



FINAL PROJECT REPORT:

***CONSIDERATIONS WHEN
SUPPORTING 2S/LGBTQ+
NOVA SCOTIANS
EXPERIENCING FOOD
INSECURITY***



INTRODUCTION

The Canadian government defines food insecurity as the “inability to acquire or consume an adequate diet quality or sufficient quantity of food” or “the uncertainty that one will be able to do so” (Health Canada, 2010, para 1). In 2021, nearly 1 in 6 Canadian households (5.8 million Canadians) experienced food insecurity and 168,000 Nova Scotians lived in food insecure households (Tarasuk et al., 2022). It is well reported that “living with food insecurity negatively impacts both mental health and diet-related chronic disease,” with researchers reporting a strong correlation between reduced access to nutritious food and poor mental health, chronic pain, diabetes, and premature death from infections and other causes (Joy, 2022, para 2).

Two-spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, intersex, and questioning (2S/LGBTQ+) people face unique combinations of risk factors for food insecurity (Health Canada, 2019), and as a result, food insecurity is known to disproportionately affect 2S/LGBTQ+ people (University of British Columbia, 2021). For example, “three times more bisexual Canadians report being food insecure than heterosexual individuals” (Casey, 2019, p. 41). Additionally, a Statistics Canada study monitoring food insecurity from 2015–2018 found that 13.3% of gay or lesbian Canadians reported household food insecurity in the preceding 12 months compared to 8.5% of heterosexual people (Government of Canada, 2022). The study found that “despite their work status, employed LGB people aged 25 to 64 years [...] were significantly more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to live in a household that experienced food insecurity in the previous 12 months” (Government of Canada, 2022).

A COMMUNITY PROJECT



This report discusses the research and results of a qualitative study undertaken by Dr. Phillip Joy in the Applied Human Nutrition Department at Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU) in partnership with community nonprofit group Feed Nova Scotia. Funding was provided by CLARI.



While Feed Nova Scotia helps Nova Scotians meet a basic need for survival, they're also "raising awareness of the root causes of food insecurity – things like systemic racism, low wages, inadequate income support, and unaffordable housing. [They're] advocating for sustainable, policy-based solutions that will allow everyone to live a life of dignity and leave no one relying on charitable band-aids to address human rights" (Feed Nova Scotia, 2017, para 1).

Food banks are not the solution; we need to understand the experience of food insecurity more deeply in the context of 2S/LGBTQ+ populations. The current research project is urgently needed to address key knowledge gaps about the lived experiences of 2S/LGBTQ+ Nova Scotians enduring food insecurity, the barriers they face in finding and accessing available supports, and what this population's specific support needs are. The knowledge generated by this research will be crucial to both develop structurally competent, safe, and accessible supports for food insecure 2S/LGBTQ+ Nova Scotians and to inform Feed Nova Scotia's policy advocacy efforts.

THE PROBLEM

Food insecurity is a “social justice issue” that is “intimately tied to the social determinants of health” (Joy, 2022, para 3), and while food charities are typically thought of as a solution, they have been found to be largely ineffective in mitigating food insecurity (Enns et al., 2020; Loopstra & Tarasuk, 2012). Despite this, food banks are often developed nations’ first response to issues of food insecurity (Tarasuk et al., 2019), and in Canada, food bank usage continues to climb (Food Banks Canada, 2024).

While meant as a solution, sometimes support services designed to help 2S/LGBTQ+ people experiencing food insecurity can pose threats of danger or violence due to stigma and cis-heterosexism (Kidd, 2003). For example, many food banks and adjacent services are faith-based, and 2S/LGBTQ+ people experiencing food insecurity may be hesitant to access these services for fear of encountering discrimination, homophobia, transphobia, and/or stigma (Feed Nova Scotia, personal communication, 2022). In a study conducted in 2020 by the Williams Institute, 14% of survey respondents indicated they have avoided going to a food pantry because of an organizational bias towards LGBT people (Wilson et al., 2020). Thus, the organizational beliefs and origins of many food charities may further act as a barrier to successful access of food support services.



OBJECTIVES

Food insecurity is a “social justice issue” that is “intimately tied to the social determinants of health” (Joy, 2022, para 3), and while food charities are typically thought of as a solution, they have been found to be largely ineffective in mitigating food insecurity (Enns et al., 2020; Holmes & Gagnon, 2018; Loopstra & Tarasuk, 2012; Tarasuk et al., 2019). Despite this, food banks are often developed nations’ first response to issues of food insecurity (Tarasuk et al., 2019), and in Canada, food bank usage continues to climb (Food Banks Canada, 2024).

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RESEARCH AIMS

The purpose is to explore the barriers to finding and accessing food support services (such as those provided by Feed Nova Scotia) for 2SLGBTQ+ Nova Scotians living with food insecurity.

We seek to understand in greater depth these barriers to access as well as how to create safe, accessible, and structurally competent resources for this polymarginalised population.

Research Question 1

What are the barriers to resource access for 2S/LGBTQ+ Nova Scotians?

Research Question 2

What are the communities' strengths that may inform structurally competent, accessible, safe, and effective food services?



METHODS

This study received ethics approval by the Research Ethics Board at Mount Saint Vincent University.

Theoretical Approaches

This research is qualitative in nature and is guided by poststructuralist and queer theoretical frameworks that position the subject as produced within social and historical contexts and not as a reflection of an essential self. The use of this framework allows for critical exploration of how a person's values, beliefs, and practices are constituted.

Inclusion Criteria

To participate in this study were to self-identify as sexually and/or gender diverse, be above the age of majority (19 years old), self-report experiencing or having experienced food security, reside in Nova Scotia, and be able to speak and understand English.

Data Collection & Analysis

Our team developed text and image recruitment ads that were shared through social media, community organisations serving 2S/LGBTQ+ Nova Scotians and Nova Scotians experiencing food insecurity, public poster boards such as at municipal libraries, and the researchers' own community networks. A link to a survey screening for eligibility was provided by link or QR code in the recruitment postings. Each potential participant was contacted and sent an informed consent document. Each participant completed a semi-structured virtual or in-person interview from August–November 2023. Interview transcripts were analysed using discourse analysis, a method which involves systematic and critical examinations of data that look beyond the surface meanings to situate texts within their cultural, political, historical, and broader social contexts



RESULTS

Eleven participants were recruited to the study.

Ten participants were identified as being moderately to severely food insecure in the past 12 months, with all having reduced food quality and quantity, and often having skipped meals and reduced food intake due to lack of money for food.

One participant indicated that while they are not currently food insecure, they have experienced food insecurity in the past.

Five themes were identified from the data.

Theme 1: Accessibility

Accessibility concerns were diverse and varied considerably per participant. Among them were factors such as lack of space in which to store and prepare food, physical location of food banks, hours of food bank operation, lack of reliable and timely transportation, and the challenges that come with rural living in Nova Scotia.

Theme 2: Chronic Illness

Many participants live with a variety of chronic health conditions and disabilities. Among those named were multiple sclerosis, diabetes, Ehlers-Danlos syndrome, hypertension, blindness, autism, ADHD, and long-term eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and binge eating disorder.

Theme 3: Making Ends Meet

Significant discussion of strategies that participants employed to 'make ends meet' arose in every interview conducted. Inflation was by far the most common talking point, with participants frequently noting the ongoing housing crisis in Nova Scotia, as well as the rising costs of groceries and personal care items.



RESULTS

Theme 4: Safety and Dignity

The theme of safety and dignity was by far the most common throughout the interviews. If participants felt their safety was at risk while accessing food support services, they almost always attributed the cause to their 2S/LGBTQ+ identities and presentation. For the majority of participants, safety and dignity were closely intertwined concepts that informed one another in a cyclical or bi-directional relationship. In several cases, participants talked about the need to hide or alter their gender or sexuality presentation while accessing food support services to avoid actual or expected discrimination from food bank workers and volunteers.

“I hate saying it ‘cause it makes me sick to my stomach, but when it comes to food banks and stuff, I have to go back in the closet, and I shouldn’t have to do that.” – Participant

Theme 5: Visions for Food Support Services

Participants offered several visions of what a great 2S/LGBTQ+ friendly food support resource could look like for Nova Scotians. Among the suggestions were deliverable food boxes or items, trans- and 2S/LGBTQ+-specific food events or spaces, and the ability to pay-what-you-can or to pay-it-forward with donations, labour, or money at a later time, such as after receiving assistance or a pay cheque. Interestingly, several participants indicated a strong desire to feel as though they are contributing in exchange for food, something which was tightly tied to the discursive theme Safety & Dignity

COMMUNITY RECOMENDATIONS

Key community recommendations are to:

● **Training:**

Ensure consistent training on 2S/LGBTQ+, minority, and polymarginalised communities is provided to and completed by all frontline volunteers and employees, and services are consistently delivered in a way that fosters the comfort, dignity, and security of everyone.

● **Transparency**

Ensure that there is transparency for service users regarding who has access to their demographic information and for what purposes it is collected, accessed, and used.

● **Engage collaboratively**

Engage collaboratively with 2S/LGBTQ+ communities to develop explicitly queer-friendly food support services and locations.

● **Advocate**

Publicly and explicitly advocate for increased government action to control the costs of housing, prescription medication, and accessible transportation and to support Nova Scotians to access those services.



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Acknowledgements:

We would like to thank CLARI for providing the funding for this project. Most of all, we would like to thank all the participants, without whom this project would not have happened.

