



UAKN Prairie Research Centre: Defining Food Security for Urban Aboriginal People

KEY FINDINGS:

- While food security is an urgent social, economic, cultural and health issue for Aboriginal people in urban areas, and particularly those living in inner city areas, there are unique elements of food security related to cultural values to be considered.
- Food, culture and health are all linked - research findings have indicated that while food insecurity does exist for urban Aboriginal people, there is an important connection between food and social well-being.
- This study revealed that the impacts of colonialism on Indigenous food systems and the gaps in the literature and research that remain when looking at urban Aboriginal populations that migrate from the remote and rural communities.
- The three key areas identified by participants as being pertinent to Indigenous food security in Winnipeg include: 1) Growing, harvesting, preparing and eating cultural food as ceremony, 2) Cultural food as a part of connection to land through reciprocity and 3) Re-learning Indigenous Food Security practices to address food insecurity.
- Research identified the need for urban organizations to work with the community to participate in “upskilling” around cultural food, to build capacity on improving access and knowledge to traditional foods.

INTRODUCTION:

This research brief explores the concept of food security from an urban Aboriginal perspective and explores the challenges of maintaining access to culturally valued food in the inner city of Winnipeg, Manitoba. While food security is an urgent social, economic, cultural and health issue for Aboriginal people in urban areas, this study revealed that

there are some unique elements of food security to be examined related to cultural values for those living in the inner city areas.

The Environics Institute found that 44% of Aboriginal people in Winnipeg felt that it was important that future generations know about traditions pertaining to food. Yet, there is little research that examines what food security means for Aboriginal people living in urban areas. This study explores this issue with the overall objective to make policy and programming recommendations to better meet the needs of the increasing urban Aboriginal populations. The overarching goal of this research project is to make direct recommendations concerning food systems policy in order to meet the needs for culturally valued foods for urban Aboriginal households.

PARTNERSHIPS:

Winnipeg Indian and Metis Friendship Centre
University of Winnipeg

METHODOLOGY:

This research applied a mix methods approach; this consisted of ten interviews conducted with participants and additional focus groups that were held to collect data. The set of questions focused not only on access to cultural foods in the city but also a discussion about the connection between cultural food and an individual's well-being. The interviews were transcribed and coded for further research analysis.

The research questions looked to extract information on to how to further explore the concept of food security from an urban Aboriginal perspective, explore the challenges of maintaining access to culturally valued food in the inner city and to make recommendations concerning food systems policy in order to meet the needs for culturally valued foods for urban Aboriginal households.

MAIN FINDINGS:

Food, culture and health are all linked - research findings have indicated that while food insecurity does exist for urban Aboriginal people, there is an important connection between food and social wellbeing. This study identified the impacts of colonialism on Indigenous food systems within a rural, remote, northern and reserve context. Yet, there still remains a gap in the literature when looking at urban Aboriginal populations that migrate from the remote and rural communities.

During the interviews and focus groups participants also made the strong linkage between food, culture and health. There are three key areas identified by participants as being pertinent to Indigenous food security in Winnipeg include: (1) growing, harvesting, preparing and eating cultural food as ceremony, (2) cultural food as a part of connection to land through reciprocity and (3) re-learning IFS practices to address food insecurity.

The three key areas can be further broken down to below on how they examine on how food security is a strong social determinant of one's health connecting to individual.

1. Growing, Harvesting, Preparing, Eating and Sharing Cultural Food as Ceremony

Participants described a spiritual connection to cultural food. Often stories and ceremony were connected to the practice of growing and nurturing one's food. Understanding the larger process of growing, harvesting and catching one's food in the context of cultural knowledge and transmission was identified. The knowledge and understanding associated with growing and nurturing your own food is connected to a larger understanding of the relationship between the environment, spirituality and people.

2. Cultural Food as a Part of Connection to Land Through Reciprocity

The access to traditional food in the city is different than for people living in rural and reserve communities. Often being in the city means that participants act as a host to family and friends who are visiting or living in urban areas where the activities of gifting and bartering take place within the urban community. In the urban context, accessing traditional foods may be difficult but the development of networks becomes a key factor in addressing this barrier. Participants discussed that participating in urban gardening programs or Community Shared Agriculture programs (CSAs) and the practice of bartering is also related to traditional teachings around reciprocity. The reciprocity between the provider and receiver of the food is about cultural exchanges.

3. Re-learning Indigenous Food Security to Address Food Insecurity

Access to cultural food in the city is about alleviating food insecurity and can be seen as a reclamation and reconnection to food and food production. Indigenous food sovereignty (IFS) goes beyond food security in that it looks to reconnect people and their food systems with a strong emphasis on cultural exchanges and notions of reciprocity. IFS is based on the principles that food is sacred and participation can lead to self-determination and support the relationships that need to take place in order to ensure that these important cultural connections are made. The colonial histories such as the disruption of hunting and gathering practices by the residential school system have intergenerational impacts outlined in this study.

CONCLUSION:

Unique elements were revealed when looking at food security from an urban Aboriginal perspective. Urban Aboriginal organizations, or those that primarily serve Aboriginal populations can provide an important opportunity to build capacity (which we refer to as "upskilling" because capacity insinuates that there is limited skills or capacity to begin with) when it comes to preparing cultural food. Food, culture and health are all linked and this can be seen when looking at the three key themes identified by participants when examining Indigenous food security in Winnipeg. These three areas need to be considered when examining food security: (1) growing, harvesting, preparing and eating cultural food

as ceremony, (2) cultural food as a part of connection to land through reciprocity and (3) re-learning IFS practices to address food insecurity.

Policy Recommendations:

To further contribute to policy would be to provide a larger context for urban organizations, specifically Aboriginal organizations that focus on food security, to better understand how to develop programs and policies which support traditional and culturally based food production and food preparation. The following policy recommendations were brought forth:

- Begin a dialogue at the local level for understanding not only how to access cultural food, but how to authentically engage in Indigenous Food Security through a knowledge and awareness of food preparation.
- The knowledge and understanding associated with growing and nurturing your own food is connected to a larger understanding of the relationship between the environment, spirituality and people.
- Obtaining access to traditional food in the city is different than for people living in rural and reserve communities and needs to be addressed as such.
- Access to cultural food in the city is about alleviating food insecurity, but also about a larger reclamation and connection to food and food production
- Make recommendations concerning food systems policy in order to meet the needs for culturally valued foods for urban Aboriginal households.

Future Research Goals: Next steps for Phase 2 of this project:

The success of this project has now led into a second phase. The research question for this second phase is to ***explore the ways in which urban organizations can “upskill” Indigenous food practices such as food growing, harvesting and production to diminish food insecurity and promote principles of Indigenous Food Sovereignty (IFS) within an urban context.*** This research will explore the operationalization of IFS principles by undertaking a series of traditional food preparation, cultivation and procurement workshops followed by focus groups to talk about IFS principles within an urban context. This project will seek to expand its network of partners, develop curriculum and to continue to make policy recommendations that can be used at regional level.

About Us:

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The Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network, the UAKN, is a community driven research network focused on the Urban Aboriginal population in Canada. The UAKN establishes a national, interdisciplinary network involving universities, community, and government partners for research, scholarship and knowledge mobilization. For more information visit: www.uakn.org



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