federal and Provincial government must consistently fund effective, Indigenous-led local organizations and initiatives (Interviewee 5, BC Community Project Manager). Many Indigenous-led organizations are impactful, but are shut down due to underfunding (Interviewee 1, UGTS Representative; Interviewee 5, BC Community Project Manager).
- Expand funding to support current successful initiatives instead of creating new initiatives

# **Key Insights & Lessons Learned**

# KEY INSIGHTS & LESSONS LEARNED

Our team acknowledges our privilege of having no lived experience of food insecurity. We were unaware of the degree of food insecurity experienced by the Indigenous population within BC. In the presence of many food insecurity initiatives, we were initially under the impression that they were sufficient in addressing food insecurity in our community.

Through our research, we learned that food insecurity and more specifically, Indigenous food insecurity is a **complex and systemic issue** that has been **prevalent for decades** without sustainable interventions being implemented. We also discovered that while the current discourse may assume that the majority of people living in urban settings experience little to no food insecurity, urban Indigenous Peoples are especially vulnerable due to various intersecting factors.

Urban areas allow for a mixture of Indigenous populations to gather from many different communities (Appendix 7). Addressing Indigenous food insecurity in urban areas presents the challenge of considering the 198 distinct First Nations in BC (Province of British Columbia, 2021) without treating all Indigenous Peoples as a **single monolith**.

Additionally, Indigenous Peoples living in BC urban areas may be less connected to their culture (Elliot et al., 2012). It is important to recognize that **not every Indigenous person** will want to participate in traditional practices or eat traditional foods (Interviewee 4, UBC Indigenous Relations Advisor). The most successful food security initiatives **co-create together** to support **Indigenous self-determination** to meet the specific aspirations of the community (Interviewee 3, UBC Land and Food Systems Professor; Interviewee 4, UBC Indigenous Relations Advisor).