



UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA
ALBERTA CENTRE FOR SUSTAINABLE
RURAL COMMUNITIES

Paradox in the Land of Plenty

ISSUES OF FOOD SECURITY IN BROOKS, ALBERTA

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Introduction

Food insecurity is an issue increasingly facing rural communities across Canada. At its basis, it has severe implications for physical and mental health ranging from daily preoccupation to malnutrition and chronic disease (Food Security 2014, Food for Thought 2005). Food provides the foundation for life, and its absence or deficiency creates a 'domino effect' through every aspect of one's day, leading to potential negative impacts on productivity, social bonds, and local health systems (Food for Thought 2005). With global food prices continuing to climb, residents in rural areas face particular vulnerability due to poverty, unemployment or low-wage employment, loss of traditional region-based food knowledge and awareness, and poor access to or availability of nutritious, affordable food (Alberta Government 2014, Carolan 2013, 69-70, Feeding America 2014, Flora and Flora 2013, 261).

Best known for its prolific food processing industry, Brooks Alberta makes an interesting case study in food security. Though Brooks processes an estimated 40% of Canadian cattle and has a large agricultural sector, these facts are juxtaposed against declining food security as an estimated 1 in 25 residents utilize a local food bank, suffering from low levels of healthy and nutritious food (Brooks Profile 2014, Food Bank 2014, Graveland 2013). While food security measures such as The Food Coalition Society of Brooks and the Brooks Food Bank do exist, their efforts may be bolstered by fostering communication between food-related organizations and establishing policy that encourages local, holistic approaches to tackle food insecurity (Food Bank 2014, Food Coalition Society 2014). Suggestions for improvement include expansion or addition of community gardens and greenhouses, taking advantage of ample fishing and hunting opportunities, specifically to supplement food security, policy that encourages small local growers to purchase and utilize cropland, and food education and outreach integrated within already existing systems of support.

Context and Importance

As previously summarized, food security is an issue paramount to the well-being of rural communities. Not only does food insecurity degrade the ability of individuals to live fully and contribute to society, but inadequate or overly utilized systems of support will begin to effect rural communities through decreased economic productivity and lower participation in spheres of community activity, such as engagement in political, cultural, or social capitals (Food for Thought 2005). In addition, there are increased health care costs associated with malnutrition, higher levels of aggression and anxiety, depression, and illnesses such as diabetes, heart disease, hypertension, cancer, and obesity (Feeding America 2014, Food Security 2014).

Due to their particular vulnerabilities, rural and remote areas are often hit far harder than their urban counterparts in the face of rising prices and the current economic flux surrounding food. Food insecurity rises from a multitude of convergent global factors far beyond the control of rural communities: unequal distribution of food, greater demand for food due to increased global population, lower levels of food production following climate change events such as droughts or floods of increased severity, mandated bioethanol usage, the degradation or paving-over of arable land, loss of agrarian biodiversity, water shortages, and fossil fuel dependency for the transportation, manufacture, and processing of food (Carolan 2013, 111-113, 148-159). Closer to home, causes of food insecurity often stem from low levels of affordability, access, and awareness (Food Security 2014). Rising prices and rural shortages of nutritious food are compounded by a lack of access to locally grown food, limited circulation or knowledge of healthful food information, and policy that favours industrial farmers whose products are shipped abroad over smaller growers whose local sales would contribute to increased availability of food and keep money within the local economy (Carolan 2013, 158-159, 162-165).

The latter especially applies to Brooks, as its agricultural land base largely supports an industrialized model of beef, wheat and canola production (Brooks Profile 2014). Though Brooks has rates of employment and median family income higher than the provincial average, its economy is highly reliant on food processing, with 2500 jobs attributed to the Lakeside Food Processing plant – well over 20% of the working population (Brooks Profile 2014, City Data 2011). The vulnerability to shocks was highlighted during the XL Food Lakeside 2012 shutdown when cases of e-coli across Canada and the United States were traced back to Lakeside-processed beef (McClure and Forbes 2012). America quickly closed its border to Albertan beef, and processing was suspended for several weeks with decreased pay going to remaining jobs as measures were taken to ship and process the cattle elsewhere (D'Aliesio 2012, Graveland 2012). Though the industry quickly got back on its feet, some residents had already left for greener pastures, and worries remain that the speed, stress, and sanitation of the Lakeside line fall short of safety standards (D'Aliesio 2012, Graveland 2012).

While Brooks has taken measures to create a diverse economy, any area whose workforce is one fifth reliant on a single employer will be vulnerable to economic shocks, a vulnerability increased by the occasionally turbulent nature of the meat processing industry. Policy shifts focused at expanding existing frameworks for food security while making allowances that encourage smaller growers to exist in rural communities are two key areas that would benefit from attention. These may be strengthened not only in Brooks, but implemented across other food insecure regions to increase community resilience in event of rising prices, potential shortages, and an unsure future regarding global foods.

Critique of Policy Options

Current policies are not necessarily failing – in fact, it is evident that a good deal of planning and effort has gone into addressing Brooks' food security. Yet with the vulnerabilities of highly concentrated employment, globally rising food prices, and increasing issues of food security across all of rural Canada, adaptive strategies should be instituted and existing ones strengthened and cross-integrated to help ensure Brooks is better equipped to weather potential crises.

The Brooks Food Bank is an excellent measure to mitigate food insecurity, but suffers from a lack of nutritious food (2014). This is troubling since users of food banks are often especially vulnerable populations such as children, single parents, the elderly, recent immigrants, and members of low-income households (Who's Hungry 2012). Nearly 40% of Brooks households have children, and 7% of those households are single-parent (City Data 2014). It is also worth noting that Brooks has a high migrant population largely due to employment at the Lakeside processing plant (Broadway 2012). Beyond limited availability of nutritious foods, strict financial guidelines for eligibility do not necessarily capture all portions of the population who suffer food insecurity (Food Bank 2014). As a temporary measure for those falling within certain financial guidelines, the Brooks Food Bank is helpful in alleviating immediate food insecurity – but, as suggested later on, it is in a unique position of outreach and could do much more in the effort to advocate food security.

The Food Coalition Society of Brooks is a far more integrative measure that aims at holistic community frameworks to tackle food insecurity (Food Security 2014). Under the guidelines of Growing Food Security in Alberta, the Food Coalition has attempted to focus on community engagement by organizing healthy community meals, overseeing community kitchens, and identifying potential stakeholders such as the Brooks City Council, schools, the Community Health Council, and the local Farmers Market Coordinator, among others (Food Security 2014). They have also made efforts to raise awareness through brochures about specific community projects, as well as hosting booths at the farmers market (Food Security 2014). Challenges include an ethnically diverse community and an absence of engagement with policy makers (Food Security 2014). The Food Coalition Society of Brooks boasts a little over 100 members, which seems like relatively low membership considering that 500 citizens are utilizing the food bank at any given time (Food Bank 2014, Food Security 2014). Though the foundations for food security are somewhat established, the Food Coalition is reaching a limited audience and may benefit from diversifying engagement and awareness efforts in order to bring food security to a wider portion of the community, especially its most food insecure members.

Policy Recommendations

Food security is best promoted through food growth at a local level: therefore, efforts should be made to establish or expand community and household gardens and greenhouses. Funding may be allocated or raised to bolster community-based projects and events, with corresponding awareness raised through local news outlets and food-based organizations. For instance, though the Coalition already oversees the community garden, workshops may be held there detailing how to start a household garden – including basic supplies such as heirloom seeds and pamphlets to get attendees started (Food Security 2014). As well, although greenhouses can be expensive endeavours, their capacity to produce large volumes of healthy food all year round makes them worthy of consideration in areas of food insecurity. A volunteer-tended community greenhouse has the potential to increase the nutritional stocks of the Food Bank and distribute affordable produce throughout the community.

One aspect of food insecurity that is particularly puzzling in Brooks: southern Alberta has a lively hunting and fishing economy with several websites promoting Brooks in particular, but not a single piece of food security literature mentions this opportunity. Despite seasonal and licensing restrictions, there is an abundant and colourful variety of wildlife available: trout, pike, walleye, pheasant, partridge, grouse, waterfowl, White-Tailed and Mule Deer, and even Pronghorn Antelope (Wildlife Guide 2014). While hunting and fishing may be seen as largely recreational activities, perspectives may be shifted through promotion of hunting and fishing in conjunction with local food security. With enough effort through local media and events to stir interest within Brooks to take advantage of these opportunities, expeditions could be arranged with the explicit intent of alleviating food insecurity. Attendees may learn or further hunting and food-related skills while adding a variety of nutritious 'country foods' to their diets.

Education is another component that has enormous potential to alleviate food insecurity. One of the easiest ways to spread relevant information is through already-established organizations. For instance, the Brooks Food Bank has access to a dense and varied network of vulnerable individuals who may benefit greatly from increased access to and awareness of topics regarding food security. Given their audience, I would suggest that it is their responsibility to further promote aspects of food security such as nutrition and food preparation, awareness of community kitchens and upcoming food events, references to the Coalition regarding community or household gardening, and other locally-based resources. As for the Coalition, teaming up with Brooks Food Bank would be useful for the organizations and for their unique clientele as it keeps each up to date and forges stronger social networks. Both organizations could benefit from updated websites with links to all food-related aspects of Brooks, including

direction to local growers and the farmers market, zone-specific information and recommendations for gardening, and information regarding nutrition and culturally appropriate foods for all Brooks residents. In addition, the Coalition could contact the city council or school board to make efforts to target the health and awareness of children through educational measures. Field trips to the community garden or farmers market and posters or guest speakers promoting healthful eating and local foods have great potential to raise awareness within this vulnerable demographic.

Perhaps the most difficult issue to tackle is the issue of policy so that it encourages smaller growers to purchase and utilize land for local consumption. It is well-known that farmers often scale up production and sell to corporate interests due to economic pressures, squeezing smaller growers out of business and effectively nullifying their beneficial impact on local food culture and economy (Carolan 2013, 158-159). The Coalition has not attempted to engage with policy-makers to date; they could start by initiating dialogue with Brooks City Council to broach the subject, expressing both concerns for and benefits of food security and smaller local growers, including economic multiplier effects as money spent on food is kept within the community (Flora and Flora 2013, 199, Food Security 2014). Subsidies could be offered to attract local growers, with the city proposing plans to and approaching higher levels of government when appropriate. Though a multitude of community measures exist to alleviate food insecurity within Brooks, the leverage gained by cooperation with municipal and provincial levels of government has the capacity to spurn larger movements that promote food security across rural Canada.

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About ACSRC

The ACSRC fills the gap for research and policy in rural areas by fostering constructive dialogue, promoting interdisciplinary and collaborative research, and developing partnerships between the University of Alberta and rural communities.

Mission

The mission of the ACSRC is to link the research, outreach and educational capacity of the University of Alberta with students, researchers, rural communities, rural community organizations and policy makers at multiple levels across the province, nationally, and internationally in order to support the improved sustainability of rural communities and populations.

General information

The vision of the ACSRC is of resilient rural communities across Canada linked closely to the discovery, dissemination, and application of new knowledge at the University of Alberta through teaching and learning, research and creative activity, community involvement, and partnerships. Such resilient rural communities will hinge on informed citizens actively participating in community governance and development in order to support and sustain the people, livelihoods, regional and local capital, economic development and long-term social viability of rural communities as a key element of the Canadian economy, the natural environment and as home to many Canadians.

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