



# Food Security in Our Time

This year marks the **10th anniversary of Vital Signs**, an annual assessment of community life. For 2023, Edmonton Community Foundation and Edmonton Social Planning Council look back at the first topic of Vital Signs — Food Security — and where we are today.

**Food security** is when everyone has physical, social and economic access to safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for a healthy lifestyle. *FAO. 2002. The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2001. Rome.*

**Food sovereignty** is the right of people to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It transforms the idea of food as a commodity to food as a public good. *People's Food Policy Project, 2011.*

**Dignified food access** means “providing quality food choices, in a respectful way, in welcoming places.” *Roots to Harvest (2021). Dignified food access: A framework for action and handbook for organizations.*

## The seven pillars of food sovereignty:

- Focus on food for people
- Localize food systems
- Build knowledge and skills
- Recognize that food is sacred
- Value food providers
- Control locally
- Work with nature

*People's Food Policy project (2011). Resetting the table: A people's food policy for Canada. Food Secure Canada.*

**A note on language:** This document uses the language and terms as reported in the original sources, and as such, may not reflect the language and terms people identify with and use in their daily lives.

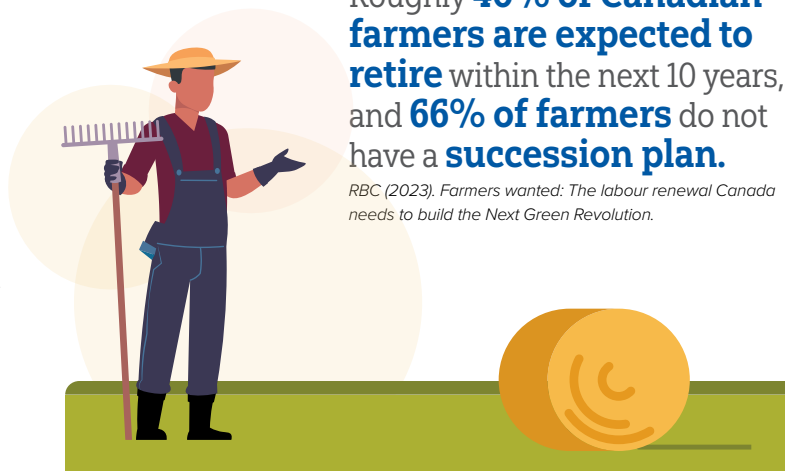
## Farming

At its core, farming is how we all get food. When money is prioritized over feeding communities, inequities in food access grow.

### Big business in the farming sector

Farmland is increasingly being purchased by investors — which shifts ownership and access to land and its resources from local communities to financial capital and corporate interests, and pushes up farmland market values.

Many farmers' ability to retire rests on them selling their land — which continues to increase the cost of farm land and makes it even harder for future generations to afford land. *Aske, K. (2022). Finance in the Fields: Investors, Lenders, Farmers, and the Future of Farmland in Alberta. Parkland institute.*



Roughly **40% of Canadian farmers are expected to retire** within the next 10 years, and **66% of farmers do not have a succession plan.**

*RBC (2023). Farmers wanted: The labour renewal Canada needs to build the Next Green Revolution.*

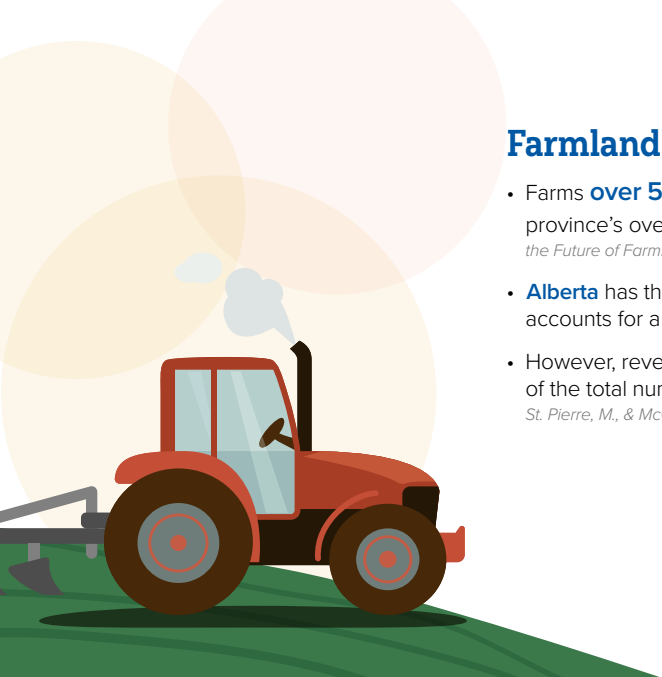
**Canadian farm debt has doubled since 2000, now standing at \$129 billion.**

Did you know **90%** of Canada's canola and **75%** of its wheat is exported?

*Aske, K. (2022). Finance in the Fields: Investors, Lenders, Farmers, and the Future of Farmland in Alberta. Parkland institute.*

Increasingly, farmers are working on farmland that they **rent rather than own.**

- This forces farmers to think in the **short term** as their position is precarious — and restricts the ability to engage in long-term projects that are essential to making farming sustainable.
- Family farmers must buy fertilizers, chemicals, machinery, fuel and technology, and pay rent and interest to large corporations, which eats at their profits. **Agribusiness corporations have captured 95% of all farm revenues, leaving just 5% for the farmers.**



## Farmland – and power – is concentrated in the hands of a few.

- Farms **over 5,000 acres** only account for **6%** of the total farms in Alberta, but control **40%** of the province's over **50 million acres** of farmland. *Aske, K. (2022). Finance in the Fields: Investors, Lenders, Farmers, and the Future of Farmland in Alberta. Parkland institute.*
- **Alberta** has the **highest farm operating revenues of all provinces** in Canada at **\$22.2 billion**. This accounts for a **quarter (25.5%)** of all farm revenue in Canada.
- However, revenue is not spread evenly. Farms with at least **\$2 million** in revenue make up **4%** of the total number of farms in Alberta, but account for **61.7%** of total farm revenues in Alberta. *St. Pierre, M., & McComb, M. (2022). Alberta has the highest farm operating revenues in Canada. Statistics Canada.*

## Ranchers also struggle

- The average return for a **200-cow herd** is just under **\$18,000**.
- Rising costs of feed supplies and fuel are forcing ranchers to downsize herds.

## Community gardens and newcomers

Many newcomers come from farming backgrounds, and community gardens allow them to get back to their roots and rekindle a missing part of their lives.

**Community gardens** foster connections between newcomers and Indigenous peoples — they can learn who was living here and how they lived on the land, developing respect for Indigenous cultures.

*Ghonaim, H. (2020). 'Land of Dreams': a space for newcomers to grow crops and respect Indigenous roots. CBC News Calgary.*

## Youth and farming

Young people face many barriers getting started in farming — high costs of equipment and land, lack of training and support, isolation and a lack of mental health supports in rural areas.

But young farmers have the potential to innovate farming because they can:

- Bring fresh perspectives.
- Share environmental and social justice values.
- Explore more niche agricultural products.
- Work collectively, building community.

*Young Agrarians (n.d.) How to support new farmers in Alberta.*

## Role of immigrants in Alberta's farming economy

Immigrants can bring innovation to Alberta's farming practices.

Jianyi Dong introduced passive solar greenhouses to his farm in Alberta, a practice commonly used in northern China, which has allowed him to extend his growing season.

Through site visits and YouTube videos, he hopes to teach others how to use these practices.

*Government of Canada (2022). Introducing new farming techniques to Western Canada [video].*

In 2021, **777,000 labourers** arrived in Canada, **39%** of whom were employed in the **agricultural, manufacturing, construction and food processing** sectors.



Migrant workers have a limited understanding of their rights in Canada — many had either not received any information about their rights, or the information provided was only in English.

**Many migrant workers experience exploitation on Canadian farms:**

- They are frustrated by policies that make it difficult to get permanent residency. Many are not aware of the different pathways that are available to them, and the ones who are aware are disappointed in how few opportunities they had.
- Workers believe that their wages are low in comparison to their skill level and the demands of the job.
- Inadequate safety training.
- Many workers experience discrimination from their bosses, especially if they have limited English proficiency.
- Many workers are discriminated against, but don't speak up because of a lack of knowledge or awareness about their rights, fears of deportation, lack of awareness of available community supports and economic desperation.

*Canadian Centre to End Human Trafficking & RCJ Refugee Center (2023). It happens here: Labour exploitation among migrant workers during the pandemic.*

# Food Entrepreneurship

**“Farm to table” describes a movement where restaurants and cafés source their ingredients from nearby growers.**

Restaurant owners work closely with local farmers to source fresh and seasonal produce, and in turn, farmers are able to support local businesses.

However, farm to table is often seen as a luxury, and meals can be expensive.

*Farm Folk City Folk (2021). Benefits of Supporting Farm-to-Table.*



## Immigrant food businesses

- Missing foods from home has inspired many immigrants to create their own businesses — such as grocery stores and restaurants — to bring those tastes to Edmonton
- These businesses also facilitate the sharing of foods between cultures. *Matt S. (March 2007). Hunger for Home: Homesickness in a Global Consumer Society.*

## Community Supported Agriculture

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is a way for consumers to connect with and support local farmers and local economies, creating a stronger relationship with food producers.

Similar to a subscription box, CSAs involve consumers buying a share of products grown at a local farm, which are then delivered on a regular basis. Consumers can get fresh seasonal vegetables, eggs and meat.

For smaller farms, CSAs give farmers guaranteed customers and a more predictable income, which allows them to target what they grow to meet community needs and reduce food waste of unsold produce.

*Alberta Open Farm Days (n.d.). Purchasing from a CSA in Alberta. Riverbend CSA (n.d.). What is a CSA?*

# Food Programming in Edmonton

## Food programming in schools

Students with a universal breakfast program experienced fewer discipline problems, improved behaviour, better attendance and learning and improved psychosocial well-being. *Maimann, K. (2019). United Conservative government confirms funding for Alberta school nutrition program.*

### The limitations to school nutrition programs are:

- School food programs provide meals to children during school hours and cannot be accessed during evenings, weekends or school breaks.
- The pandemic has brought to light how vulnerable these programs are. School closures meant that many students lost access to these programs. Interim programs were put in place to feed local children (such as Heroes Against Hunger, an initiative started by Sobeys Belmont and supported by C5, and programs created by school boards). *Huncar, A. (2020). Edmontonians launch efforts to help students cut off from school food programs during pandemic.*
- Breakfast Clubs of Canada has a waitlist of **150 schools** in Alberta. *Johnson, L. (2022). Soaring costs could jeopardize school nutrition programs: Breakfast Club of Canada.*
- While it is important to fulfil students' immediate hunger needs and support their health, this type of food programming would not solve food insecurity. **We need to address root causes – families not having enough money to afford food.** *PROOF University of Toronto (2022). Open Letter: Stop headlining the pan-Canadian school food policy as a way to reduce food insecurity among children.*

**School nutrition programs provided more than 96,000 students with meals between 2017 and 2020.**



## Other food programming in Edmonton

There are a wide variety of food program models available to Edmontonians. These may share shelf-stable goods, fresh produce, fresh breads and/or meat and proteins.

It is important that food programs operate from a place of dignified food access, which means “providing quality food choices, in a respectful way, in welcoming places.” There is no shame in asking for food. *Roots to Harvest (2021). Dignified food access: A framework for action and handbook for organizations. Roots to Harvest: Thunder Bay, Ontario.*

### Food hamper programs:

- Collect food from donations or bulk buying and then distribute it to clients through pre-packaged hampers of food.
- **Examples:** Edmonton’s Food Bank, CANAVUA Food Hamper Program, Multicultural Health Brokers Cooperative Grocery Run and Campus Food Banks.

### Market model:

- Collect donated food and hygiene essentials, and allow clients to shop these items for free or at subsidized costs.
- **Examples:** C5 Community Market, Food4Good Market.

### Hot meal programs:

- Deliver hot meals directly to where people are – organizations may ‘patrol’ neighbourhoods or locations with known needs, and hand out meals, set up food trucks or deliver meals directly to clients’ homes.
- **Examples:** Nekem, Bearclan, CANAVUA Community Food Truck, WeCAN Food Basket.



### Low cost food boxes and markets:

- These programs allow individuals and families to purchase boxes of fresh food in a market for 30-50% below retail value.
- **Examples:** Food4Good boxes, Riverbend Good Box Food Program, WeCAN Food Basket.

### Faith-based programming:

- Many faith centres in Edmonton provide groceries, hot meals and free bread.

**Note:** This is not a list of all services available. Edmonton’s food programs are rapidly changing, and as such, some programs listed here may no longer be active at the time of report publication and new programs may have been created.

# Indigenous People and Food Sovereignty

Due to colonization, Indigenous people have been disconnected from the traditional foods of their ancestors. The shift from a traditional diet to government-supplied commodities and processed foods has led to the increase in chronic diseases like diabetes.

**A return to traditional food knowledge is key to restoring physical health and ensuring the survival of a cultural lifeway.**

The food sovereignty movement shifts people away from corporate food systems toward locally grown, locally distributed and culturally appropriate foods. It emphasizes the nourishment provided by traditional foods hunted and gathered locally, honoured and shared in traditional ways.

*Walker, R.A. (2023). How Indigenous nations are rebuilding food systems.*

**Food sovereignty for Indigenous People places relationships and responsibility at the heart of the movement.** It is about the responsibility to plant and animal relatives, respect for mother earth and a relationship with self and community. It is also a reconnection to land-based food and political systems and specifically includes fishing, hunting and gathering.

*Milgroom, J. and S. Senogles (2022). Harvesting is an act of indigenous food sovereignty.*



**Growing some of what you eat is one way to create meaningful connections with the earth and ourselves.**

There has been an over-reliance on processed foods with limited nutritional value. With that, there is a loss of connection with food and the land as “convenience” foods became more commonplace. *Brooks, C. and H. Moore (2020). An Indigenous perspective: “Food is medicine, medicine is food.”*

*Brooks, C. and H. Moore (2020). An Indigenous perspective: “Food is medicine, medicine is food.”*

# Food and Ethnocultural Communities

**One in five households of recent immigrants to Canada experience food insecurity.**

*Community University Partnership (2017) CUP impacts 2017.*



**Food isn't the only thing families need to buy.**

A survey of newcomers accessing services in Edmonton found that **62% pay 50% or more of their income on their rent or mortgage.** This leaves very little money for food.

**Food insecurity is a challenge in ethnocultural communities.**

**60%** of survey participants experienced severe food insecurity, saying they often (**24%** of total respondents) or sometimes (**36%** of respondents) cut the size of their meals or skipped meals because there is not enough money for food. *Edmonton Chamber of Voluntary Organizations (2021). The housing stories of newcomers in Edmonton: A snapshot of the lived experience 2020.*



**Food insecurity impacts newcomer's ability to engage in culture.**

- Many immigrants are unfamiliar with the canned goods typically given by food banks, and do not know how to prepare or eat them.
- Groups such as the Umoja Centre and Multicultural Health Brokers have programs to provide newcomers with culturally relevant goods – but don't always have the resources to meet the need. *Dubey, R. (2023). Lentils, halal meat: Alberta food banks address demand for cultural groceries. CTV News Edmonton.*
- A study interviewing Somali women in Edmonton found these women often had sufficient quantity of food, but not quality. They were forced to rely on grains and didn't have sufficient fruits or veggies.
- They did not have enough money to afford foods that represented their cultural identity. *Quintanilha, M., Mayan, M. J., Jarman, M., & Bell, R. C. (2018). Prevalence and experiences of food insecurity among immigrant women connected to perinatal programs at a community-based organization in Edmonton, Canada. International Journal of Migration, Health, and Social Care 15(2). P 121-132. DOI: 10.1108/IJMHS-09-2018-0064*
- A lack of income means people cannot buy the food they want — that they like and enjoy eating. This has impacts on people's sense of happiness, self-worth, and respect.
- For many immigrant families, food is often a part of celebrations, and brings communities together as they prepare, share and enjoy it together. It can be isolating when people do not have food to share.

- Food is seen as a way of sharing cultural values, traditions, memories and helps children to develop cultural self-esteem. It is a way of preserving culture and heritage in a new country and sharing intergenerational wisdom.
- Growing, cooking, eating and sharing cultural foods can support well-being in the face of stress and isolation. *The Persimmon Project (2021). Newcomers engaged in food dignity: Edmonton 2020-21.*

## Community Member Testimonies

**"In Canada, we are not hungry, but we do not eat with dignity. I mean we do not have the ability to buy the food we want. Our income defines what we eat."**

**"I worry also the individualistic culture of our children. Food brings together families to share happiness and grievances. I would like that we teach our children the culture and spiritual values of food."**

**"Food is considered to be from God. Food has spirit — has value — has dignity. Is a blessing.... Food is material — also spiritual. Food dignity is connected to God. Food carries spirit of others — those who grew the food."**



# The Impact of the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic forced many organizations to quickly adapt their services to meet the needs of their communities by expanding operations and changing how they do things. Collaboration between organizations allowed them to fill service gaps and approach problems in unique ways. Funders stepped up to ensure these groups had the money they need. New organizations and mutual aid groups were also created to reach more people. These are just a few examples of food support during COVID:

- Groups such as Islamic Family and Social Services Association (IFSSA), Free Footie and YEG Community Response to COVID-19 stepped up to address the food gap by delivering hampers to people's doors. *Huncar, Andrea. CBC News (2020). Refugees, new Canadians struggling to feed children during pandemic, advocates say.*
- Canadian Volunteers United in Action (CANAVUA) began providing meals to Edmontonians in fall 2020 with the use of a food truck in an effort to improve food security. Twice per week, volunteers provide meals to walk-ups and make deliveries, reaching **300 to 350 people per day**, primarily serving Afro-Canadian, Indigenous and newcomer communities in Edmonton. The food comes from donations and the menu changes weekly. *Jeffrey, A. (2020). 'The spirit of Canada': Non-profit food truck serving free meals to hundreds in Edmonton.*
- Fresh Routes ran a mobile grocery store in Calgary and Edmonton, providing affordable fresh food to communities who face barriers (physical or financial) to accessing these products. They filled in the gap when Boyle Street Education Centre closed and students couldn't get a reliable meal by delivering food straight to student's homes. Fresh Routes also adapted their service to deliver fresh food to people who couldn't access food as they normally would

have, such as immunocompromised or people who didn't feel safe using public transit during COVID. The partnership also allowed students to volunteer at the store, learn about healthy foods and how to prepare them, and learn about budgeting and resource management. The Fresh Routes mobile grocery store in Edmonton has since closed.

*CBC News (2020). Partnership between Edmonton high school and non-profit tackles food security during pandemic.*

- Edmonton Community Coordination of Food Resources Committee (ECCFRC) was created in the wake of COVID. It provides direction and leadership to ensure low-income and vulnerable Edmontonians can access food when and where they need it through coordinated community efforts. The committee works to find efficiencies to best deliver services, share information and resources to facilitate providing services, maximize donations, grant funding and agency resources, and explores and addresses issues underlying food insecurity.

**For a lot of these emergency measures, funding was not sustained in the long term. Food insecurity continues to be a persistent challenge in Edmonton – and organizations do not have the capacity to help everyone who needs support.**



## How the food system affects us locally

The food system is huge and complicated, but it deeply affects our access to food. Canada is over reliant on transporting goods across long distances.

- More than half of Canada's food imports come from the United States. We tend to import more during the winter.
- **Extreme weather, labour shortages and the pandemic have all disrupted supply chains, making it hard for food to get here.**
- Locally, the closure of processing plants — such as Alberta's beef processing plants — have contributed to disrupted supply chains. *Hui, A., Robertston, S.K., and E. Atkins (2022). How Canada's fragile food supply chain is being disrupted. Von Massow, M. and A. Weersink (2020). Why we aren't running out of food during the coronavirus pandemic.*

- Supply chain disruptions often lead to fewer options in grocery stores. *Hui, A., Robertston, S.K., and E. Atkins (2022). How Canada's fragile food supply chain is being disrupted.*
- Canada's largest grocery stores (including Lowlaws, Sobeys) control **70%** of the market.
- Suppliers say Canadian supermarkets have fewer products and higher prices compared to stores in the United States because consolidation allows our grocery chains to charge sky-high listing fees and fines, which push out small producers. *Alsharif, G. (2023). 'Supply chain bullying': Inside the food fight between Canada's grocery giants and their suppliers.*
- All this means higher prices and fewer choices for all Edmontonians at the grocery store.

**Climate change has created the conditions for extreme weather events which threaten our food systems.**

- Summer is wildfire season in Alberta, which has forced farmers to abandon their farms at a moments notice, putting their farms and livelihoods — and our food — at risk.
- Farmers face difficulty evacuating their livestock during emergency evacuations. *Global News (2023). 'We lost our entire farm': Alberta wildfire victims brace for more extreme weather [video].*