



POLICY BRIEF

Eat Well, Eat Together:

Anti-Racist Policies to Effectively Address Food Insecurity and Social Isolation
Among Indigenous and Black Seniors in Vancouver

NJOKI MBŪRŪ

The LEVEL Youth Policy Program takes place on the traditional and unceded territories of the xʷməθkʷəyəm (Musqueam), Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh (Squamish) & sə́ilwətaʔ (Tsleil-Waututh) Coast Salish peoples.

GRAPHIC DESIGN

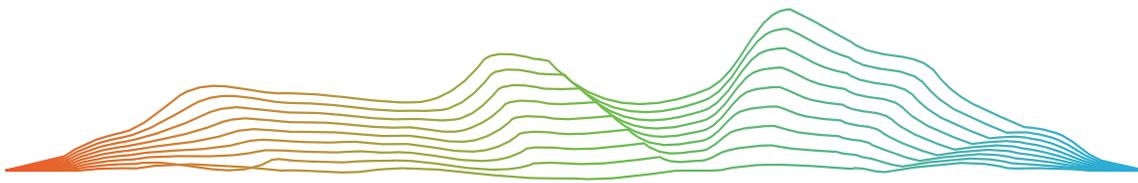
And Also Too

COVER ILLUSTRATION

semillites hernández velasco

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About the LEVEL Initiative

LEVEL is a youth engagement initiative of Vancouver Foundation that aims to address racial inequity. We do this by investing in the leadership capacity of Indigenous, racialized, immigrant, and refugee youth to create more opportunities throughout the non-profit and charitable sector.

Despite being the fastest-growing youth populations in British Columbia, Indigenous, immigrant, and refugee youth don't have the same opportunities as other young people. Race continues to be a factor that hinders their ability to have a say in decisions that impact their lives.

LEVEL empowers these youth by building their capacity to challenge and change those systems that hinder their ability to build a more just world.

LEVEL consists of three pillars of work to advance racial equity

1. LEVEL Youth Policy Program
2. LEVEL Youth Organizing
3. LEVEL Youth Granting

About the LEVEL Youth Policy Program (LEVEL YPP)

The LEVEL Youth Policy Program (LEVEL YPP) brings together young people between the ages of 19 and 29 from across British Columbia who identify as being Indigenous or racialized immigrants or refugees. Indigenous and racialized Newcomer youth are dispropor-

tionately impacted by certain public policies but are rarely included in the development and implementation of public policy process. The LEVEL YPP aims to provide these youth with equitable training and leadership opportunities to better navigate the public policy landscape, and to develop new tools and skills to influence, shape, and advocate for policy changes that are relevant in their own communities. Having young people directly involved in shaping policies that impact their lives is essential to creating systemic, meaningful change. The LEVEL YPP's training is grounded from and within Indigenous peoples' worldviews, which the program acknowledges, could vary from person-to-person or nation-to-nation. Indigenous worldviews place a large emphasis on connections to the land. This perspective views the land as sacred; where everything and everyone is related and connected; where the quality of the relationships formed are key in life; where what matters is the success and well-being of the community, and where there can be many truths as they are based on individual lived experiences.¹ As such, an important premise of this training is to centre and place a particular focus on the fact that the work that has gone into developing this training, as well as the training itself, has taken and will take place on unceded (never given away/stolen) territories of the həŋq 'əmin 'əŋ-speaking Musqueam peoples, of the Halkomelem-speaking Tsleil-Waututh peoples, and of the sníchimspeaking Skwx_wú7mesh (Squamish) peoples.

1. <https://www.ictinc.ca/blog/indigenous-peoples-worldviews-vs-western-worldviews>

Biography

NJOKI MBŪRŪ



Ol Rongai is the place that I feel most at peace. Ol Rongai is a farming community, my mother's community, the home of my grandparents, and the environment that informed my childhood. Moving between Nairobi (Kenya), Freiburg (Germany), and Vancouver (Canada) over the past six years has, in some instances, served to ground me in my passion for creative writing, storytelling, theatre performance, and environmental governance. In other instances, I have had to question the ideologies, behaviours, and identities that have influenced my growing, thinking, and belonging. These tensions continue to inform my daily being—challenging me to live in spaces without searching for “home.” They remind me that the words I speak, the intentions I hold, and the actions I pursue should be informed by history, grounded in the “now” and part of a kind yet radical future.

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Acknowledgements

My heart is full to know that each truth I live is blessed and prayed for by my beautiful, strong, kind, and courageous Cūcū (grandmother). I feel whole to be named after you. I feel honoured to carry the strength, humility, and wisdom of my Guka (grandfather). I thank Source for my mother's body, heart, and mind—you are precious beyond the realms of these words. To my loving brothers, live every part of your truth every day.

Thank you, Ale, Aida, Marcus, Paul, and Chinu. Thank you LEVEL YPP, 2020 for humbly acknowledging that we are here to “plant seeds for trees whose shade we may not live to sit under.” May we plant seeds of unbreakable connection.

Executive Summary

In Vancouver, British Columbia between 2017-2018, 28.9% of Black households and 28.2% of Indigenous households reported that they struggled with accessing adequate, nutritious, and affordable food.

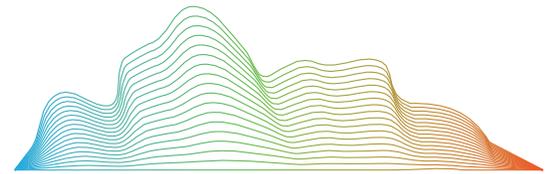
These statistics were particularly striking compared to the statistic that 11.1% of White households faced food insecurity. Like the reality on the national scale, food insecurity is prevalent amongst Black and Indigenous seniors. This disproportionate impact is primarily attributed to income levels inequality. Research studies show that the level of food insecurity (i.e. marginal, moderate, or severe) is negatively related to one's income. This correlation is strong within Canadian society, despite its being praised as having one of the lowest rates of food insecurity among seniors within the list of countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

Since 1990, Canada has been collecting data on household food insecurity. Throughout, researchers have consistently concluded that socio-demographic factors such as race and immigration status are essential in determining the level of food insecurity that individuals are exposed to. Unfortunately, policies that address food insecurity at a municipal-to-national level appear ignorant of this reality, choosing instead to purely focus on income levels. By advancing a reductive policy that only focuses on income, governments are perpetuating a cycle of poverty that is inherently sabotaging Black and Indigenous folk's ability to secure high-paying, safe, and secure jobs. When Black and Indigenous people become eligible for pensions, and other govern-

ment-funded support programs, they are already at a lower benchmark, given the factors that have impeded their economic progress. These structural factors include higher rates of homelessness, incarceration, drug-related illnesses, and trauma that leads to mental and physiological challenges.

Therefore, this policy proposal is based on an understanding and appreciation for a holistic, longitudinal, context-specific, race-based analysis of the causes of food insecurity, specifically for the senior (65+) population in Vancouver, BC.

Currently, the Federal government supports senior citizens through the Old Age Pension Plan program, which includes a universal, income-based, and earnings-contribution plan. While these plans have generally been particularly useful in reducing the level of food insecurity amongst seniors, they have failed to take into account the unequal "starting points" determined by race, ability, immigration status, gender identities, etc. Quantitative baselines are easy when used to determine how much a senior is eligible for in their pension. However, a qualitative baseline that acknowledges the



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structures of oppression and racism would have more impact in eradicating inequalities related to income, access to food or housing, etc.

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed the greatest threat to seniors' health and wellbeing around the world. To minimize exposure to infection, restrictions to movement have become a standard feature. One particular consequence of this restriction is social isolation. For seniors in Vancouver who were dependent on subsidized meals from community kitchens or collecting fresh produce in community gardens, social isolation has exacerbated the level of food insecurity that they grapple with. Before the declaration of a state of emergency due to COVID-19, community organizations that run seniors' programs, e.g. luncheons, struggled to access consistent funding to keep their services ongoing. Programs were sometimes short-lived and may have failed to reach a share of seniors in most need. To close this gap and ease insecurity in running senior-focused programs, I propose that the Provincial and Federal government allocate a portion of their annual budgets to supporting community-led programs that support racialized seniors. Municipal governments would play the role of managing and disbursing these funds since they (municipal governments) are perceptively more informed about the community-led programs that are in place.

To effectively reach Black and Indigenous seniors affected by food insecurity and social isolation, collecting accurate data is the first step. With the information that I have encountered during my research, seniors are presented as a monolithic group, assumed to be similar in status. This is misrepresentation and reductiveness, reflective of a political and economic system built on ignorance, erasure, anti-Indigeneity, and anti-Black racism. Collecting data that takes critical socio-demographic factors into account makes room for intersectional policy. Rather than creating policy that is catering to the symptoms of the problem, we would be moving towards policy that is thorough in its root-cause analysis. The role of the government, I propose, is to not only supervise the regular collection and reporting of disaggregated data but also to prepare and follow through with action plans that incorporate race-based and context-specific solutions to the challenges of food insecurity and social isolation. For the City of Vancouver, this would mean investing in health-equity programs whose mission, vision, and theory of change are grounded in reconciliation, upholding Indigenous sovereignty, and responding to the call that Black Lives Matter.



The COVID-19 pandemic has posed the greatest threat to seniors' health and wellbeing around the world.

2. Health Canada, 'Household Food Insecurity in Canada: Overview,' Government of Canada, 22 June 2010, <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/food-nutrition/food-nutrition-surveillance/health-nutrition-surveys/canadian-community-health-survey-cchs/household-food-insecurity-canada-overview.html>.
3. PROOF Canada, 'Household Food Insecurity in Canada—PROOF,' PROOF | Food Insecurity Policy Research, 2018, <https://proof.utoronto.ca/food-insecurity/>.



Problem Definition and Background

There is an urgent need to develop evidence-based policies to address food insecurity amongst Black and Indigenous seniors in Vancouver.

Each year, Statistics Canada measures household food insecurity using the Household Food Security Survey Module (HFSSM). As part of the survey, food insecurity is defined as “the inability to acquire or consume an adequate diet quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways, or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so.”² Researchers investigating food insecurity in Canada as part of the PROOF Canada program at the University of Toronto (U of T) have further categorized household food insecurity into three levels:³

- **Marginal** - Concern about running out of food, with few food choices due to budget constraints;
- **Moderate** - A lower-quality of food due to inadequate finances;
- **Severe** - Reduced number of consumed meals, with a total lack of food on some days.

In Canada, food insecurity is a public-health issue. Children living in food-insecure households have higher incidences of suicidal ideation and face a higher risk of developing conditions such as asthma.⁴ Adults in similar households run the risk of developing diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, and poor mental

health.⁵ Research across Canadian households reveals that these challenges to physical and mental health are exacerbated for those that identify as Black and Indigenous.⁶ This disproportionate impact is primarily attributed to the higher rates of poverty rates that Black and Indigenous communities are forced to grapple with. In Canada, there is a strong correlation between income and level of food insecurity (*i.e.* marginal, moderate, and severe). Survey data collected by Statistics Canada in 2013-2014 reveals this correlation (Figure 1). According to the data collected through the HFSSM in 2017/2018, 28.9% of Black households and 28.2% of Indigenous households faced food insecurity.⁷ These two percentages were the highest amongst all racial groups, and appear significantly large compared to 11.1% of White households recorded as food insecure.⁸

I have chosen to further explore how Black and Indigenous seniors in Vancouver are grappling with the challenges of accessing fresh, nutritious, affordable, and adequate food. This policy proposal will mainly focus on investigating the hardships that seniors in Vancouver’s City Centre and general Downtown area face, as well as exploring the opportunities that exist in reforming policy to cater to the specific,

4. Lynn McIntyre *et al.*, ‘Depression and Suicide Ideation in Late Adolescence and Early Adulthood Are an Outcome of Child Hunger,’ *Journal of Affective Disorders* 150, no. 1 (August 2013): 123–29, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2012.11.029>.

5. Nicholas T. Vozoris and Valerie S. Tarasuk, ‘Household Food Insecurity Is Associated with Poorer Health,’ *The Journal of Nutrition* 133, no. 1 (1 January 2003): 120–26, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jn/133.1.120>; Geneviève Jessiman-Perreault and Lynn McIntyre, ‘The Household Food Insecurity Gradient and Potential Reductions in Adverse Population Mental Health Outcomes in Canadian Adults,’ *SSM - Population Health* 3 (1 December 2017): 464–72, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmph.2017.05.013>.

cultural needs of Black and Indigenous seniors. With the COVID-19 pandemic still leading to financial difficulties, physical health hardships, and mental health strains for many around the world, the impact is harder for those living in poverty, isolation, and who were dependent on regular financial cheques from the government. This situation describes the conditions for many Black and Indigenous seniors in Vancouver’s City Centre and general Downtown area.

This policy proposal is informed from a nexus of urban food insecurity, income inequality, race, and age. In the broader context of the province of BC, poverty among seniors rose by 10.5% between 1996 and 2014.⁹ This trend is reflected across the country during the same period, with an increase in seniors’ poverty from 3.9% to 12.5%.¹⁰ Despite limited research

and data collection on the levels of food insecurity that racialized, immigrant and Queer communities face, indicators show that these groups mentioned above disproportionately confront higher levels of poverty and, therefore, are food insecure.¹¹

One of the ways the Federal government addresses poverty among seniors in Canada is through the provision of public pensions to Canadians over the age of 65. Through the Old Age Security (OAS) program, Canadian seniors are eligible for three pension plans, each with its requirements:

- OAS Pension → universal plan;
- Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS) → income-based plan;
- Canada Pension Plan (CPP) /Quebec Pension Plan (QPP) → based on earnings-contribution.

6. Valerie Tarasuk and Andy Mitchell, ‘Household Food Insecurity in Canada,’ *Research to Identify Policy Options to Reduce Food Insecurity (PROOF)* (Toronto: Canadian Institutes of Health Research and Joanna and Brian Lawson Centre for Child Nutrition at the University of Toronto, 2017), <https://proof.utoronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Household-Food-Insecurity-in-Canada-2017-2018-Full-Reportpdf.pdf>.

7. Tarasuk and Mitchell.

8. Tarasuk and Mitchell.

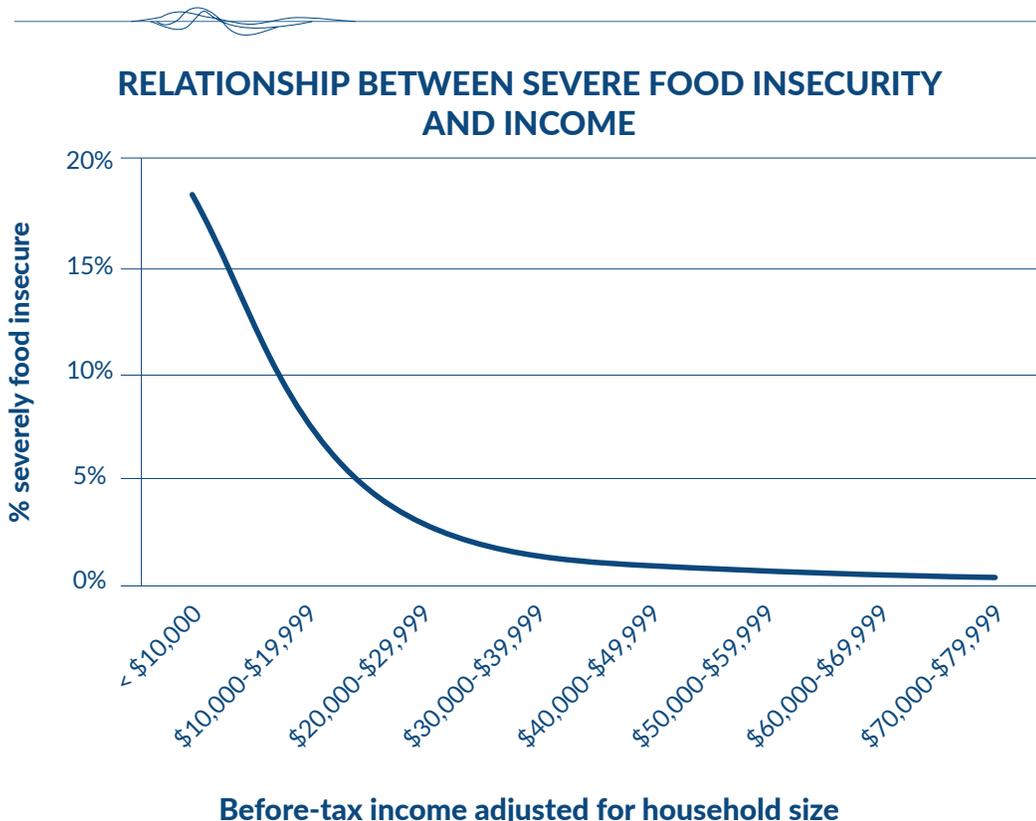
9. Igluka Ivanova et al., ‘Poverty and Inequality Among British Columbia’s Seniors’ (Vancouver, BC: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, April 2017), <http://www.deslibris.ca/ID/10089544>.

10. Ivanova et al.

11. National Seniors Council (Canada), ‘Report of the National Seniors Council on Low Income among Seniors.’ (Gatineau, Québec: Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, February 2009), <https://www.deslibris.ca/ID/224551>.

12. Lynn McIntyre et al., ‘Reduction of Food Insecurity among Low-Income Canadian

Figure 1: Relationship between severe food insecurity and income



Data Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS), 2013-14.



Immigrant and Queer communities face, indicators show that these groups mentioned above disproportionately confront higher levels of poverty and, therefore, are food insecure.

A common factor for all three plans is that seniors must have lived in Canada for a minimum of 10 years after they turned 18 years of age, and must be registered as citizens or legally entitled to live here to be eligible. Data on food insecurity amongst seniors, collected between 2007-2013 as part of the Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS), indicated a significant reduction in the levels of food insecurity for seniors who receive minimum income through the public pension plans.¹² Poverty reduction strategies, such as the CCP/QPP, mitigate the risk of food insecurity amongst seniors and are particularly helpful for unattached seniors who live alone and have no close familial contacts to offer them support.¹³

While these pensions play a crucial role in reducing the prevalence of food insecurity amongst seniors, Black and Indigenous seniors continue to be disproportionately represented amongst those who “fall through the cracks” in Canada’s health and economic plans. Amongst the countries that are part of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Canada is recognized as having one of the lowest rates of seniors’ poverty.¹⁴ However, this distinction does not include an analysis based on race, gender, single-household, or family-setting households, etc. By failing to

account for the stark differences in the levels of food insecurity through a socio-demographic profile, policies and programs developed by public and private institutions erase systemic forms of discrimination, and may exacerbate the problems they seek to address. Since 1990, the data on household food insecurity reveals that socio-demographic factors such as race and immigration status play a role in determining the level of exposure to food insecurity.¹⁵

By 2036, the percentage share of seniors in Canada is projected to rise to 25% of the nation’s population.¹⁶ Policies targeting seniors’ economic and health status need to take this growth into account, offering the possibility of a future where intersectionality, anti-racism, and Indigenous Sovereignty informs decision-making and prevents more seniors from grappling with unsafe living conditions. Policies that acknowledge the systemic racism that leads to Black and Indigenous seniors having to eat meagre and unhealthy food options are urgent and essential, particularly with the rapid changes in the diversity of Canada’s population. I have written this report with the following intention: to complicate the generalized and aggregate approaches that governments have taken to address poverty and food insecurity. It is a recognition that providing public pensions is a dose for the symptoms. Still, it does not address the root causes that have left Black and Indigenous seniors in relatively more precarious conditions. Policies at all levels of government “... need to be grounded in evidence, targeted to the causes of household food insecurity—not its symptoms, and evaluated in relation to their impact on food insecurity prevalence and severity.”¹⁷

Seniors as a Likely Impact of a Guaranteed Annual Income,’ Canadian Public Policy 42, no. 3 (12 October 2016): 274–86.

13. McIntyre et al.

14. OECD, ‘Pensions at a Glance 2019: OECD AND G20 INDICATORS’ (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2019), <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/docserver/b6d3dcfc-en.pdf?expires=1596942369&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=E8E-ODA54E308699A-84B9E0CF62AE8E2E>.

15. Tarasuk and Mitchell, ‘Household Food Insecurity in Canada.’

16. Anne Kloppenborg and Social Policy Division City of Vancouver, ‘Seniors in Vancouver’ (Vancouver: City of Vancouver, 2010), <https://vancouver.ca/files/cov/Seniors-Background.pdf>.

17. Tarasuk and Mitchell, ‘Household Food Insecurity in Canada.’



Recommendations

1 Qualitative Baseline and Higher Monetary Minimum for Seniors' Supplement.

In BC, eligible seniors can receive a Seniors' Supplement and the federal OAS or GIS pension payments. The Seniors' Supplement calculation is based on the total income that seniors declare to the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA). If a senior citizen is required to complete a GIS application, the Senior's Supplement amount is calculated based on how much they declare through the GIS application. In either case, the maximum rate is \$49.30 per senior and \$120.50 for couples.¹⁸

For Black and Indigenous seniors who may have held low-paying, high-risk jobs for most of their employment, even the maximum amount of the Seniors' Supplement (*i.e.* \$49.30) would barely cover any essential, daily needs. In the same way that Black and Indigenous Seniors are over-represented in the statistics of those facing household food insecurity, they also disproportionately struggle with chronic health conditions, mental health, and drug-related challenges. These difficulties are rooted in a system of colonial violence that silences the legacy of trauma still present and imposed upon racialized communities within settler-colonial states, such as Canada.¹⁹

Therefore, the BC Seniors' Supplement would best meet Black and Indigenous seniors' specific needs when adjusted to a significantly higher minimum. While correcting this minimum, the BC government should consider the socio-economic, infrastructural, cultural, and linguistic barriers that prevent these specific racial demographics from working in higher-paying and less precarious jobs. An in-depth, intersectional, sociological analysis of the barriers to secure and dignified employment would be relevant in understanding the processes that cause Black and Indigenous communities to struggle with low social and economic mobility and a cycle of poverty. Additionally, this analysis mentioned above would go to show that advancement into the latter years of life does not necessarily correlate with an increase in wealth.

Furthermore, basing the Senior's Supplement on the income earned during one's employment period further extends the wealth gap between economically-disadvantaged racialized communities and financially-privileged White people. I propose a new baseline based on a more holistic understanding of the barriers to employment opportunities and equal wages, *e.g.* gender, disability, mental-health challenges, *etc.* This would be more of a

18. BC Government, 'Seniors' Supplement,' *General Supplements & Programs*, 19 October 2005, <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/policies-for-government/bcea-policy-and-procedure-manual/general-supplements-and-programs/seniors-supplement>.
CBC News, 'Disproportionate Number of Black, Indigenous, Latin People Counted in Metro Vancouver Homeless Survey | CBC News,' CBC, 6 August 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/vancouver-homeless-count-disproportionate-black-indigenous-1.5675414>.
UN FAO, 'The Right to Food | Background,' *Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations*, 2020, <http://www.fao.org/right-to-food/background/en/>.

19. Ameal J. Joseph, 'A Prescription for Violence: The Legacy of Colonization in Contemporary Forensic Mental Health and the Production of Difference,' *Critical*

qualitative baseline, which, albeit difficult to define, would represent the broader systemic and infrastructural barriers that have been imposed to impede the economic progression of Black, Indigenous, and Brown communities in Vancouver. A dollar amount based purely on years of employment is reductive because it assumes a form of equity in “starting points.” Through my conversations with racialized seniors in Vancouver, the truth of the matter is that the current supplements and pension plan amounts are meagre and barely cover the basic needs per month. A new analysis on the baselines is urgently needed if we are to secure the right to health, wellbeing, and food security for Black and Indigenous seniors in Vancouver.

Criminology; Dordrecht 22, no. 2 (May 2014): 273-92, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10612-013-9208-1>.

20. Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre Society (VAFCS), ‘Elders’ Wisdom - Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre Society,’ VACFS | Programs, 2020, <http://www.vafcs.org/programs/elderswisdom/>.

2 Streamlined and Reliable Funding for Organizations that Serve Seniors in Vancouver.

In the city of Vancouver, some organizations deliver programs specifically for senior citizens. The services that these organizations provide include language translation during hospital visits, grocery shopping and delivery, maintaining and managing community kitchens for seniors to share subsidized nutritious meals, facilitating seniors ↔ children educational programs such as storytelling, etc. The common aim of these services is to reduce social isolation among seniors through communal sharing of food.

Many of these organizations are forced to rely on inconsistent funding sources, coming from private donors or larger granters such as Vancouver Foundation and United Way. Insecurity in accessing adequate funds limits the length of the programs that these organizations offer to seniors, thereby leaving dependent seniors in a “sinus rhythm of precarity and social isolation.”

One of the organizations that supports Indigenous elders in Vancouver is the Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre Society (VAFCS). Through their “Elders Wisdom” program, VAFCS offers Indigenous Elders “a nourishing environment ... to apply and maintain their traditional practices in a social environment.”²⁰ The VAFCS has been supporting Vancouver’s urban Indigenous communities for the past 50 years. To sustain and improve the quality of service and programs that organizations such as VAFCS offer to the Indigenous and Black senior population in Vancouver, a more streamlined and reliable funding source is necessary.

I, therefore, propose that the municipal government of Vancouver strengthens its collaboration with the Provincial and Federal Government to secure an annual, significant budget that is allocated to non-profits, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), Neighbourhood Houses, and charities. These funds would be for use within programs whose main aim is to reduce social isolation among Black and Indigenous seniors in Vancouver.



I propose that the municipal government of Vancouver strengthens its collaboration with the Provincial and Federal Government to secure an annual, significant budget that is allocated to non-profits, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), Neighbourhood Houses, and charities.



This funding would be available as steady and assured grants for Vancouver-based organizations that are eligible. In the situation of the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, it would have been beneficial to have such a fund in existence so that local seniors' programs would remain uninterrupted. Additionally, having a secure fund to source from in cases of emergencies would have served to meet the needs of the burgeoning and marginalized homeless seniors that are at high risk of exposure to COVID-19. Data collected from the 2020 Metro Vancouver Homeless count revealed that:²¹

- Six percent of the 3634 homeless people in Metro Vancouver are Black
- Indigenous people are over-represented in the homeless population within Metro Vancouver.

The economic and health strains that the COVID-19 pandemic has imposed on the quality of life for the general population have been particularly amplified for homeless people who identify as Indigenous. While Indigenous people make up 2.5% of Metro Vancouver's population, they represent a staggering 1.3% of those that count as homeless. In fact, Vancouver's homeless population is the largest in Metro Vancouver, and almost three times as large as that in Surrey (i.e. 2095 people in Vancouver and 644 people in Surrey).

Municipal governments have a critical role in securing funding from the Provincial and Federal levels because they (municipal governments) have an extensive and deep-rooted understanding of the organizations working to support seniors in Vancouver. Furthermore, the municipal government may have more clarity on the demographics of seniors in the most urgent need to access these services.

21. CBC News, 'Disproportionate Number of Black, Indigenous, Latin People Counted in Metro Vancouver Homeless Survey | CBC News,' CBC, 6 August 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/vancouver-homeless-count-disproportionate-black-indigenous-1.5675414>.

22. Health Canada defines the term 'social determinants of health' as "a specific group of social and economic factors within the broader determinants of health. These relate to an individual's place in society, such as income, education or employment."

3 Collect Race-Based Data and Report on a Race-Specific Action Plan for Health Equity.

Seniors are not a monolithic group. By only reporting on the health, economic status, income level, etc., of seniors in general terms is to refuse to acknowledge that the political systems in Canada are inherently based on promoting the interests of White supremacy, while perpetuating anti-Black racism, and anti-Indigeneity. Collecting data on the socio-cultural, economic, and environmental conditions of Black and Indigenous seniors on a city-wide to nation-wide scale is vital in creating policy that is evidence-based, intersectional, and anti-racist. The generalization of vulnerable populations within policy is reflective of a system rooted in ignorance, erasure, and colonial stratification.

Any government-initiated action plans whose aim is to address seniors' food insecurity must be based on a theoretical and evidence-based understanding of the complex interactions that lead to health inequities. These interactions include gender identities, age, race, immigration status, disability, etc. Through collecting race-based data on the social determinants of health,²² with a focus on seniors, the City of Vancouver would be able to develop context-specific policies. As a signatory to



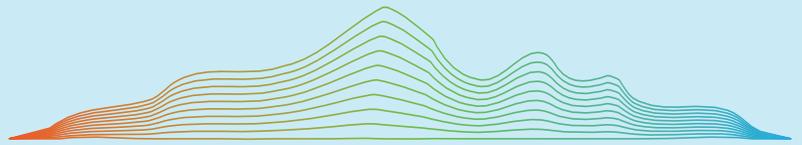
Any government-initiated action plans whose aim is to address seniors' food insecurity must be based on a theoretical and evidence-based understanding of the complex interactions that lead to health inequities.

the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization (UN FAO), Canada has the mandate to eradicate food insecurity through evidence-based support. This membership in FAO means that Canada's political structures should ensure that "periodic assessments of human rights standards and principles, policies, programs, and laws are carried out to improve their impact on food-insecure and malnourished people and address the underlying causes of hunger."²³

Regularly collecting and reporting the prevalence of food insecurity among Black and Indigenous seniors in Vancouver is the first step. The next step is to implement action plans attuned to the specific needs of these racial demographics. Finally, the municipal government would need to report on the progress made each year or every five years, as a form of accountability to eradicating anti-Black racism, amplifying Indigenous sovereignty, and protecting the right to healthy, adequate, and nutritious foods for all.

23. UN FAO, 'The Right to Food | Background,' Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, 2020, <http://www.fao.org/right-to-food/background/en/>.

Conclusion



While Canada is considered to have one of the lowest levels of seniors' food insecurity amongst countries that are part of the OECD, Black and Indigenous seniors continue to face disproportionately high levels of food insecurity. In Vancouver, the situation is more precarious, given the high poverty rates that affect the same racialized communities. While policies, such as seniors pension plans, have reduced the overall level of food insecurity among folks that are older than age 65, their eligibility criteria mean that Black and Indigenous seniors remain in a position of mediocre economic mobility. The cycle of poverty is exacerbated by policy and funding measures based on aggregate data, which generalizes the socio-cultural, economic, and environmental milieu of seniors in Vancouver, and largely Canada.

This policy proposal aims to challenge the government's approach of providing pensions based on income-earned during years of employment. It does so by recognizing the systemic and structural barriers that prevent Black and Indigenous seniors from accessing equitable income, safe working conditions, and secure job tenures. The current approach of income-based pensions means that seniors who have worked in low-income, high-risk jobs continue to live in poverty post-retirement because their pensions are equally low. An alternative approach that I recommend is for the municipal and provincial levels of government to instead develop a qualitative baseline to determine the amount of pension. Rather than using income-earned as a defining figure, the governments should base pension amounts on a sociological, longitudinal analysis of the



specific challenges faced by seniors due to their race, ability, sex, gender identities, immigration status, etc. Following my interest, I have chosen to focus my analysis on the role of race in influencing the level of food insecurity amongst seniors.

Another major challenge that seniors encounter that further exacerbates their inability to access healthy, adequate, and culturally-appropriate food is social isolation. This is a significant problem in Vancouver, given the strikingly huge number of homeless people, who again are mostly Black and Indigenous seniors. While community organizations, ranging from Neighbourhood Houses to NGOs, have been continuously providing services that aim to reduce the prevalence of social isolation among seniors in Vancouver, they grapple with inconsistent and meagre funding. This uncertainty in accessing adequate and reliable financing means that their programs can be short-lived and only serving a small proportion of at-risk seniors. To address this, I propose that the Provincial and Federal levels of government gather their funds and annually allocate a percentage to community-led programs to reduce social isolation amongst seniors. Municipal governments would manage these funds, disbursing them to community organizations whose programs support racialized seniors in navigating healthcare systems, accessing food, etc.

In researching and writing this report, I realized that "seniors" are often viewed as a monolithic group. This means that when researchers collect data, they often aggregate it, providing generalized results and conclusions that fail to acknowledge the differences amongst groups of seniors. Such non-specific approaches reproduce what the acclaimed Nigerian-American

author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie refers to as "The Danger of a Single Story." Chimamanda reminds us of the need for plurality in our perspectives, as she emphasizes that "Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity."²⁴ In policy, this calls for a diversity of thought and process in defining communities, reviewing data, planning, and implementing action plans, etc.

The right to food is more than access to the nutritional ingredients from fields and farms. All people need to have dignity in accessing adequate food, sharing food with the communities that they are part of, and growing food on land upon which they move with freedom and sovereignty. For Black (Canadian and non-Canadian) and Indigenous seniors in Vancouver, the right to food is diminished and structurally squandered. In their attempt to access a healthy and dignified life and livelihood, Black and Indigenous seniors have to overcome insidious, and often covert, barriers put up by systemic White supremacy. Anti-Indigeneity and anti-Black racism have been the crux of Canada's economic and political systems. Unless these forms of discrimination are exposed and eradicated when addressing food insecurity amongst seniors, any plans and actions will only be treating the symptoms while leaving the disease in the body.

24. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *The Danger of a Single Story* | Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, TED Talk (TEDGlobal, 2009), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9I-hs241zeg>.



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Vancouver Foundation is Community Inspired. We are a community foundation that connects the generosity of donors with the energy, ideas, and time of people in the community. Together, we've been making meaningful and lasting impacts in neighborhoods and communities since 1943. We work with individuals, corporations, and charitable agencies to create permanent endowment funds and then use the income to support thousands of charities. We recognize that communities are complex and that collaboration between multiple stakeholders is needed to help everyone thrive and evolve. Vancouver Foundation brings together donors, non-profits and charities, government, media and academic institutions, local leaders, and passionate individuals to build meaningful and lasting change in the province of British Columbia. We see young people, their voices and experiences as part of that vision to building meaningful change.

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