

PROJECT FACT SHEET

Hunger & Health in Atlantic Canada

Investigators: Meaghan Sim
Graduate Student
Mount Saint Vincent University

Theresa Glanville
Professor-Department of Applied Human Nutrition
Mount Saint Vincent University

Lynn McIntyre
Former Dean of Health Professions
Former Professor—Faculty of Health Professions
Dalhousie University

A surprising number of Canadians live in what are called “food-insecure” households. Statistics Canada defines “food insecurity” as being worried about having enough to eat, not having enough to eat, or reporting having to eat lower quality or undesired food. Food insecurity is associated with poorer health outcomes, and low-income, single mother-led households are a group at risk for food insecurity.

Mount Saint Vincent University graduate student researcher Meaghan Sim received a grant from the Nova Scotia Health Research Foundation to study food insecurity in Atlantic Canadians. Ms. Sim was particularly interested in the food-management methods used by food-insecure households, an area that has received relatively little attention.

The study centered on a sub-set of 24 families who had participated in a previous research study that investigated dietary behaviours of food insecure, low-income, lone-mother led families in Atlantic Canada. Using a number of assessment tools created specifically for the study, Ms. Sim’s research analyzed both the quality of diet and interviews with the families to determine their food management strategies. Strategies were then compared with diet quality to determine relationships.

“We classified management practices through a series of opposites,” explains Ms. Sim. These management strategies were considered as either “mother driven” or “child driven;” characterized by “healthy eating” versus “subsistence feeding;” reflecting “food privileging” versus “sharing for the common good;” “formal meal structure” versus “informal meal structure;” and “meal planning” versus “ad hoc food consumption.”

Mother-driven menus, a healthy-eating philosophy, and meal planning were food-management behaviours associated with better diet quality for the households studied. The severity of household food insecurity and position within the family were not related to diet quality.

“Based on our findings, interventions aimed at improving diet quality should consider strategies to manage their food resources, in the absence of additional financial or food resources” says Ms. Sim: “Different households may require different supports to achieve nutritional health.”

This research highlights the complexity of food insecurity and the need for a collaborative approach. Research like this has the potential to improve the health of many disadvantaged Nova Scotians and reduce the costs that poor diets exact on the public health care system.

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Contact information:

Theresa Glanville
Professor, Department of Applied Human Nutrition
Mount Saint Vincent University
Phone: 902.457.6248
Email: theresa.glanville@msvu.ca