Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development
ISSN: 2152-0801 online
https://foodsystemsjournal.org

Food insecurity in Yukon communities during COVID-19: A qualitative study

Sara McPhee-Knowles [a] *
Yukon University and University of Saskatchewan

David Gatensby [b]
Yukon University

Submitted May 5, 2023 / Revised August 3 and September 8, 2023 / Accepted September 13, 2023 / Published online November 27, 2023

Citation: McPhee-Knowles, S., & Gatensby, D. (2023). Food insecurity in Yukon communities during COVID-19: A qualitative study. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, *13*(1), 335–348. https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2023.131.015

Copyright © 2023 by the Authors. Published by the Lyson Center for Civic Agriculture and Food Systems. Open access under CC BY license.

Abstract

Food insecurity increased in Canada during the COVID-19 pandemic; in the Yukon Territory, the Whitehorse Food Bank saw its scope increase significantly as smaller Yukon communities were requesting deliveries of food while travel restrictions were in place. In this qualitative study, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with food bank clients in Whitehorse and two smaller Yukon communities, as well as representatives of other organizations that were involved in community food security initiatives. The results revealed five main themes emerging from shared client experiences and impacts from the pandemic: emphasis on the hamper as core food on an ongoing basis, the importance of traditional foods, food insecurity and access, the role of the Whitehorse Food Bank in supporting informal networks in communities, and ideal food situations that focused on an abundance of fresh and land-based foods. The results show some contrast between needs in Whitehorse and needs in smaller, more remote Yukon communities. Because of limited access to fresh foods in communities outside

[a] * *Corresponding author*: Sara McPhee-Knowles, PhD, Assistant Professor, School of Business and Leadership, Yukon University; 500 University Drive, Box 2799; Whitehorse, Yukon, Y1A 5K4 Canada; smcpheeknowles@yukonu.ca; and Adjunct Professor, Johnson-Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy, University of Saskatchewan; 101 Diefenbaker Place; Saskatoon, SK, S7N 5B8 Canada.

[b] David Gatensby, Bachelor of Business Administration Student, School of Business and Leadership, Yukon University; Whitehorse, Yukon, Canada.

Author Note

Sara McPhee-Knowles is a board member of the Whitehorse Food Bank. This work was presented publicly at the Stockholm Resilience Centre in February 2023 and in Whitehorse in March 2023. A version of this paper was written up as a report to the Whitehorse Food Bank and distributed to participants.

Funding Disclosure

This project was funded by Mitacs Accelerate and the YukonU Scholarly Activity Grant.

of Whitehorse, merely increasing income supports would not completely alleviate food insecurity for these participants, who they lack physical access as well as economic access to fresh, preferred foods.

Keywords
food insecurity, Northern Canada, Yukon, food bank, COVID-19, pandemic response, remote communities

Introduction

Food security means that individuals have consistent "physical, social and economic access" to safe food in adequate amounts to meet their preferences and needs (Wakefield et al., 2015); food secure people can access sufficient amounts and types of food to meet their dietary and cultural needs in a way they prefer. The definition used to measure food insecurity in Canada is "inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints" (Tarasuk & Mitchell, 2020, p. 5). In Canadian northern communities, however, food security is often intimately tied to the land, and is affected by accessibility as well as finances. Food builds community and connection "through shared meals and feasts, connects people to the land through traditional food gathering practices, and inter-connects [*sic*] the people, the land and the culture" (Stroink & Nelson, 2012, p. 66). Thus, the toll of food insecurity is punctuated by other determinants involving connectivity, including geography, climate, remoteness, proximity to food production, access to culturally relevant foods, and levels of social inclusion. Food insecurity has long been a concern in Canada's North; the most recent figures available show that in 2020, 15.3% of households in the Yukon, 23.1% of households in the Northwest Territories, and 46.1% of households in Nunavut are moderately or severely food insecure (Tarasuk et al., 2022).

The Yukon Territory is located in the far northwest of Canada, bordering Alaska, USA to the west, the Northwest Territories to the east, and British Columbia to the south. The territory is vast and remote, and is home to about 44,000 residents, of whom about 80% live in the capital city of Whitehorse (Yukon Bureau of Statistics, 2023). The rest live in smaller communities throughout the territory, often separated by large distances (Figure 1). The next largest community, Dawson City, 533 km northwest of Whitehorse, is home to about 2300 people, and the third largest community is Watson Lake, 437 km south-east of Whitehorse, with about 1500 residents (Yukon Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Most of the smaller communities are home to about 200–900 residents, and not all have a grocery store. There is economic disparity between Whitehorse and the smaller towns; median income in Whitehorse is higher (Statistics Canada, 2023), and goods tend to cost more in the smaller, more remote communities (Yukon Bureau of Statistics, n.d.). Because Whitehorse is home to such a large proportion of the population, Yukon-level statistics are skewed by the conditions of the capital city.

All communities have year-round road access except Old Crow, which is only accessible by air. The territory has cold, dark winters and short, intense summers, with about 80 frost-free days near Whitehorse (Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2013). Of the 14 Yukon First Nations, 11 are self-governing under modern treaties. Around 21% of the population is of First Nations ancestry: 56% of the Yukon First Nations people live in Whitehorse, 15% of its population, and the remaining 44% live in the smaller communities, where the percentage of First Nations people ranges from 89% in Pelly Crossing to less than 25% in Dawson City (Graham et al., 2021). Food insecurity in Canada is racialized (Budd Nugent et al., 2022); Indigenous people experience higher rates of food insecurity in the ten provinces (Tarasuk et al., 2022). With the racialized nature of food insecurity, and as the Yukon Indigenous population is larger than the Canadian average, we can expect higher than average rates of food insecurity.

Food banks began as a community response to food needs during the 1980s in the context of economic recession and neoliberal reductions in social safety nets. Since then, they have become institutionalized, as there has not been a strong Canadian policy response to food insecurity (Loopstra & Tarasuk, 2012; Riches, 2011). Only 21.1% of food insecure households in Canada access food banks; these families appear to have lower incomes generally, and are thus more likely to seek assistance

Figure 1. Map of the Yukon Territory

Source: Wikimedia Commons, 2012

from community agencies or social assistance than the food insecure households that do not access food banks (Tarasuk et al., 2019).

The Whitehorse Food Bank[1] began operating in the Yukon in 2009 and primarily served Whitehorse residents, although Yukoners from other communities who happened to be in Whitehorse on a distribution day were able to pick up a hamper, which in this context is emergency food assistance, tailored to household size, that includes core staples of canned and dry goods and some fresh or frozen foods depending on availability. The Whitehorse Food Bank has seen its scope expand significantly since the COVID-19 pandemic began in March 2020. Across Canada, food bank use has increased 35% from 2019 (Food Banks Canada, 2022); in the Yukon, hamper distributions increased 38% from 2021 to 2022 (Food Bank Society of the Yukon, 2022). Prior to COVID-19, all clients seeking emergency food assistance were required to come into the Food Bank in Whitehorse to receive five to seven days of emergency food once per month; however, in the early days of the pandemic, Yukoners were encouraged to limit travel between the smaller communities and Whitehorse. In response, communities requested that the Whitehorse Food Bank distribute hampers more broadly. With the factors of high inflation and transportation costs, as well as increased food insecurity, the Whitehorse Food Bank has seen increased demand and operational costs at a time when the organization has begun to play a larger role connecting remote communities in the Yukon food system.

This study was motivated by the increased demands placed on the Whitehorse Food Bank and the sudden shift in operational scope due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Co-developed with the Whitehorse Food Bank, this project sought to collect information from clients in the new areas that were being served by the organization at an unprecedented time. Through qualitative interviews, the researchers sought to depict the experiences of food-insecure clients of the Whitehorse Food Bank in Whitehorse and in two smaller communities. The researchers also interviewed representatives of other organizations who were involved in community food security initiatives in some way. The results revealed shared client experiences and impacts from the pandemic that were specific to the unique Yukon experience of travel restrictions (McPhee-Knowles et al., 2022).

Research Methods

The purpose of the qualitative interviews was to obtain rich multifaceted insights from clients of the Whitehorse Food Bank with respect to their experiences with food insecurity throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants were also asked about accessing Food Bank services in their communities. The semi-structured interview guide was developed by the researchers, who sought input from the executive director of the Whitehorse Food Bank as to the content of the questions. The project was approved by the Yukon University Research Ethics Board in April 2022. The two researchers completed interviews in Haines Junction, Watson Lake, Whitehorse, and Carmacks from June to August 2022. They also conducted six interviews with representatives from organizations involved in food security or distribution in some way in those four communities (these participants are sometimes referred to as non-client participants, for clarity). During distribution times, 17 clients were interviewed in Haines Junction, Watson Lake and Whitehorse. Unfortunately, due to forest fires and flooding that affected Carmacks during the study period, the research team was unable to complete interviews in that community as planned. All participants consented to the interview and were compensated for participating. The interviews were audio recorded following consent and were transcribed using NVivo Transcription. Transcripts were reviewed by the researchers for accuracy and edited as necessary. Identifying information was removed from the transcripts. Participants were offered the opportunity to request a transcript and quotes to review; these were sent to clients either through a password-protected link or by mail, depending on their contact information.

[1] The Whitehorse Food Bank has recently changed its name to the Food Bank Society of the Yukon to reflect the increased scope of its operations. For simplicity, the organization is referred to as the Whitehorse Food Bank throughout this paper.

The researchers followed a six-step approach to thematic analysis: 1) familiarization with the data set, 2) an open-ended coding process, 3) initial theme generation, 4) developing and reviewing themes against the data, 5) defining and naming final themes, 6) writing the report (Terry & Hayfield, 2021). Reviewing and editing the transcripts was an important part of building familiarity with the overall dataset.

Transcripts were coded using an inductive approach, rather than beginning with a predetermined codebook. One researcher coded in NVivo (Version 12) and the other reviewed paper transcripts and coded by hand. The client and non-client interviews were coded separately. Many of the same concepts came up in both types of interviews but were discussed from different perspectives. Following this initial coding effort, the two researchers compared their codes and discussed which codes should be added, which could be aggregated, and which would be candidates for promotion into themes. These discussions informed revisions to the initial coding in NVivo, and the lead author developed a smaller set of codes and recoded the data; this effort informed initial theme generation. Around this time, the researchers presented preliminary results to the board of the Whitehorse Food Bank for their feedback, which was helpful for refining the early prototype themes. The two researchers held subsequent meetings to review the initial themes against the data. Following further refinement, the themes were defined and the authors began drafting the analysis.

Limitations

There are some important limitations to this study. First, the results are context specific; we interviewed a limited number of participants, and the results are unlikely to be generalizable beyond the Yukon. We interviewed participants in a limited number of Yukon communities, and there may be regional perspectives that were not captured due to this approach. As well, we interviewed a small number of representatives from other organizations. All participants provided valuable insights, but these are based only on their own experiences. In addition, the experiences of those living with food insecurity but not accessing food bank services, which we know from other work are likely to be a large percentage of food insecure households, were not captured by the study criteria.

Results and Discussion

Food bank clients recounted a variety of experiences involving food insecurity and accessing the Whitehorse Food Bank in their community. Nearly every client we spoke with reported a difficult life event that led to them to needing to access the Food Bank, such as breaking up with a partner, health issues, losing their job, car accidents, and losing their driver's license. For example: "Then [I] split with my wife. … Things just kind of went downhill from there. So that's where I met the food bank." In some cases, clients described the impact of a difficult life event as compounded by being on a fixed income: "And ever since my husband passed, it's been [difficult], I'm really grateful for this. You know, like this [program] really helps me because I'm a pensioner."

Participants frequently reported skipping meals: "Yeah, I notice that I go without a lot of meals. I try not to say anything. I make sure that the people around me have their food before I eat. But that's been something I've done for more than 30 years though too, right." Another participant said: "I eat once a day. … It's when I am normally the hungriest. And you can't afford to shop here. Have you been in our grocery store? It's ridiculous!" Statistics Canada defines severely food insecure as disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake (Polsky & Garriguet, 2022). Based on this definition, many of the clients we spoke with would be considered severely food insecure, but they often described themselves as getting by, or commented that they had always eaten every day, but only once per day. There is a stigma around admitting food insecurity, and some participants mentioned that they knew of others who would benefit from Food Bank services but were unwilling to go. Sometimes they would pick up food for others. Research indicates that many food insecure people do not access food bank support, in many cases by choice rather than because of barriers (Loopstra & Tarasuk, 2012). Food banks are an incomplete approach to addressing food insecurity;

there is a need for broader response from governments. Some groups, such as the Ontario Dietitians in Public Health, insist that food banks are counterproductive because they enable governments to avoid making food insecurity—and, in their view, addressing the root cause of inadequate income—a policy priority (Ontario Dietitians in Public Health, 2020).

Insecurity in food, housing, and transportation are all intertwined. Clients without vehicles or driver's licenses have more difficulty accessing food distributions, and people who are housing insecure may not have access to kitchen facilities for preparing food or temperature-appropriate food storage options. For example, one client remarked: "Well, there's only so much you cook in a hotel, right?" Another participant explained that a hamper that accounted for a lack of kitchen access would be appreciated: "Yeah, because anybody that's sleeping in a motel room, they should rearrange their box and realize. … That's not a kitchenette, it's just a room or a microwave." Yukoners frequently face increasingly high market rents (Yukon Bureau of Statistics, 2022) and utility costs, so their budgets for variable costs, including food, are squeezed: "You should be able to get food when you want food, but the money is going to the landlord, which is fine. That's a roof over your head." There is a relationship between increasing rents and food insecurity; previous research from the U.S. shows that a $500 increase in yearly rental costs results in a 10% relative increase in food insecurity (Fletcher et al., 2009).

The mental load of poverty was another theme across the interviews. Many participants were on fixed incomes, often social assistance, pensions, or employment insurance, and were struggling with increased costs due to inflation. Clients described the effort they undertake daily and weekly to just keep making it through: "Today that's why I have to come here, because I'm just running shy to make it for my next income. So like at times, I think to myself should I eat, should I cook or, you know, am I going to waste this food? Yeah, it's really a balancing act." This balancing act is taxing; it can involve budgeting money, rationing food, or conserving gas in a vehicle to ensure they can get to a Food Bank distribution on the required day. As noted by Mani et al. (2013): "The poor must manage sporadic income, juggle expenses and make difficult tradeoffs. … Preoccupations with pressing budgetary concerns leave fewer cognitive resources available to guide choice and action" (p. 976). A further element that contributes to the mental burden is managing daily activities around which support services are available. One participant said that they were waiting in their vehicle for the Food Bank to open, because they had a list of things to do in town involving several NGOs but there was confusion over schedules: "Well, to me, already this morning, I waited about an hour and a half just to get where I am. Yeah, for this place [other NGO] to open and I got a refusal or no confirmation. Or I'll call you back. So I sat and waited for this place [Whitehorse Food Bank] to open, you know, so I can catch the ten o'clock. Because two hours is not enough time for families to come in, you know, from 10 to 12, you know, because some people don't know that they only distribute for two hours a morning. You know, there's times that I've tried to come in an afternoon and go, oh no, it's closed. You've got to wait until the next day, the next week. Um, so you have to get out. You have to really keep your ball rolling, you know, if you need to get somewhere. And that's just how I see it. Yeah, you know, I made my trip to town worth it because now I'm going home with something." This is an example of tradeoffs that clients experience when trying to manage their day-to-day activities around accessing food supports.

Poverty also increases the risk of mental illness, both as a contributing factor due to stress from poverty, or as a consequence, when mental illness symptoms interfere with employment (Fell & Hewstone, 2015). Some clients described the impact of food insecurity on their mental health: "I'm always, seems like I'm always trying to stretch something somewhere, you know? It does, it gets to you after a while. I think that's why sometimes when I wake up, it's just like, I wish I could just go right back to bed." Participants also spoke about the positive mental health impact of a good meal: "Yeah, it fills you up and you're ready to go, you know, gives you your strength."

Participants overall had positive experiences

accessing the Food Bank. Most heard about the Food Bank's services through word of mouth. Overall, the participants spoke very highly of Food Bank staff and volunteers: "Very accommodating, very friendly. … That's what that's what I enjoy about being here. I feel I feel like they do like they're a part of, they make me a part of their family. It's like a family environment here." Some participants credited the program with keeping them from falling into even more severe food insecurity: "We're still trying to get on our feet. … I tell you what, the Food Bank for us was absolutely a god send. Cuz I don't think that we would have had many meals without that." Knowing that the Whitehorse Food Bank was there to rely on was described as alleviating the mental load associated with food insecurity: "I really appreciate the Food Bank being here. Especially, you know, when you're going through a hard time. It sure helps with that stress level at home, makes you breathe a little bit easier for another couple days."

Food preference was a common topic in the interviews. Participants, overall, expressed gratitude for the food they received through the program; some noted that there were foods in the hamper that they preferred over others, for reasons ranging from ease of preparation to personal taste. Several participants mentioned enjoying and frequently eating noodles, which were often present in the hamper. Others noted that some of the foods they received were not culturally relevant: "But the only thing I really don't like is like chickpeas or something weird like that, because I don't know what to do with them, eh. They're just like extra cans of chickpeas, so I don't know what to do if they come around. I just give them back to the Food Bank when they collect, because I have no idea what to do with them. So that's not even in my culture. I don't even think it's average culture around here. I mean, I've never heard of them until recently. I didn't know what a chickpea was until I came to the Food Bank, and I still don't know what they are, where they come from or what to put them in." Comments such as this stem from the model deployed by the Whitehorse Food Bank, a traditional food pantry model where clients are offered minimal choices. This is in large part because of logistical constraints: as there are usually no locations where food can be stored, hampers are sent already assembled. Some participants spoke about getting items they could not use, which they would save for other people, return to the Food Bank, or pile up at home. One participant specifically said that they would prefer to fill their own bag; another said that a box with canned staples was less useful because of their lack of kitchen access, and a third said that their dietary restrictions meant some items were not things that they could eat. As there is no nutritional value realized from the hamper contents if they cannot be eaten by the recipient, the Whitehorse Food Bank could consider a model that allows for client choices to address these concerns; choice models are generally considered the best practice in the literature, as this approach is trauma-informed and empowering for clients.[2] A choice model can reduce the scarcity mindset that accompanies food insecurity and reduce food waste, as clients will select items that they and their families want to eat (Martin, 2021).

Beyond these common client experiences, five core general insights emerged from the analysis: an emphasis on the hamper as core food on an ongoing basis, the importance of traditional foods, food insecurity and access, the role of the Whitehorse Food Bank in informal networks, and ideal food situations. Each will be described in turn.

Emphasis on the Hamper as Core Food on an Ongoing Basis

Most participants were regular clients who receive a hamper each month; in Whitehorse, where the Food Bank has been operating since 2009, many had been clients for years. A number of participants explained that the hamper has become a staple of their diet, rather than an emergency support to get them through a brief time of hardship,

[2] Trauma-informed approaches seek to "resist re-traumatization of clients as well as staff. Organizations often inadvertently create stressful or toxic environments" (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's [SAMHSA's] Trauma and Justice Strategic Initiative, 2014, p. 10) for clients. Basing approaches on guiding principles including (but not limited to) safety, choice, and empowerment is necessary to work with clients in a trauma-informed way (SAMHSA Trauma and Justice Strategic Initiative, 2014).

which is what food banks were intended to do when initially established: "How do I put it, without the Food Bank, I'd be doing without a lot of things … I don't know what in the world. I might be one of those people be knocking on the neighbor's door saying, hey, can I get a couple of slices of bread or something like that?" Participants described planning their shopping around the hamper, mainly by purchasing only items they know they will not receive. For example, one client stated: "Well, the Food Bank comes in handy because I don't have to buy that stuff. And I could buy more meat instead of vegetables and beans and rice and stuff like that." Another client explained his use of the hamper: "It extends the food, you know, that we do have. We get the main thing like the burger and whatever, the meat. And then it helps with the Food Bank because, you know, we get the side dishes like beans or whatever we could put on the side. So helps with that. So that beans, green beans or whatever? Beans, canned vegetables? Yeah, it helps a lot." Research on food bank use between 1992 and 2017 in Vancouver, Canada found that occasional food bank use was common, but that 9% of members engaged in "longer-term episodic or ongoing usage over several years, accounting for 65% of all visits" (Black & Seto, 2020, p. 853). This research shows that food banks providing substantial ongoing food support, rather than emergency food, also takes place elsewhere in Canada.

The pandemic had an impact on transportation, making it more difficult for those who rely on hitchhiking to access food; and in communities that offer bus service through the local First Nation to Whitehorse, fewer seats were available to allow for physical distancing. One participant described difficulties in getting to Whitehorse: "I haven't been there for a while now. I still have my food voucher and I can't get a ride in. I haven't been able to get a ride in." As emergency food through the Food Bank has become more accessible in Yukon communities, residents who may have had trouble obtaining this support prior to the pandemic because of lack of transportation to Whitehorse have come to rely on it as an important and consistent source of food.

Some clients in communities expressed fear of the program being canceled: "I don't know what would happen if it's going to shut down, you know, it's gonna hurt a lot of people." There are fewer other food supports available in smaller communities, and supports that were available before the pandemic ceased to operate during COVID-19. One support is community dinners, described as an important "soft" source of food support by participants from other organizations: "There were a lot more community meals like gathering together to talk about a topic or that sort of thing, so people could access food … without having to acknowledge that they needed food, they just could just go to a supper and participate." Another way that the pandemic impacted families was having kids at home from school, and changed eating habits due to disrupted routines: "The prices rose. Yes. And I'm cooking more or more snacking. You know, I'm giving more snacks to the kids because I took them out of the school for the pandemic. So that means I was digging in my cupboards more. So it kind of made me dig in my pocket more. Now here I am … I just notice a lot of COVID eating, I call it. Yeah, COVID eating because there's nothing else to do, you sit in the box and entertain yourself with food. That's what I noticed."

The importance and complexity of food in everyone's lives demands a multi-tiered approach. A matrix of supports is required to help meet the short- and long-term nutritional, social, and economic- challenges accessing sufficient, nutritious, and culturally relevant foods. The Food Bank should only be considered one of the supports that address Yukon food needs. But currently there is a gap in food options available for Yukoners: although there are some free services for food, including the Food Bank's hamper program, some support available through schools and First Nations, and some lunch programs in Whitehorse, there are no alternative options that are subsidized or based on a pay-what-you-can model.

Importance of Traditional Foods

Traditional foods are important for meeting nutritional needs in First Nation communities (Robidoux et al., 2021). Harvesting traditional foods and related activities satisfy important cul-

tural components of people's lives, providing a sense of purpose and belonging: "For Northern Indigenous Peoples, food security is more than just having a full stomach; food is linked to identity, culture and way of life" (Butler Walker et al., 2017, p. 33). Client participants spoke about the importance of traditional foods in their diets, some describing experiences with harvesting food from the land: "Beautiful. Everything. I did everything. I got a moose with my mom. A buffalo, and everything." Some talked about how they no longer have access to areas where they know what and how to harvest, nor the community and family support to undertake harvesting: "Right now, I would have been out on the land in the coast for a moose, maybe a couple of caribou to fill up our freezers to be ready for the winter. Yeah … that's what I left behind. The difference is I left my tradition of hunting. You know, in the summertime we harvest beluga whales, our family, that's another thing I left behind." No longer having access to harvesting increases reliance on commercially available foods, which do not offer the same cultural meaning and fulfillment. There was a very strong link between family relationships, sharing food, and land-based foods in the analysis. Often, participants described undertaking harvesting with family members and then sharing their harvests, or family members sharing with them: "Well, my mom and dad help me out too. With moose meat and stuff."

Transportation issues were intertwined with food insecurity, including with access to traditional food sources. Some clients lack transportation to undertake on-the-land activities even if they have the gear and skills: "And since I've been staying in town, I don't hunt as much, but I have like hunting gear. I have like a gun and some bullets and stuff. But I just don't. Over ten years ago, I got charged with impaired and I never bothered to get my license back because I just don't have the money to pay the fines or anything like that." Others described how hunting pressure from those with resources to purchase trucks and quads, who presumably have the means to purchase food but prefer to hunt, were making it more challenging to get out on the land for those with greater food insecurity and lower income: "They got 70, 80 thousand dollar trucks, trailers, four quads and who can afford all that? Why don't you just go to the store and buy it instead of going out on the land. You're snuffing out most [of] the animals." Some participants described more access to traditional foods as their ideal food situation. A non-client participant talked about a relative's preferences for traditional foods toward the end of her life: "But you know, it's the same thing she wasn't eating and everything. And finally, we went over there and she just said … you guys always bring me food, but she's like, you know, it's not the food that you know that I grew up on, right? She wanted, she wanted beaver meat. She wanted grouse. She wanted, but she wasn't a big fan of, you know, pork and chicken and, you know, like the store-bought chicken. So, you know, and then so once we started seeing those needs … those are specifically First Nations' needs. They need that traditional food." In the smaller communities, some representatives from other organizations said that up to 90% of the people belonging to their respective First Nations rely on traditional foods harvested from the land; other literature has also emphasized the importance of traditional foods in the diets of Northern peoples (Walch et al., 2018).

Food Insecurity and Access

Most research on food insecurity focuses on it as an income problem. However, additional income does not solve the problem of access to grocery stores in remote communities, or to traditional foods threatened by hunting pressure and climate change. In remote communities, food is more expensive: "So right now, I'm dreaming about a cauliflower. It's on sale this week. For $4.99." In addition to being more costly, food is often less fresh than options available in Whitehorse: "By the time you get your bread home, it's moldy. Let's put it that way." In terms of official definitions of food security, individuals in Yukon communities are lacking the consistent physical and economic access to meet their food preferences and needs. Food security research often focuses on food insecurity as a problem of insufficient financial resources, and emphasizes the need for policy responses that increase income to address food insecurity (Loopstra, 2018; Tarasuk et al., 2022). Although more income would help these clients

access more foods from their local grocery store, and perhaps get to Whitehorse more frequently to purchase cheaper and fresher items, more income would not fully address food insecurity because fresh, high-quality foods are unavailable on a regular basis in their community. In remote areas, policies that increase income would need to be associated with initiatives to increase access to nutritious, fresh, and culturally relevant foods in sustainable, community-led food systems to more fully address food insecurity (Budd Nugent et al., 2022; Wilson et al., 2020).

Transportation is a challenge in different ways depending on where participants live. Clients in Whitehorse who rely on public transit described challenges getting all their hamper items from the Food Bank back to their home because of infrequent service. One participant specifically mentioned returning items that they are less likely to use because they cannot carry their entire hamper home in backpacks on the bus: "Yes, carrying a back bag home. On the bus … usually it's me and my partner, he's got a big backpack. I got a big backpack. We took out what we need and what we don't use. So we don't use much tomato sauce, or much tuna. Or beans. And so we put that back." In communities with no public transit (all communities except Whitehorse), clients who had cars described informal networks of coordinating picking up hampers for others. Delivery options in some communities lowered barriers to access. Clients also mentioned challenges in getting to Whitehorse to purchase in bulk less expensive non-perishable items that are prohibitively expensive or unavailable in their home communities: "Yeah, you can't buy toiletries. Dog, animal food, but you know those things. Laundry detergent, at that place it'll put you right in the poorhouse." A participant said that he prefers to purchase in his community, and factors transportation costs into his grocery shopping: "Because they're a lot cheaper there, like the price in Whitehorse. Yeah, and here they're twice as much, but still cheaper than going to Whitehorse, right?"

People in smaller communities are more likely to rely on harvesting traditional foods to have enough food for winter, while climate change and hunting pressure are making harvests more difficult. Participants from smaller communities in particular talked about declining wildlife populations, even among non-hunted species: "Used to be a lot of birds. … There's no chickadees. Do you see any around? No." Because the Yukon government implemented a self-isolation requirement upon returning home to the territory until May 2021 (Government of Yukon, 2021), many residents who normally would have spent vacation time outside the territory did not leave, and anecdotally, camping, hunting and fishing were undertaken more frequently. Participants thus described increased hunting pressure during the COVID-19 pandemic, along with other impacts, leading to more challenging hunts for moose, taking longer because hunters need to go farther to be successful: "When you talk about that, then it turns into … is it worth it financially to, you know, go on a three- or four-day moose hunt when you have to travel those distances, right?" Another participant spoke about declining salmon populations, and how their children will not have the same experiences with regular fish camps where important intergenerational cultural learning takes place: "She's with me a lot and she'll tell people, there's no fish, there's no fish. That's why we can't go to fish camp. And she'll tell them, do you remember fish camp? So it's really interesting to see that these generations are already being affected. And so, yeah, that piece is really, really sad and really, really detrimental, and we don't know how to fix it." The strong traditional connections between culture, relationships, and food security are negatively affected by environmental factors.

In Communities, the Whitehorse Food Bank Serves as the Backbone of Informal Networks Supporting Food Needs

A consistent theme from the interviews with representatives from other organizations was that the Whitehorse Food Bank serves as the foundation of a network linking nonprofit supports in communities. The expansion of Food Bank services has nurtured creation of partnerships that are both beneficial and fragile. These networks were created as a direct response to the request to widen the Food Bank's service area during the pandemic the Food

Bank supplies the food, and the partners distribute it in the community. These partnerships may be fragile in the sense that they are held together by a couple of key people who are "community pillars": the relationships they have built are strong but depend on the presence of those individuals. As described by one participant: "It's the Yukon. … It's all about relationships, right? Like, those informal relationships are so important in transmitting knowledge, right? … The established formal meetings are important, but so often a lot of it happens because we're having tea."

The benefit of the networks is that the Whitehorse Food Bank has been able to expand beyond what their resources would otherwise allow. Building the hampers in Whitehorse and shipping them to communities, smaller groups of volunteers can manage distribution that supports a significant percentage of community members. For example, one participant reported on her experience leading distribution in her community: "So it's about, like all told, somewhere between 50 to 60 man hours per month, including my time for organizing. … But aside from the cost to the Whitehorse Food Bank, 60 hours is not much, and it's spread around you know, by 10 people. So, you know, it's pretty good bang for the buck. … It would get really hard to do if [the] Whitehorse Food Bank couldn't produce the hampers for us and pay for them and cover the cost of freight. Like if the Whitehorse Food Bank didn't make the hampers, we're done. Our program is done. Like there's no way we have the infrastructure to do the assembly of hampers every month." This speaks to the limited volunteer resources in smaller communities, where managing all the steps in the distribution process would not be possible.

Another component of network building in which the Whitehorse Food Bank could potentially play a lead role would be to facilitate information sharing between communities and organizations. There was a need expressed by some representatives from other organizations involved in food security work to hear about what is happening across the Yukon, in part to improve their own work and also to learn lessons and avoid reinventing the wheel: "What are you doing in your community? How is it working? Because at the end of this, we might get some information from another community that's doing something and said, Hey, that could work here, right? So I think just more information sharing between communities would be good." The Whitehorse Food Bank seems uniquely positioned to contribute to information-sharing networks as the organization that is the hub to all the spokes in different communities.

Ideal Food Situations

We asked both clients and representatives from other organizations what an ideal food situation would look like for them or their community. Clients offered insights from their own individual perspective (often after asking for clarification as to what an ideal food situation meant). A recurring point was simply having access to abundant food at home: "Whenever I need something I'm just able to open up the cupboard and be able to take it out." Others stated having more access to meat, fruit and vegetables, and a way to grow or harvest these things themselves: "I'd say lots of fruit and vegetables and be able to grow them or be able to have access to them. So this would be my ideal." Affordability of food also came up, with one participant stating that more foods should be free. Some participants mentioned easier access to foods that fit their dietary restrictions, which are often costly: "It is quite hard because the foods I eat is expensive. So two weeks on, I have to do without [those] foods. Because I have to eat certain foods for my thyroid." Another common theme was that an ideal food situation would be having more high-quality food: "A prime rib roast. [laughs] I haven't had one of those in a long time." Sometimes this meant more land-based or traditional foods. Often participants looked back to times when they could afford to purchase their preferred foods: "Years ago, when I was working, though, I would always go to the [local butcher] and buy big boxes of meat and stuff like that. And that would last me for a month. Throw it in the freezer and it would last. Yeah, that would be an ideal food situation for me where I was working, and I can just walk into the store and buy everything I needed and all the meat from the [local butcher]."

The representatives from other organizations framed their explanations of ideal food situations

more from a community perspective. The major theme emerging from their responses was the need for layered and holistic solutions to food insecurity (although, interestingly, none of our participants mentioned income, which is touted as the best policy solution to food insecurity). Solutions described included Meals on Wheels programs or other meals for elders, funding for food in schools and daycares, and a soup kitchen for those experiencing homelessness, all of which could be linked with other supports. Sometimes this was framed in the context of a food hub or other network. Some participants also spoke about the need for food literacy and skill-building programs related to cooking, gardening, and butchering, including preparation of sausages or other long-lasting foods. Another facet of food security mentioned multiple times was the desire to grow more food locally: several participants mentioned community greenhouses (which, in some cases could be heated through waste heat from other buildings) and more farming for meat and eggs. One participant pointed out that these initiatives could provide not only food security in smaller communities but job security as well. A newer technology of interest is hydroponic growing systems, which could produce vegetables year-round and could be located in buildings such as schools and incorporated into their programming: "So how do we integrate food like completely differently than we have before? Right now, people don't even know where the food is growing, … Then they come to school to do a little like hydroponics programs or something like that for the kids where they can actually learn how to do it at home."

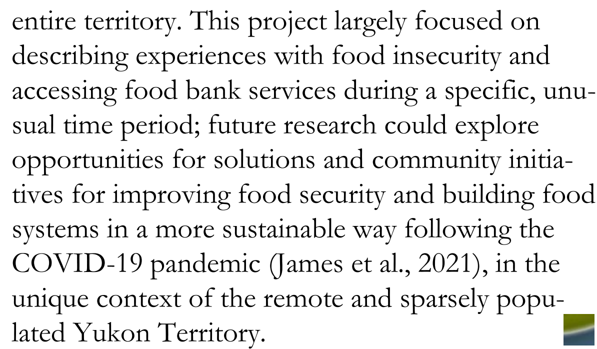
Conclusions

This study highlights the lived experiences of Yukoners in Whitehorse and smaller communities with food insecurity and food bank services during the COVID-19 pandemic, along with community-based perspectives of those working in organizations involved in food security. Threads that emerged from the interviews with food bank clients included common experiences tied to difficult life events precipitating food bank access, experiencing severe food insecurity, the mental burden of poverty, and preferences for certain types of food and more choices. Some important insights from this research include that participants are often relying on the emergency food hamper to meet their core dietary needs, and thus plan any grocery shopping they do to purchase only items they know that they will not receive in their hamper. Further, traditional foods hold an important place in the diets and lives of participants. Because of limited access to fresh foods in communities outside of Whitehorse, merely increasing income supports—a commonly recommended policy response to address food insecurity—would not completely alleviate food insecurity for these participants, because they lack physical access as well as economic access to fresh, preferred foods.

At present, no single solution will address the problem of food insecurity in Yukon communities, so layering initiatives could contribute to food security and resiliency for the entire territory, which is currently vulnerable to food shortages in emergency situations that close the Alaska Highway. Because Yukon communities are so small and so extremely far apart, "the distinctions between commercial, community, and subsistence production are much more fluid than in other parts of Canada" (Wilson et al., 2020, p. 298). A further consideration for food security in the Yukon is the sustainability of fish and wildlife populations because of the cultural importance of these foods, especially in First Nations communities. Furthermore, a broader community focus on food security and improving it at a community level could have a positive impact on attitudes that would reduce the social stigma associated with experiencing food insecurity on the individual level.

Overall, there is a greater role for government to play in addressing food insecurity; in small, remote Northern communities, policy responses should be linked to community needs and explore options to both increase income and access to fresh, culturally appropriate foods. Appropriate responses should also address access to housing and transportation, as insecurity in these areas is tightly linked with food insecurity. Ideal food situations described by client participants focused on access and abundance; non-clients spoke about community-oriented, layered, and holistic approaches to improving food security for the

entire territory. This project largely focused on describing experiences with food insecurity and accessing food bank services during a specific, unusual time period; future research could explore opportunities for solutions and community initiatives for improving food security and building food systems in a more sustainable way following the COVID-19 pandemic (James et al., 2021), in the unique context of the remote and sparsely populated Yukon Territory.



Acknowledgments

The researchers would like to thank everyone who participated in this research project—without them generously sharing their time and experiences, this work would not have been possible. Further thanks go to Dave Blottner, the executive director of the Whitehorse Food Bank, and the board, who fully supported this project from start to finish. Dr. Rebecca Major and Gabor Gyorgy provided helpful comments on an earlier draft.

References

Black, J. L., & Seto, D. (2020). Examining patterns of food bank use over twenty-five years in Vancouver, Canada. *Voluntas*, *31*(5), 853–869. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-018-0039-2

Budd Nugent, N., Ridberg, R., Fricke, H., Byker Shanks, C., Stotz, S., Jones Chung, A., Shin, S., Yaroch, A., Akers, M., Lowe, R., George, C., Thomas, K., & Seligman, H. (2022). Food sovereignty, health, and produce prescription programs: A case study in two rural tribal communities. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, *11*(3), 177–196. https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2022.113.014

Butler Walker, J., Kassi, N., Friendship, K., & Pratt, M. (2017). Stories of Yukon food security. *Northern Public Affairs*, *5*(1), 33–38 https://iportal.usask.ca/record/64383

Environment and Climate Change Canada. (2013). *Canadian climate normals 1981–2010 station data. Whitehorse.* Government of Canada. https://climate.weather.gc.ca/climate_normals/station_select_1981_2010_e.html?searchType=stnProv&lstProvince=YT

Fell, B., & Hewstone, M. (2015). *Psychological perspectives on poverty* (Report). Joseph Rowntree Foundation. https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/psychological-perspectives-poverty

Fletcher, J. M., Andreyeva, T., & Busch, S. H. (2009). Assessing the effect of changes in housing costs on food insecurity. *Journal of Children and Poverty*, *15*(2), 79–93. https://doi.org/10.1080/10796120903310541

Food Bank Society of the Yukon. (2022). *Annual general meeting—Financial report.*

Food Banks Canada. (2022). *HungerCount 2022*. https://hungercount.foodbankscanada.ca/

Government of Yukon. (2021, May 21). *Public health restrictions to be lifted on May 25* (News release No. 21-146). https://yukon.ca/en/news/public-health-restrictions-be-lifted-may-25

Graham, A., Curran, G., & Johnston, K. (2021). *State of Rural Canada, 2021: Opportunities, recovery & resiliency in changing times. Yukon*. Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation. https://sorc.crrf.ca/yk2021/

James, D., Bowness, E., Robin, T., McIntyre, A., Dring, C., Desmarais, A., & Wittman, H. (2021). Dismantling and rebuilding the food system after COVID-19: Ten principles for redistribution and regeneration. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, *10*(2), 29–51. https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2021.102.019

Loopstra, R. (2018). Interventions to address household food insecurity in high-income countries. *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society*, *77*(3), 270–281. https://doi.org/10.1017/S002966511800006X

Loopstra, R., & Tarasuk, V. (2012). The relationship between food banks and household food insecurity among low-income Toronto families. *Canadian Public Policy*, *38*(4), 496–514. https://doi.org/10.3138/CPP.38.4.497

Mani, A., Mullainathan, S., Shafir, E., & Zhao, J. (2013). Poverty impedes cognitive function. *Science*, *341*(6149), 976–980. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1238041

Martin, K. S. (2021). *Reinventing food banks and pantries: New tools to end hunger.* Island Press.

McPhee-Knowles, S., Hoffman, B., & Kanary, L. (2022). The Yukon's experience with COVID-19: Travel restrictions, variants and spread among the unvaccinated (Commentary). *Canadian Communicable Disease Report*, *48*(1), 17–21. https://doi.org/10.14745/ccdr.v48i01a03

Ontario Dietitians in Public Health. (2020). *Position statement and recommendations on responses to food insecurity: Executive summary*. https://www.swpublichealth.ca/en/my-health/resources/Nutrition/2020-Food-Insecurity-Position-Statement-Executive-Summary.pdf

Polsky, J. Y., & Garriguet, D. (2022). Household food insecurity in Canada early in the COVID-19 pandemic. *Health Reports*, *33*(2), 15–26. Statistics Canada. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/82-003-x/2022002/article/00002-eng.htm

Riches, G. (2011). Thinking and acting outside the charitable food box: Hunger and the right to food in rich societies. *Development in Practice*, *21*(4–5), 768–775. https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2011.561295

Robidoux, M. A., Winnepetonga, D., Santosa, S., & Haman, F. (2021). Assessing the contribution of traditional foods to food security for the Wapekeka First Nation of Canada. *Applied Physiology, Nutrition, and Metabolism*, *46*(10), 1170–1178. https://doi.org/10.1139/apnm-2020-0951

Statistics Canada. (2023). *Census profile, 2021 census of population*. Government of Canada. https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/dp-pd/prof/index.cfm?Lang=E

Stroink, M. L., & Nelson, C. H. (2012). Understanding traditional food behaviour and food security in rural First Nation communities: Implications for food policy. *Journal of Rural and Community Development*, *7*(3), 65–82. https://journals.brandonu.ca/jrcd/article/view/607

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's Trauma and Justice Strategic Initiative. (2014). *SAMHSA's concept of trauma and guidance for a trauma-informed approach*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Office of Policy, Planning and Innovation. https://ncsacw.acf.hhs.gov/userfiles/files/SAMHSA_Trauma.pdf

Tarasuk, V., Fafard St-Germain, A.-A., & Loopstra, R. (2019). The relationship between food banks and food insecurity: Insights from Canada. *Voluntas*, *31*(5), 845–852. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-019-00092-w

Tarasuk, V., Li, T., & Fafard St-Germain, A.-A. (2022). *Household food insecurity in Canada, 2021*. Research to Identify Policy Options to Reduce Food Insecurity (PROOF), University of Toronto. https://proof.utoronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Household-Food-Insecurity-in-Canada-2021-PROOF.pdf

Tarasuk, V., & Mitchell, A. (2020). *Household food insecurity in Canada, 2017–2018*. Research to Identify Policy Options to Reduce Food Insecurity (PROOF), University of Toronto. https://proof.utoronto.ca/resources/proof-annual-reports/household-food-insecurity-in-canada-2017-2018/

Terry, G., & Hayfield, N. (2021). *Essentials of thematic analysis*. American Psychological Association. https://doi.org/10.1037/0000238-000

Wakefield, S., Frederickson, K. R., & Brown, T. (2015). Food security and health in Canada: Imaginaries, exclusions and possibilities. *The Canadian Geographer*, *59*(1), 82–92. https://doi.org/10.1111/cag.12139

Walch, A., Bersamin, A., Loring, P., Johnson, R., & Tholl, M. (2018). A scoping review of traditional food security in Alaska. *International Journal of Circumpolar Health*, *77*(1), Article 1419678. https://doi.org/10.1080/22423982.2017.1419678

Wikemedia Commons. (2012). *Yukon region map* [Map]. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Yukon_region_map_(fr).png

Wilson, A., Levkoe, C. Z., Andrée, P., Skinner, K., Spring, A., Wesche, S., & Galloway, T. (2020). Strengthening sustainable northern food systems: Federal policy constraints and potential opportunities. *Arctic*, *73*(3), 292–311. https://doi.org/10.14430/arctic70869

Yukon Bureau of Statistics. (n.d.). *Community spatial price index*. Retrieved July 31, 2023, from https://community-statistics.service.yukon.ca/

Yukon Bureau of Statistics. (2022). *Yukon rent survey, April 2022*. Government of Yukon. https://yukon.ca/sites/yukon.ca/files/ybs/fin-yukon-rent-survey-april-2022.pdf

Yukon Bureau of Statistics. (2023, January 30). *Population report, Q3 2022*. Government of Yukon. https://yukon.ca/en/population-report-q3-2022