



A Summary Report: Considerations for Action

Focus Groups Explore Food Security Issues in Hastings and Prince Edward: Thoughts and Ideas from Community Participants

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2012

Food
Security
Network 
HASTINGS &
PRINCE EDWARD
COUNTIES

**Members of the Food Security Network
Community Capacity Building Sub-Committee
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For further information or to receive the accompanying report brochure,
please contact the Food Security Network at foodsecurity@hpechu.on.ca

The Network welcomes new members; please consider joining us.

Executive Summary

In the autumn of 2011, the Food Security Network of Hastings & Prince Edward Counties conducted six local focus groups to generate information about food security issues in Hastings and Prince Edward counties. The purpose was to explore issues of food security: where people get food, the barriers they deal with, their resourcefulness as well as their suggestions for how the community can work together to improve food security. Two focus groups were held in Belleville, and one each in Bancroft, Madoc, Picton and Trenton.

Focus group participants shared with each other and the broader community their struggles to have physical and economic access to an adequate supply of safe, affordable and nutritious food. They shared issues around food availability and affordability; they spoke of difficulties with transportation, high cost of nutritious food and the lack of availability of some foods in community food programs. They offered strategies to stretch one's food dollar and the wish for more knowledge and skills around lower cost healthy foods and basic cooking. In general they spoke of worry and getting enough food as a constant struggle. Despite these struggles, participants demonstrated great resourcefulness and resilience and offered suggestions for both personal and community approaches and resources.

Our most sincere thanks are extended to the participants of these focus groups.

Focus Groups Explore Food Security Issues in Hastings and Prince Edward: Thoughts and Ideas from Community Participants

Introduction

The Food Security Network (FSN) of Hastings and Prince Edward Counties is a voluntary association of individuals and representatives from community agencies and programs who work collaboratively to develop and promote food security and an environmentally sustainable, local and just food system.

Food security exists when:

- all people
- at all times
- have an adequate supply of safe, affordable and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences
- without social or economic barriers
- so they can be active and healthy.

The Food Security Network provides a forum for information sharing and collaboration on activities such as awareness raising, education and advocacy that contribute to food security. It supports community food programs, participates in groups to support poverty elimination and better access to healthy food, conducts and applies research findings, including the annual costing of a nutritious food basket, and uses research results to advance food security in Hastings and Prince Edward.



Issue

There has been little information available about food security specific to Hastings and Prince Edward counties. With research, we can describe gaps in present servicing and supports for those who are food insecure, increase awareness, and start to work together towards change. The Network's Community Capacity Building subcommittee suggested focus groups of area residents who could discuss food security, specifically – sources of food, barriers to food security, resourcefulness and suggestions for change. Results could then be used to begin dialogue about potential solutions and to advocate for better methods to support services surrounding food security.

The Food Security Network acknowledges and thanks the focus group participants whose ideas will contribute to actions to build a more food secure Hastings and Prince Edward region. The Food Security Network also acknowledges and thanks the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario for its generous support that made this research possible, as well as the in-kind contributions of a number of individuals and agencies throughout the five communities.

Method

During the summer of 2011, the FSN contacted local groups to assist recruiting individuals who are struggling with food security in various geographic areas throughout Hastings and Prince Edward counties to participate in focus groups in their communities. The goal was to recruit eight to twelve individuals from a variety of different social and household compositions for each focus group.

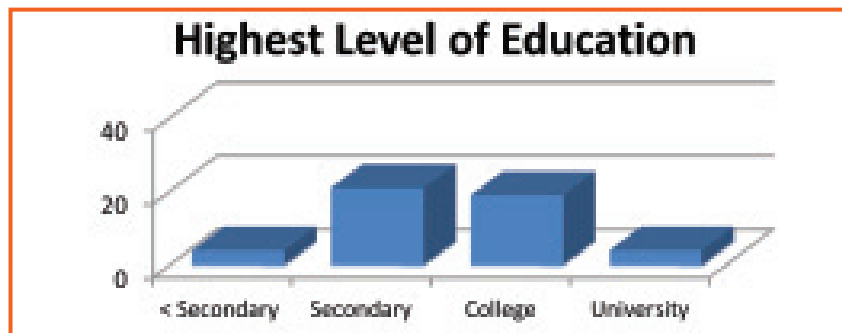
In the autumn of 2011, the Food Security Network conducted six focus groups: two in Belleville, and one each in Bancroft, Madoc, Picton and Trenton. Focus groups were facilitated by Food Security Network members. The purpose was to explore issues of food security: where people get food, the barriers they deal with, their resourcefulness as well as their suggestions for how the community can work together to improve food security.

Participants

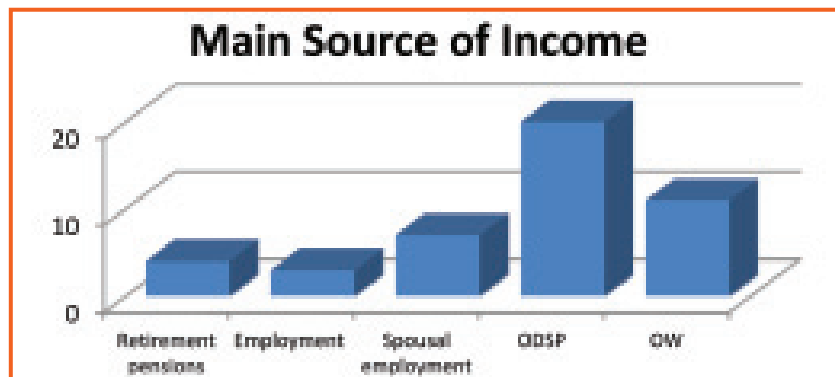
Fifty-three people participated in six focus groups. They ranged in age from 17 to 68, and their average age was 38.6 years. More females than males participated in the focus groups. Participant household structure varied widely. The majority of participants were married or living in common law relationships; most had children. Four participants were single mothers. In total, the participants were responsible for 67 dependent children. Some participants lived alone or with unrelated housemates. All participants had lived in Hastings or Prince Edward counties for at least three years.



Most had secondary or higher levels of education.



The majority of the participants depended on government transfers as their main source of income.





Key Findings

Places People Get Food

Overall, most participants identified grocery stores, including discount chains and frozen food outlets, as their primary source of food. They also discussed strategies to stretch their food dollars in grocery stores, e.g. coupon use and the price reduced rack. Some mentioned neighbourhood “convenience stores” as sources of food. Family and friends also provided food for many participants. In addition, members of the focus groups used a variety of community services and agencies: food banks; various church-based meals; soup kitchen programs; community dinners; the Good Food Box; Food for You, Food for Two; school lunch and breakfast programs as well as various other community centres. Farmers’ markets and “pick your own” options were also popular. For some participants, restaurants, especially fast food and take-outs, were a source of food. Many also relied on their own resourcefulness in getting food, e.g. growing their own vegetables, participating in community gardens or hunting.

Worries About Food

Issues of both affordability and availability of food were expressed. Transportation was often mentioned as a problem. Participants reported that some stores have limited choices of food, and personal and specialty food choices at times were difficult to find. Some also expressed a frustration that they were unable to preserve food, especially meat that is purchased on special. Many were very concerned about the high cost of healthy foods, including meats, lactose free products, cheese, fresh fruits and vegetables, bread, cereal and baby food. Others indicated they did not have access to a fully equipped kitchen to prepare, preserve and store food. This issue was particularly highlighted when talking about gardens. Gardens are seasonal and there is no way for most participants to preserve the food. Still others commented they did not know basic cooking methods.

While community programs are used as sources of food, some concerns were also raised. The Good Food Box has to be paid up front, and participants found that a box is heavy to carry, which is a problem if people do not have transportation. Many relied on food banks; however, there were questions about the nutritious quality of food from the food banks. Some felt that food banks cater mainly to families with children, and that adults without children are not given the same quality, quantity and variety of food, including milk, as are families with children.

Times of Struggle

Participants expressed weekly, monthly and yearly cycles of difficulty, based on timing of incoming money and payment of bills. Some mentioned that they struggled before the Thursday flyer sales, and others suggested that weekends were difficult since meal programs do not operate. The first of the month when bills are due, the middle of the month between pay cheques and the end of month when pennies are being counted were all suggested as times that people had problems getting or having enough food. If they buy most of their food after they are paid at the beginning of the month or after the Baby Bonus arrives, storage of food is a problem.

Certain times of the year also presented difficulties: beginning of the school year (when money is needed for school supplies and lunches), the end of June (when money is needed for children's camps/activities), and the summer (when most meal programs stop, and children are home from school and seem to eat more). Others mentioned the onset of winter (when seasonal employment ends), and the winter in general, since travel costs are higher and fresh produce is more expensive. Festive occasions, such as Christmas, Easter, and Thanksgiving were also seen as challenging.

Unrelated to specific times of the year were concerns about unexpected expenses that crop up (e.g. car problems, drug prescriptions, higher than expected bills that need to be paid or even theft of food). For many of the participants there was a constant stretch to provide food; getting or having enough food was hard all the time. In many families, the children are given the food first, and adults do without.

In short, participants' experiences around food can be summarized as a constant struggle.



How People Manage

Participants showed a great deal of resourcefulness about managing when there was insufficient food. Strategies included using the food they had on hand and making do by substituting ingredients, getting creative, or baking more. They access food banks and programs such as soup kitchens, church meals, Salvation Army, Legion, Meals on Wheels, Good Food Box, Good Baby Box, and school meal programs and turn to others (including family, friends and faith groups) for money and/or food. They buy cheaper food, e.g. junk food, food on sale, reduced rack at grocery store and change what and how much they eat. Some pool food together with others to make a meal or reorganize their budgets by taking money away from bills to pay for food. Others dip into savings, if they have any, or find odd jobs. Some participants use alternative approaches to getting food, e.g. dumpster diving, bartering for food, and hunting. Other people do without food.

Barriers to Food Security

Underlying the discussion about food sufficiency was insufficient resources. First and foremost was lack of money for food, but lack of transportation, time, child care, kitchen facilities and knowledge were also mentioned. The issue of affordable transportation was related in part to location of stores, the cost and limitations of public transit (e.g. limit of 2 bags per person), the price of gas and difficulties in walking (including with a stroller).

Personal circumstances contributed to difficulties in obtaining food. Among these are health issues (in part related to cost of special food requirements), the lack of child care and personal emotions, e.g. pride, embarrassment, concerns about judgments from others, as well as debilitating constant worry. Cooking for one was found to be difficult and more expensive. The lack of kitchen facilities (e.g. no refrigeration, no stove, no pots, no utensils, and no storage) and the lack of space to grow a garden also presented problems. Lack of time was also an issue, whether that was related to walking to get free meals, work schedules or difficulties managing time and planning ahead. It was estimated that it takes seven hours per week to research where to find food to eat twice a day. For this reason, many lived day by day. Family situations also made food sufficiency difficult; some participants mentioned that they found it hard to limit kids and other hungry family members, even pets.

Some difficulties were related to limitations of community food programs, e.g. the criteria required and the hours of operation for the food bank (including the limit of food for singles), and the inadequacy of some programs (e.g. Good Food Box only once a month; Food for You, Food for Two over when baby turns 6 months). Participants lack knowledge of where and when free meals are provided in the community.

Focus groups members also identified lack of personal knowledge as a problem. Participants expressed the need for easily accessible and basic cooking classes. Many expressed concerns that they did not know about healthy inexpensive foods or how to prepare and cook them. Participants also identified a need for more help with budgeting and time management as well as the need for crisis management associated with unexpected expenses.

The biggest difficulty expressed in getting or having food was lack of money and the high cost of food. Sometimes this concern was related to unemployment, but low rates of social assistance and the increasing cost of living were also strongly stated.

Concerns were raised about difficulties they encountered at some community programs, including the lack of respect and dignity with which they were treated. Participants encouraged each other to make use of the community resources that are available.



Ideas to Improve Food Security

The participants showed great resourcefulness in approaches in securing food and coping with food inadequacy. They provided keen insights and suggestions for the development of both personal and community resources that would help them to become more food secure.

The personal resources they sought were education about cooking, food selection, budgeting, gardening and time and crisis management. Focus group members also wanted to develop ways for helping each other and sharing skills and community resources (e.g. volunteer child care).

Suggestions for the development of better community resources included a well-publicized calendar of when and where all of the food programs are available. Participants recommended that the Good Food Box could be available at least twice a month, be more accessible and perhaps even be delivered. Improvements for food banks included extended hours, accessibility each day, healthier foods (e.g. fresh fruit and meats), child care, help with delivery, help with health issues (e.g. foods more suitable for people with diabetes, lactose intolerance, and allergies), increased amounts of food and greater choice of foods. Clients wanted to be treated with greater respect which might include but is not limited to greater flexibility about ID and the ability to go to food banks more frequently. It was also stated that more community gardens are needed. Participants recommended that the Food for You, Food for Two should be extended beyond the 6 month period and that Meals on Wheels should be extended for all people or for young families, especially in rural areas. Soup kitchens were also suggested for all communities.

Participants had many ideas about addressing the issues of transportation, facilities for cooking and storing food, child care and increasing food availability, e.g. volunteers to provide delivery service, donation of leftover/excess food from restaurants and stores, indoor gardening at high school greenhouses and the development of a barter system. At a community level, a change of attitudes toward people living in poverty was hoped for so that those accessing assistance would all be treated with dignity and without stigma or teasing.

Systemic changes that were sought included increases in Ontario Disability Support Program, Ontario Works, pensions and minimum wage linked with greater affordability in the general cost of living, e.g. food, gas, insurance, heating, rent and hydro. Participants recognized the need for greater job availability and more affordable housing. They sought various types of social justice: that children's rights to nutrition, educational opportunities and well-being are respected; that people should be paid a fair wage; and that health standards be maintained for food and water. Greater civic involvement of grocery stores and restaurants was also suggested (reduced packaging to reduce costs, less food wastage, more reduced food racks and donations to food banks).



Conclusion

Through six community focus groups the Food Security Network explored local issues of food security in Hastings and Prince Edward counties. The participants shared with each other and the broader community their struggles to have physical and economic access to an adequate supply of safe, affordable and nutritious food. They shared issues around food availability and affordability; they spoke of difficulties with transportation, high cost of nutritious food and the lack of availability of some foods in community food programs. They offered strategies to stretch one's food dollar and the wish for more knowledge and skills around lower cost healthy foods and basic cooking. In general they spoke of worry and getting enough food as a constant struggle. Despite these struggles, participants demonstrated great resourcefulness and resilience and offered suggestions for both personal and community approaches and resources.

Our most sincere thanks are extended to the participants of these focus groups. Your contributions to our work and understanding of food security in Hastings and Prince Edward counties are invaluable. Your input is unique and will be used to support local, actionable programming and solutions that support food security and an environmentally sustainable, local and just food system.

The Food Security Network acknowledges food security in Hastings and Prince Edward will take time and involvement on many fronts. With that in mind the Food Security Network will work to share focus group findings and continue to work with local agencies and the larger community toward enhancing food security.

Food security exists when all people at all times have an adequate supply of safe, affordable and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy lifestyle without social or economic barriers.
