

“Managing the hungry and disciplining the poor”: A critical examination of the paradox of food insecurity policy in Canada and the transformative power of narrative



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“[Food banks] might very well provide advantages for many — for those giving to food banks; and those volunteering; for those allowing collections to take place at their stores and offices; and for the churches who spend an increasingly large amount of time ensuring all those in need are being fed; for politicians who could utilize their existence for their own purposes; and for the public who can be reassured that they can maintain their standard of living while no one goes hungry.” Daniel Ronson & Martin Caraher¹

¹ Ronson, D., & Caraher, M. (2015). Food Banks: Big Society or Shunting Yards? Successful Failures. In *Food Poverty and Insecurity: International Food Inequalities* (pp. 79–88). Springer International Publishing AG.

ABSTRACT

Over forty years ago the first food bank opened in Canada, marking the beginning of an institutionalized system that would replace social welfare policies as the primary way to “...*help Canadians put food on the table*²”. Household food insecurity in Canada refers to inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints. Research overwhelmingly shows that income redistribution policies are far more effective at reducing food insecurity than food charity or other food (re)distribution interventions. Yet, institutionalized food programs continue to dominate policy discussions, even as food insecurity rates soar to unprecedented levels across the country. There is a paradox here: despite clear evidence that income inequality drives food insecurity in Canada, governments consistently fail to implement effective income redistribution policies, opting instead for ineffective food programming. In their book, *Why isn't government policy more preventive* (2020), Cairney & St Denny explore the intersection of three policy theories – Multiple Streams Approach (MSA), Social Construction and Policy Design (SCPD), and Complexity Theory – offering a nuanced framework for understanding why prevention policy consistently challenges governments. This paper applies these theories to the paradox of food insecurity policy in Canada, using it as a compelling case study of how governments struggle to implement effective prevention policies, despite their potential to significantly improve public health outcomes.

Key words: *prevention policy; multiple streams analysis; social construction and policy design; complexity theory; household food insecurity; food insecurity; charity; food banks*

² The Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau, Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food: Office of the Prime Minister of Canada. (2020). *Prime Minister announces additional support for food banks and local food organizations.*

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SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

“Food banks have become a serious obstacle in the fight against poverty. By promising to “end hunger” by feeding hungry Canadians, they provide a comforting illusion that no one is hungry - or if they are, it's their own fault. They shelter us from the harsh reality that millions lack the basic necessities of life” – Elaine Power³

Canada faces a food insecurity crisis. Almost a quarter of Canadians (22.9%) worry about running out of food; limit how much they eat; or skip meals entirely, sometimes for days or weeks (PROOF 2024). Access to food profoundly impacts physical, mental, and social wellbeing, which makes the rapid increase in food insecurity an urgent public health issue. The greatest injustice of food insecurity in Canada is that it is entirely preventable.

Household food insecurity⁴ in Canada is the inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints (Tarasuk et al., 2020; Tarasuk et al., 2021; Tarasuk et al., 2022a; Li et al., 2023) and is rooted in income inequality. The failure to address food insecurity in Canada has perplexed advocates, experts, and researchers for decades. Research has long identified income inequality as the root cause of food insecurity and experts have long provided clear policy solutions to the problem. Yet food charity, community food programs, and food skills education remain the primary interventions to this rapidly worsening problem.

Programs and policies that focus on food-based solutions do not address the root cause of food insecurity; they treat the symptoms. This misalignment between what we know (i.e., the link between food insecurity and income), and what we do (i.e., continue to design policies and programs that use food to treat an income problem) reflects a paradox: despite the link between food insecurity and income, government interventions continue to focus on reactive programs that fail to address the problem. This paper discusses the paradox of household food insecurity policy in Canada and offers insight into why it persists.

SECTION 2: METHODOLOGY

“Hunger is rooted in poverty, and poverty is about people not having enough income to make the choices they need to make for themselves and their family. Food will not solve hunger.” – Nick Saul⁵

³ Power E. (2011). It's time to close Canada's food banks. *The Globe and Mail*. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com>

⁴ This paper will use the terms *household food insecurity* and *food insecurity* interchangeably to describe the income-based nature of food insecurity. The term *food insecurity* may differ depending on individuals' unique lived experiences.

⁵ Saul, N. (2020). Transcript: poverty, food, and COVID-19. *TVOntario*. <https://www.tvontario.org/transcript/2612426>

This research paper takes a theoretically informed case study approach. In their book, *Why isn't government policy more preventive?* (2020) Cairney & St Denny present a theoretical framework that provides a helpful backdrop for analyzing the paradox of household food insecurity in Canada. They employ three interconnecting theories – Multiple Streams Analysis (MSA), Social Construction and Policy Design (SCPD), and Complexity Theory (CT) – used here to examine why little progress has been made on successfully implementing effective food insecurity policies.

2.1 The case study: household food insecurity in Canada

Household food insecurity in Canada provides an insightful case study for understanding the challenges governments face in designing effective prevention policies. Social issues like food insecurity and insufficient household income are closely linked to poor health outcomes, which impose significant costs on society (Tarasuk et al., 2015; Raphael et al., 2020; Men et al., 2020). However, rather than follow the robust body of evidence, government and civil society continue to promote ineffective policies like food charity and food skills education as instrumental in the fight against hunger in Canada. Further, citizens, organizations, and corporations involved in food charity are lauded as heroes and “change makers” (Office of the Prime Minister of Canada 2020; Food Banks Canada 2024). In reality, food insecurity exists within a complex system that intersects with and influences diverse social, economic, environmental, and political factors. Examining household food insecurity through the lens of intersecting policy theories may contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexity of social issues and highlight the importance of preventive approaches in policy design and implementation.

This paper is based on a careful reading of Cairney & St Denny (2020); other work on the three policy theories; and the rich body of evidence on household food insecurity in Canada including research papers, news articles, status reports, and public health documents.

SECTION 3: DEFINING PREVENTION POLICY

“Governments have failed to implement enduring changes to income policies informed by research on food insecurity. Instead, we’ve almost exclusively seen small, limited-time benefits like the federal

Grocery Rebate and continued community food programs as the response to the hardships Canadians are facing” – Tarasuk & Li⁶

Prevention is the process of engaging early with social problems before they worsen and become harder to reverse and more expensive to fix (Cairney & St Denny, 2020). These policies are often touted as the “gold standard” for improving public health problems. Designed well, these policies can save lives, yet governments do not consistently or effectively tackle complex policy problems in this way. (Cairney & St Denny, 2020).

There are three main types of prevention policy: *primary* – stopping a problem before it causes disease or injury, or impacts population health (e.g., population immunizations); *secondary* – stopping a problem facing at-risk groups (e.g., implementing dietary programs to prevent heart disease); or *tertiary* – focusing on an affected group to stop a problem from getting worse (e.g., managing diabetes through medication, diet, and education) (Cairney & St Denny, 2020). *Primary* prevention policies work “upstream” (i.e., they stop a problem before it causes harm). These policies and programs, like those aimed at income redistribution, target the root causes of social and health inequalities (Cairney & St Denny 2020; National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health 2014).

While prevention holds considerable promise, it faces a range of obstacles. Prevention policy is hard to define and complex in nature, making it challenging to articulate, design, and implement (Cairney & St Denny 2020). The term “prevention” is ambiguous, making it difficult to identify clear problems and frame them effectively for preventive policy interventions. Additionally, prevention policies are often long-term, less tangible, and less publicly visible compared to more symbolic or reactive policies. It can take decades for the positive impacts of comprehensive prevention policies to appear. In contrast, reactive or symbolic policies give the impression government is acting, which is both publicly appealing and politically rewarding (Cairney & St Denny, 2020). Finally, the scale and complexity of structural and social issues combined with competition over limited resources, difficulty in measuring outcomes, and the number of groups impacted contribute to the challenging nature of prevention policy (Cairney & St Denny, 2020).

⁶ Tarasuk & Li. (2023). Food insecurity in Canada is the worst it’s ever been – here’s how we can solve it. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com>

Prevention has long been a core focus of public health; particularly *primary* prevention policies that address the social determinants of health. Effective primary prevention includes income redistribution policies and comprehensive social programs, which are crucial for providing Canadians with the resources they need to secure basic necessities such as food. These essential policies and programs help maintain a decent standard of living and prevent poor health outcomes (Raphael et al., 2020; Li et al., 2023; Hankivsky 2014).

SECTION 4: THE PARADOX OF FOOD INSECURITY POLICY IN CANADA

“[The government] must invest in people, social programs, public services, health care, and education. It has the means to fight social inequality and poverty...all it takes is the political will of our government to put an end to poverty and food insecurity in our province.” – Janelle LeBlanc⁷

4.1 An overview of food insecurity in Canada

Canada is one of the wealthiest nations in the world, yet almost one quarter of Canadians experience some level of food insecurity (PROOF 2024). This ranges from worrying about food, struggling to access enough food, or skipping meals entirely (Li et al., 2023; Tarasuk et al., 2022a; Tarasuk et al., 2021; Tarasuk & Mitchell 2020). Six percent of Canadians are in this latter category, forced to skip meals, significantly reduce food intake, or without food – sometimes for days or weeks (Li et al., 2023; Tarasuk et al., 2022a; Tarasuk et al., 2021; PROOF 2024). This level of deprivation has serious mental and physical health consequences that worsen as the severity of food insecurity increases (Li et al., 2023; PROOF 2024; Tarasuk et al., 2015; Men et al., 2020). Food insecurity in Canada cuts across all demographics and geographical regions, but there are clear disparities across groups, particularly among historically marginalized communities (Li et al., 2023; Dhunna & Tarasuk 2021). The rising rates of food insecurity in a wealthy country like Canada underscore a profound failure at all levels of government to implement effective income policies.

4.2 Public health consequences of food insecurity

Household food insecurity is a powerful determinant of health. It is linked to a wide range of chronic diseases and mental health issues, which can lead to increased healthcare use

⁷ LeBlanc, J. (2023). Political will required to end poverty, food insecurity in New Brunswick. *NB Media Co-op*. <https://nbmediacoop.org>

and poorer health outcomes (Tarasuk et al., 2015; Marmot, 2016; Marmot, 2017; Raphael 2020). The social determinants of health are the conditions within which people are born, live, work, and age and they have the power to make us sick or protect our health (Tarasuk et al., 2015; Marmot, 2016; Marmot, 2017; Raphael 2020; Canadian Public Health Association, 2023). They include factors like income, education, safe and affordable housing, access to food, exposure to gender-based or race-based discrimination, social exclusion, and exposure to adverse early childhood experiences (*Refer to Appendix A for a list of SDOH*) (WHO 2024; Marmot, 2016; Marmot, 2017; Raphael 2020; Canadian Public Health Association, 2023). These social factors exert a greater influence over the quality and length of our lives than individual behaviours like diet, physical activity, or sleep, which are often the primary focus of health-related policy interventions (Marmot, 2016; Marmot, 2017; Raphael 2020). Limited resources create substantial barriers to accessing essential services and support, diminishing individuals' control over their circumstances, which further exacerbates health disparities.

Food insecurity frequently intersects with other determinants of health like income, housing, access to healthcare, geographic location, or transportation. This intersection forces households to deplete their limited financial resources and exhaust coping strategies, further exacerbating health challenges. As food insecurity deepens, health outcomes decline, creating a vicious cycle that undermines overall wellbeing. Food-insecure households often find become trapped in a chronic loop of deteriorating health and worsening food insecurity (Weiser et al., 2015). The extreme financial constraints experienced by households living with food insecurity forces impossible choices between paying rent and bills, filling essential prescriptions, and buying food (Weiser et al., 2019; Men et al., 2019). These dire choices impact physical and mental health, which can increase the risk of developing chronic illness, which can further exacerbate deprivation and food insecurity (Weiser et al., 2019). Children raised in food insecure households are more likely to be diagnosed with chronic illnesses like asthma and diabetes and are at a higher risk for experiencing mental illnesses like depression (Kirkpatrick et al., 2010; Jessiman-Perreault & McIntyre 2017; Brown & Tarasuk 2019; Tarasuk et al., 2022a). Adults who are food insecure are more likely to be diagnosed with chronic illnesses like heart disease and diabetes, and mental health issues like mood or anxiety disorders. Moreover, managing chronic illness in the absence of adequate income is difficult and can result in poorer health outcomes, leading to severe and sometimes deadly consequences (Li at al., 2023). In fact, individuals

experiencing severe food insecurity are less healthy, incur higher healthcare costs, and die younger than their food secure counterparts (Tarasuk et al., 2015; Jessiman-Perreault & McIntyre 2017; Men et al., 2020; Tarasuk et al., 2013).

High rates of household food insecurity exert significant pressure on an already strained healthcare system. People living with food insecurity utilize healthcare system more frequently, whether through increased visits, higher rates of hospitalization, or longer stays in acute care (Li et al., 2023; Tarasuk et al, 2015). Severely food insecure households can incur up to 76% more healthcare costs compared to food secure households. (Tarasuk et al., 2022a; Tarasuk et al. 2015). Further, the income inequality that exacerbates food insecurity carries significant societal costs, including diminished social cohesion, increased mortality rates, higher crime levels, and elevated psychological stress (Wilkinson & Pickett 2017). Inequality and food insecurity reinforce each other: the deterioration of one amplifies the other, creating a cycle with profound social consequences (Wilkinson & Pickett 2017). The widespread health and social impacts of food insecurity underscore the urgent need for effective policies to prevent or reduce this pressing public health issue, and the consequences of failing to do so.

4.3 Canada's response to food insecurity

In Canada, the primary responses to food insecurity are centred around food. Food charity, community food programs, and skills-based programming may provide short-term relief to some, but they do not effectively address the root financial deprivation. Rather, this type of programming puts the onus on individuals and households to ask for help, which creates the narrative that food insecurity is an individual based problem rather than a systemic issue (Riches 2018). Similarly, framing education and skills-based programming as valid food insecurity interventions conflates knowledge with inequality, taking an individual-based approach to social injustice (Huisken et al., 2016). In contrast, income redistribution interventions like raising minimum wages, improving targeted income supplement programs, or implementing a universal basic income target the economic inequality that causes food insecurity (Basic Income Canada Network 2021; Tarasuk et al, 2021; Tarasuk et al., 2022a; Khaki et al., 2022; Li et al, 2023).

Experts have long urged policymakers to address food insecurity through structural change. In response, governments commit, promising to “put food on the table” (Office of the Prime Minister of Canada 2020) and “make life more affordable for Canadians” (Office of the Prime Minister of Canada 2022). Inevitably, policy action drifts from effective income redistribution to

less effective, individual-based interventions. Frustrated by this, experts and advocates are left disillusioned, decrying the “lack of political will” governments display in their failure to tackle the root causes of food insecurity and income inequality.

4.4 The paradox of prevention policy

Government policymaking is much more complicated than “lack of political will” or collective disinterest in fixing a problem. The misalignment between evidence and action presents a curious paradox: despite the knowledge that income redistribution policies are the most effective way to address food insecurity, policies and public discourse continue to favour short-term programs and individual-based solutions. Examining how this paradox emerged and what might resolve it is crucial for understanding how to develop policies that promote long-term, sustainable solutions to this urgent problem.

In their book, *Why Isn't Government Policy More Preventive?* Cairney & St Denny (2020) offer theoretical insights into why prevention policy is so challenging for governments to implement. Using three theoretical frameworks, Multiple Streams Analysis (MSA), Social Construction and Policy Design (SCPD), and Complexity Theory (CT), the authors examine the multiple converging realities that create barriers to prevention. Applying these insights to the problem of food insecurity in Canada, this research paper seeks to answer the question, *despite research demonstrating their effectiveness, why is it so challenging for governments to effectively implement policies that prevent household food insecurity in Canada?*

To establish a foundation for examining the paradox of food insecurity policy in Canada, this paper begins with an overview of prevention policy. It then provides an overview of the three theories put forward by Cairney & St Denny (2020) and examines how each one contributes to the challenging food insecurity policy landscape. The third section outlines the problem of household food insecurity in Canada and provides a brief overview of the current food insecurity policy landscape. The final section applies the three policy theories to the problem of household food insecurity in Canada and critically analyzes the paradox of food insecurity policy.

SECTION 5: POLICY THEORY: CAIRNEY & ST DENNY

"We're taught that the best way to respond to food insecurity in our communities is to collect our leftover and unwanted food and donate it to a food bank. Schools across the country hold food drives so that kids

can be taught an important lesson. But I think the lesson that we're really taught is that food insecurity is a community issue. It's an issue of charity, and it can be solved by the kindness of others," – Paul Taylor⁸

Governments often fail to develop comprehensive public policies that are proportionate to the scale of the problems they aim to address. While evidence-based approaches are a fundamental pillar of public health practice, most policy decisions are influenced by much more than the evidence. Any given policy problem is shaped by multiple intersecting social, economic, environmental, and political factors (Cairney & St Denny, 2020; Fafard et al., 2022a). For instance, effective food insecurity policies must address the structural inequities that lead to financial deprivation at the root of household food insecurity. Policies that reduce poverty, like those that improve the social safety net, increase minimum wages, or improve access to housing, education, and fair employment (Raphael et al., 2020; Marmot 2016) require policymakers to commit to complex systems-based thinking, multisectoral collaboration, and structural reform (Cairney & St Denny, 2020). Even if structural change were politically palatable, the limitations of human cognition make it difficult for policymakers to focus equal attention on multiple, concurrent and often competing complex problems.

In their book, *Why Isn't Government Policy More Preventive?* Cairney and St Denny (2020) waded through the challenges associated with prevention policy. They use three theories, Multiple Streams Analysis (MSA), Social Construction and Policy Design (SCPD), and Complexity Theory (CT) to explain the policy process and tease apart the complex systems within which policymaking exists. For the purposes of this paper, they are presented as unified and internally coherent theories of policy change. In reality, each theory is the subject of extensive debate and empirical work to nuance and validate certain propositions and claims within each theory. This section describes each theory in more detail and analyzes them within the context of prevention policy.

5.1. Multiple Stream Analysis

Multiple Streams Analysis (MSA) offers helpful insights into the paradox of prevention policy. This theory examines the concept of a “window of opportunity” for policy change, which is a dynamic and often fleeting period when policymakers commit to addressing a particular

⁸ Taylor, P. (2023). Charity is not a solution to food insecurity: how to feed the future. *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation*. <https://www.cbc.ca/>

issue (Cairney & St Denny 2020). There are different types of “windows of opportunity” – a single opportunity to select a vague solution to a problem, or a series of opportunities to select policy instruments aimed at addressing specific issues (Cairney & St Denny 2020). MSA helps distinguish between ideal policymaking which is rational, “evidence-based”, and legitimate and real-world policymaking, which is more complex and less rational, given the limited amount of information policymakers are able to process, the presence of competing issues, short collective attention spans, and time constraints (Cairney & St Denny 2020). In other words, there is a significant gap between prevention as “an idea whose time has come” (p.27) and the messy real-world environment within which prevention policy exists (Cairney & St Denny 2020).

Implementing prevention policy to address public health issues is difficult due to the complexity of the problems, the dynamic political and social conditions within which they occur, and the fluid nature of issue salience (Cairney & St Denny 2020; Hoefler, 2022). Based on Kingdon’s 1984 work on MSA, Cairney & St Denny (2020) discuss three distinct stages that describe how decisions are made and how heightened levels of attention, or “policy windows” continuously form and disappear. They suggest that these stages – defining problems, selling solutions, and making choices – correspond to three separate streams: problem, policy, and politics, respectively (Cairney & St Denny 2020, Pp. 32). According to their framework, interest in a particular policy solution is brief and policies are only adopted when the necessary conditions converge, attention to the problem is high, a technically and politically feasible solution exists, and policymakers have the motive and opportunity to adopt it (Cairney & St Denny 2020). The problem, policy, and political streams must converge to successfully implement prevention policy.

5.1.1. The Problem Stream

The problem stream examines how issues come to be recognized as problems that require government attention. Policy entrepreneurs play a key role in policymaking by drawing attention to specific issues, in part through strategic framing. Most societal problems are complex, intersectional, and ambiguous, consisting of more information than can be reasonably processed (Cairney & St Denny 2020). Policymakers, constrained by bounded rationality, have limited cognitive capacity and must make important decisions with limited information (Cairney & St Denny 2020). One way that policymakers simplify complex problems is through framing, which is the process of presenting ideas or information in a way that influences how they are perceived

or understood (Hoefler 2022; Cairney & St Denny 2020; McHugh et al., 2021; Bijl-Brouwer 2019; McIntyre et al., 2018). Frames are “the provisional resting places in the ongoing process of negotiating a particular slice of reality” (McIntyre et al., 2018 Pp. 151). These “slices of reality” influence narratives by highlighting or downplaying certain aspects of a problem, which guides interpretation and response (McIntyre et al., 2018; McHugh et al., 2021; Bijl-Brouwer 2019). Frames influence how we perceive reality, interpret problems, and respond to situations. Through framing, policymakers influence how problems are defined, which issues receive attention, and the relative appeal of various solutions (McHugh et al., 2021; Bijl-Brouwer 2019; Cairney & St Denny 2020). Frames tell stories, and for better or worse, they have the power to shift society in profound ways.

The problem stream necessarily involves collecting information and building evidence (e.g. through indicators, data and statistics, or precipitating events). However, if policymakers are inundated with too much information, they can experience cognitive overwhelm, which restricts their ability to thoroughly consider all perspectives (Cairney 2018). Information overload makes it challenging to focus on a single problem let alone to prioritize multiple problems, causing attention to waver (Cairney 2018; Cairney & St Denny 2020). Cairney (2018) argues that winning the “framing battle” leads to an interest in a problem, its solutions, and a demand for evidence on the winning problem. The problem stream shows that creating clear and concise problem definitions can shift policy makers’ attention to a problem. Strategically framing the problem can shape their perception, direct focus, and potentially influence policy solutions (Cairney & St Denny, 2020).

5.1.2. The Policy Stream

The policy stream focuses on developing policy solutions to pre-defined problems and ensuring they are readily available when needed (Cairney & St Denny 2020). When attention shifts towards the problem, a policy solution must be ready. If no solution is immediately available, the opportunity is already lost; attention quickly moves elsewhere and the window of opportunity closes (Cairney & St Denny 2020). The policymaking cycle does not follow a simple, linear progression from problem identification to solution design and implementation. Rather, policy entrepreneurs have pre-generated policy solutions and are waiting for an opportunity to sell them during an open policy window (Cairney 2018). While some policy solutions are quick to take off, others need to be softened over time to make them more palatable

within policy networks (Cairney & St Denny 2020). Cairney (2018) suggests forming coalitions with allies and engaging with other networks to help soften policymakers to an issue and its proposed solution.

The policy stream is heavily influenced by the quick action and foresight of policy entrepreneurs. These influential actors play a central role in the policymaking process by facilitating clear linkages between problems and available policy solutions (Cairney & St Denny 2020). Policy entrepreneurs understand when to strategically exploit windows of opportunity to promote and advocate for their preferred policy solutions (Cairney & St Denny 2020).

5.1.3. The Political Stream

The political stream links the process of policymaking and governance and describes the dynamic and unpredictable political environment within which policy decisions are made (Cairney & St Denny 2020). Policymakers must have the motive and opportunity to create policy for existing problems, which are influenced by a complex web of factors like the political climate, the national mood, shifts in public opinion, powerful interest groups, election cycles, and changes in government (Cairney & St Denny 2020; Hoefler, 2022). The political stream, often considered the most complex, presents the biggest potential barrier to policymaking (Hoefler 2022; Cairney & St Denny 2020). It is where a policy window opens and opportunities for action emerge (Hoefler, 2022). Policy entrepreneurs move quickly to package a problem with a solution before the window inevitably closes and the policy cycle forges ahead. Often, policymakers hold specific beliefs about problems and policies, making it difficult to encourage a different policy direction despite available problem-policy solution packages (Cairney & St Denny, 2020; Hoefler 2022).

Multiple Streams Analysis provides a helpful theoretical framework to understand the process of prioritizing issues, framing problems, and seizing “windows of opportunity” for successful policy implementation. However, MSA alone is not enough to explain why governments consistently struggle to design and implement policies that meaningfully impact complex social problems within society, like food insecurity. Policymaking, and the complex environments within which it operates, is more nuanced than MSA theory suggests.

5.2. Social Construction and Policy Design (SCPD)

MSA helps explain why even the most sophisticated policymaker cannot know every possible solution to a policy problem. A significant gap in MSA theory is that it overlooks the complex social environments within which policymaking occurs, and how policymakers navigate these complexities. Making quick judgement within fast-paced policy environments causes policymakers to “socially construct” narratives about situations and groups of people (Cairney & St Denny, 2020). These social constructions are stereotypes about groups of people based on culture, politics, socialization, history, media, religion, and other phenomena and are influenced by power dynamics, biases, and assumptions. While power is also a social construct, it plays a central role in shaping how different groups are perceived within society (Schneider & Ingram 1993).

Social construction is a powerful tool used to identify target populations. According to Cairney & St Denny (2020), “...prevention [as a policy aim] is a large collection of hotly contested policies. Each specific policy tells us something more about the assumptions of policymakers, the standard operating procedures of the department, or the values reinforced in the rules of public bodies” (p. 42). Making quick meaning of complex issues requires policymakers to use cognitive shortcuts that include relying on reductive stereotypes and overgeneralizations (Cairney & St Denny, 2020). Social constructions have long-lasting impacts on target groups within society. Overtime, they become institutionalized within the public discourse, making them difficult to overcome (Cairney & St Denny, 2020).

Social Construction and Policy Design (SCPD) uses the concept of social construction to explain why some groups disproportionately benefit from policies while others are burdened by them (Cairney & St Denny, 2020; Pierce et al., 2014; Schneider & Ingram 1993). Policymaking and social construction have a bi-directional relationship which creates a dangerous feedback loop. Policy design is profoundly influenced by socially constructed values, ideas, and characteristics attributed to target groups (Cairney & St Denny, 2020; Pierce et al., 2014; Ingram & Schneider 1993). These policy decisions signal to society how certain groups should be treated, which reinforces stereotypes and power imbalances (Cairney & St Denny, 2020; Ingram & Schneider 1993; Pierce et al., 2014). To explain this, Schneider & Ingram (1993) constructed a matrix to explain how power and social construction converge to create four types of target groups in society: *advantaged*, *dependents*, *contenders*, and *deviants* (See Table 1) (Schneider &

Ingram 1993; Pierce et al 2014; Cairney & St Denny 2020). The concept of “deserving” vs “undeserving” groups is a consequence of social construction and can lead to some groups directly benefiting from policy decisions while others are burdened by them (Cairney & St Denny 2020; Pierce et al., 2014).

Table 1: Schneider & Ingram on the social construction of different groups in society

Social Construction	High Power Groups	Low Power Groups
Positive	<p style="text-align: center;">Advantaged</p> <p>Powerful and positively constructed. Characteristics: intelligent, motivated, good. Their problems are considered important public problems. They both influence and benefit from policy</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Dependents</p> <p>Low power and positively constructed. Characteristics: helpless, needy. They have little influence over public policy. Helping this group “feels good” to advantaged groups</p>
Negative	<p style="text-align: center;">Contenders</p> <p>Powerful and negatively constructed. Characteristics: corrupt, self-interested, controversial. They privately influence public policy. Seen as in conflict with others’ interests</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Deviants</p> <p>Low power and negatively constructed. Characteristics: lazy, cheaters, bad. They are blamed for their problems and public policy seeks to punish this group</p>

Sources: Schneider & Ingram (1993); Cairney & St Denny (2020); Pierce et al., (2014)

Public policy serves as a tool to address social problems and maintain social order. Constructing target groups to maintain societal power imbalances exacerbates inequality, discrimination, and inequitable access to resources (Cairney & St Denny 2020; Pierce et al., 2014). Policymakers often strategically design policies to favour powerful groups and protect their interests, frequently at the expense of less powerful and more negatively viewed groups (Cairney & St Denny 2020; Pierce et al., 2014; Schneider & Ingram 1993). Debates about social policy in general and prevention policy in particular are influenced by powerful social constructs that shape perceptions of who is at risk and why. These social constructs, driven by societal biases and assumptions influence which groups are deemed deserving of support, which issues are prioritized, and how resources are allocated. As a result, policy decisions may reinforce existing inequalities rather than prevent them. Later in the paper, we see how food insecurity policy decisions are influenced by these social constructions.

5.3. Complexity Theory

SCPD theory explores how policy is influenced by socially constructed narratives that shape perceptions of deservingness, while also reinforcing existing power structures and social inequalities. However, SCPD fails to fully consider that these social constructs are fluid and exist within continuously evolving systems. Complexity theory adds yet more depth to the paradox of prevention policy by recognizing that policymaking occurs within interconnected and non-linear systems, where multiple converging factors influence each other in dynamic and unpredictable ways (Cairney & St Denny 2020; Cairney 2022). Complexity theory emphasizes that policymaking involves many actors from diverse institutions and networks across various contexts. These actors interact with each other and share information to create diverse systems of thought and behaviour that converge to influence policy decision-making (Cairney & St Denny 2020). Given the dynamic nature of social systems, complexity theory highlights the importance of taking flexible and adaptive approaches to addressing complex social problems. Finally, it recognizes the process by which policy outcomes create feedback loops that influence future problem recognition, policy development, and political dynamics (Cairney & St Denny 2020; Cairney 2022). Changes to any part of the system can have cascading effects on other parts, often in unexpected ways (Cairney & St Denny 2020; Cairney 2022).

Complex systems have several properties including positive and negative feedback and path dependence that influence how policy is designed and whether it sustains (Cairney & St Denny 2020). The concept of positive and negative feedback is rooted in the limited nature of human cognition. As already highlighted through SCPD, these limitations lead to cognitive shortcuts. When policymakers receive information about an issue, they either choose to ignore it (negative feedback) or pay close attention to it (positive feedback). Negative feedback perpetuates inaction, which can produce long periods of policy stability and create “intractable” policy problems (Cairney 2012; Cairney & St Denny 2020). Positive feedback increases the likelihood that policy will change.

The phrase “governments lack political will” is often invoked to explain why some problems persist, including social problems like food insecurity. “Lack of political will” suggests that the main barrier to effective policy design is the determination of political leaders (Greer 2022). Distilling the policymaking process down to the will of leaders oversimplifies the complex systems within which policy is designed, including the interactions between diverse

stakeholders, complicated power dynamics, and the institutions that influence decision making (Greer 2022). Complexity theory provides a deeper and more nuanced understanding of why policy actors and political leaders often struggle to adequately address complex social issues (Cairney & St Denny 2020). Further, even if a policymaker is aware of the evidence supporting a policy, it may not be politically or financially feasible, or the broader system within which it exists might be uncertain or unpredictable (Cairney 2022). Rather than a “lack of political will”, it may be that factors within complex policy systems prevent some policies from coming to fruition.

Path dependence is another characteristic of complex policy systems. It is the tendency for policy commitments to produce “increasing returns” overtime, making it difficult to change a previously implemented policy (Cairney 2012; Cairney & St Denny 2020). As societies and institutions adapt to existing policy, it becomes more costly to change paths (Cairney, 2012). As a result, most policy decisions are based on existing legislation that has become routine and often institutionalized (Cairney & St Denny 2020). Path dependence is appealing as it can feign the appearance that governments are “doing something” about an important policy issue, while falling back on institutionalized “quick fixes” that are acceptable to the public (Cairney 2022).

To break the cycle of recycling the policy of their predecessors, policy entrepreneurs can take charge to determine whether previous policy decisions are relevant or simply a reflection of path dependence. Part of this work is to diversify and expand policy options beyond what already exist (Cairney 2022; Cairney & St Denny 2020). The concept of ‘emergence’ within complexity theory describes how policy shifts may occur despite central government control. In essence, ‘emergence’ describes how large systems (e.g., institutionalized policy) may shift or change in response to the interactions of smaller elements that contribute to the system (i.e., smaller actors like provincial or local government, or community organization) (Cairney & St Denny 2020). In other words, local level actors can cause unpredictable shifts within institutionalized policy, “despite attempts by central governments to control the system” (Cairney & St Denny 2020 Pp. 56). The concept of emergence suggests that decentralized policymaking that involves diverse stakeholders can reveal the complexities of a policy issue and potentially disrupt existing patterns of path dependence (Cairney & St Denny 2020).

The environments within which policymaking occurs are complex, dynamic, and steeped in complicated power dynamics. Policymakers’ cognitive limitations hinder their ability to focus

on concurrent and competing issues, which impacts their ability to engage in the systems-based thinking required to address complex prevention policy issues. Cairney and St Denny (2020) explore these challenges using three theories, Multiple Streams Analysis (MSA), Social Construction and Policy Design (SCPD), and Complexity Theory (CT). MSA emphasizes the fleeting opportunities for policy change amidst cognitive limitations and multiple competing issues. It examines the concept of "windows of opportunity" for policy change, which occur when conditions align for policymakers to highlight their preferred issues. SCPD explores how social constructs and power dynamics influence policy design, including who benefits. Complexity theory underscores the interconnectedness and unpredictability of policy systems and emphasizes the importance of adaptive, decentralized approaches to policymaking. Together, these three theories provide deeper insight into the paradox of prevention policy by highlighting that policy decision making is shaped by more than just evidence. To understand the paradox of food insecurity policy, we must first examine the problem of household food insecurity in Canada.

SECTION 6: HOUSEHOLD FOOD INSECURITY IN CANADA

“Food insecurity will not be solved by casseroles made in community kitchens, the repurposing of two-legged carrots, donated cranberry sauce or even the current government approach of hopes and prayers. Food insecurity is an income issue that requires income-based interventions.” – Paul Taylor⁹

Household food insecurity serves as a valuable case study for understanding the paradox of prevention policy, where governments acknowledge the importance of preventing negative health and social outcomes but frequently fall short in addressing the root causes. In the case of food insecurity, the paradox is this: Canadian governments continue to invest in programs that may provide short-term relief to some, but they struggle to implement more long-term solutions that tackle the root cause of food insecurity. This gap between understanding a problem and taking commensurate action perpetuates the existence of this preventable public health problem. This section provides an in-depth overview of the state of household food insecurity in Canada.

⁹ Foden, J. (2022). What is food insecurity? FoodShare’s Paul Taylor explains (plus what we can do about it). *Food Network Canada*. <https://www.foodnetwork.ca/article/what-is-food-insecurity/>

6.1. Food insecurity within the broader context of food security

To accurately define food insecurity in Canada, it must first be examined within the broader context of *food security*. Food security means that “everyone has equitable access to food that is affordable, culturally preferable, nutritious and safe; everyone has the agency to participate in, and influence food systems; and that food systems are resilient, ecologically sustainable, socially just, and honour Indigenous food sovereignty” (BCCDC 2022). It is a complex web of social, cultural, economic, environmental, sustainability, justice, sovereignty, and political issues. Food security encompasses a wide range of issues including effective and efficient food utilization; production, processing, and consumption processes; and the presence of local, stable, and resilient food systems (BCCDC 2022; FAO 2024; OECD 2016). Food security also involves international relations and global trade, food sovereignty and social justice, climate change mitigation and ecological resilience, and international development priorities – all of which intersect to ensure safe and equitable access to food for all (OECD 2016; BCCDC 2022). Food security is a “wicked” problem, one that requires a combination of interdisciplinary solutions across a diverse range of industries and disciplines, involving many actors, organizations, advocates, researchers, experts, and Rights Holders, who each bring unique, but equally important perspectives on how to advance and protect food security.

Food insecurity “exists when factors outside an individual’s control negatively impact their access to enough foods that promote wellbeing. Economic, social, environmental, and geographical factors influence this access. It is most acutely felt by those who experience the negative impacts of structural inequities, such as discrimination and on-going colonial practices” (BCCDC 2022). Food security and food insecurity are not antonyms and the distinction between them is important within the Canadian context. In Canada and other OECD countries, food security encompasses a wide range of issues, whereas food insecurity, or *household* food insecurity specifically, is the inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints (Li et al., 2023; Li et al., 2015; Tarasuk et al., 2021; Tarasuk et al., 2022a). Household food insecurity is rooted in economic disparity and income inequality (Wakefield et al., 2012; Li et al., 2023; Li et al., 2015; Tarasuk et al., 2021; Tarasuk et al., 2022a), which stem from structural inequity, historical marginalization, and oppression, leading to unequal distribution of resources in society (Li et al., 2023; Li et al., 2015; Tarasuk et al., 2021; Dhunna & Tarasuk et al, 2021).

For the purposes of this paper, *household food insecurity* and *food insecurity* are used interchangeably.

6.2. Hunger versus food insecurity

Hunger is a term often used interchangeably with household food insecurity, but they are different, and distinguishing between them has important policy implications. Hunger is a specific physiological condition that can result from food insecurity, whereas food insecurity describes the socioeconomic conditions that limit, restrict, or cause precarious access to food (Ontario Dietitians in Public Health 2020). Framing hunger as interchangeable with household food insecurity risks shifting policy solutions towards food programming and away from preventive social policies that address socioeconomic deprivation (United States Department of Agriculture, 2019). Conflating food insecurity and hunger contributes to the framing of household food insecurity as a problem that can be solved through food.

6.3. The problem of household food insecurity in Canada

The problem of household food insecurity in Canada is rapidly worsening (Li et al., 2023; PROOF 2024). Between 2021 and 2023 rates of food insecurity rose by seven percent, from 15.9% to 22.9%, respectively (Tarasuk et al., 2022a; Li et al., 2023; PROOF 2024). In 2023, 1.8 million more households experienced food insecurity, for a total of 8.7 million Canadians, including 2.1 million children under the age of 18¹⁰ (Li et al., 2023; PROOF 2024). Data for the territories is collected separately. In 2022 Nunavut, the Northwest Territories, and Yukon households experienced household food insecurity at rates of 46.1%, 22.2%, and 12.8%, respectively. The 2022 rates were the highest ever recorded in the 17-year history of data collection, until the 2023 numbers shattered that record.

These statistics are deeply concerning. Experiencing food insecurity early in life, particularly severe food insecurity, is a significant adverse childhood experience that can leave permanent social, physical, and psychological scars. Children living in food insecure homes are more likely to access services for mental health and/or substance use disorders, which are also growing public health concerns in Canada (Anderson 2023). Food insecure households include those who:

¹⁰ Rates for Indigenous communities are likely higher due to lack of representation of people living on First Nations reserves and some remote Northern communities in the national surveys that monitor food insecurity in Canada (PROOF 2024).

- Worry about running out of food and/or have limited food selection – *marginal food insecurity*,
- Compromise the quality and/or quantity of food to make it last longer – *moderate food insecurity*,
- Reduce food intake or skip meals – *severe food insecurity* (Tarasuk et al., 2021; Tarasuk et al., 2022a; Li et al., 2023).

The risk of experiencing marginal, moderate, or severe food insecurity is influenced by a variety of factors including age, household type, home ownership, source and amount of income, immigrant status, racial identity, gender identity or sexual orientation, and disability status.

6.4. Household food insecurity and income inequality

Household food insecurity is closely linked to poverty and material deprivation. The Government of Canada does not have a single official definition of poverty but assesses it using three measures: Low Income Cut-offs, the Market Basket Measure, or the Low-Income Measure (Government of Canada 2022). Material deprivation, on the other hand, refers to a household's inability to afford basic goods and services as well as non-material aspects of living (e.g., participation in activities) that are widely considered essential for an acceptable standard of living (Mendelson et al., 2024). Measuring material deprivation may be more sensitive to the presence of poverty in Canada, as it considers the adequacy of resources to achieve a decent quality of life, even when income is above the poverty line (Mendelson et al., 2024; Notten & Kaplan 2021). While a detailed comparison of the Material Deprivation Index (MDI) and Canada's poverty measures is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note that food insecurity serves as both an indicator of material deprivation and a measure of income-based poverty. The MDI assesses material deprivation through food insecurity by assessing whether households can afford specific items like protein-rich foods, whereas income-based measures like the MBM focus on income relative to the cost of a basket of goods (Mendelson et al., 2024; Notten & Kaplan 2021; Government of Canada 2024).

Regardless of the measurement used, the relationship between income, poverty, and food insecurity is well documented. Low-income households, those dependent on social assistance programs or disability benefits, and individuals with limited assets, high debt, or poor credit are at significantly higher risk of food insecurity. (Tarasuk et al., 2021; Tarasuk et al., 2022; Li et al., 2023). These households are more likely to fall behind on bills, cancel essential services, live in unsafe housing, and lack the financial stability to withstand financial shocks like a sudden loss of

income, a sharp rise in the cost of living, or serious illness (Li et al., 2023; Tarasuk et al., 2021; Tarasuk et al., 2022a).

Households reliant on government social assistance programs like provincial welfare and disability support are most at risk for experiencing household food insecurity. In 2022, the rate of food insecurity among social assistance recipients was 69.9%, with 36.9% experiencing severe food insecurity (Li et al., 2023). The rate of food insecurity among these households was eight times higher than the overall rate across the ten provinces, indicating that these programs do not provide sufficient income to support an adequate standard of living (Tarasuk et al., 2021; Tarasuk et al., 2022a; Li et al., 2023). Canadians earning low wages are also at a high risk for food insecurity. In 2022, 17% of households reliant on wages, salaries, and self-employment were food insecure (Li et al., 2023). According to Food Bank Canada's 2023 Hunger Report, 17% of people accessing food banks across Canada were working (Food Banks Canada 2023). The risk of household food insecurity drops slightly – from 17% to 15.4% – for individuals receiving public pensions, which generally provide a better income floor than social assistance and minimum wage (Li et al., 2023).

A lack of assets also puts households at risk of experiencing food insecurity. For instance, renting, as opposed to ownership, is linked to higher rates of household food insecurity in Canada (Tarasuk et al., 2021; Tarasuk et al., 2022a; Li et al., 2023). In 2022, renters represented the majority of food insecure households – 51.3% (Li et al., 2023). Of all Canadians who rented, 27.5% experienced household food insecurity compared to 16.4% of homeowners with a mortgage and 8.4% of homeowners without a mortgage (Li et al., 2023). This disparity in risk between homeowners and renters has been consistent across previous household food insecurity reports, indicating that renters are generally more financially vulnerable and at a higher risk of experiencing food insecurity (Tarasuk & Mitchell, 2020; Tarasuk et al., 2022a; Li et al., 2023).

6.5. Household food insecurity demographics

Systemic inequity and the unequal distribution of power and resources increase the risk of experiencing household food insecurity. These inequities manifest in many ways, including racism, ableism, misogyny, queer- and homophobia, and colonialism, among others (Li et al., 2023; Dhunna & Tarasuk, 2021; Marmot, 2015). Marginalized and historically oppressed communities are more likely to experience low socioeconomic status, poverty, and material deprivation (Marmot, 2015; Marmot, 2016; PROOF 2024; Li et al., 2023; Dhunna & Tarasuk,

2021; Banting & Thompson 2021). These groups face significantly higher risks of experiencing household food insecurity, and they include:

- people who rely on social assistance, employment insurance, or workers’ compensation, (Bale-Nick, 2022)
- lone parent households headed by women (Li et al., 2023),
- unattached (single) individuals (Li et al., 2023),
- individuals living in rentals (Li et al., 2023; Bale-Nick, 2018)
- Indigenous Peoples living on and off reserve (Fitzpatrick et al., 2015)
- racialized individuals who identify as Black, Arab, Filipino, South Asian, Southeast Asian, and Latin American (Li et al., 2023; Fitzpatrick et al, 2015, Tarasuk et al., 2019)
- individuals living with a disability or who rely on disability benefits (Schwartz e al., 2019; Tarasuk et al., 2022a; Li et al., 2023)
- individuals who are part of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community (Russomanno et al., 2019; Waite et al., 2019; PHAC, 2018; Hou et al., 2024)

In Canada, household food insecurity disproportionately affects racialized communities (Tarasuk et al., 2021; Li et al., 2023). Non-white households are at a higher risk of experiencing food insecurity than white households (*See Table 2*) (Tarasuk et al., 2021& Li et al., 2023). Black individuals are 2 to 3.5 times more likely to experience food insecurity compared to their white counterparts (Foden 2022; Dhunna & Tarasuk 2021; Li et al., 2023; PROOF 2024). This disparity is driven by socially constructed barriers beyond income, like historical marginalization, racism and discrimination, and systemic oppression. These forms of structural inequity drive Black households and other marginalized groups into financial deprivation, putting them at a greater risk of experiencing food insecurity (Block et al., 2021; Dhunna & Tarasuk 2021). Racial minorities face greater challenges accumulating financial savings and assets over their lifetimes and across generations compared to their white counterparts (Block et al., 2021; Banting & Thompson 2021; Yassin et al., 2024). These communities have lower overall earnings, fewer capital gains, and are granted less access to Canada’s social safety net programs and other resources that could mitigate food insecurity (Block et al., 2019).

Table 2: Racialization of household food insecurity

Racial status	Percentage of individuals living in food insecure households (%)
Black	40.4
Indigenous peoples*	36.8
Filipino	27.0
Arab	25.8
Other/multiple	21.0
Southeast Asian	25.3
South Asian	23.8

Latin American	31.1
Chinese	19.0
White	20.3

*Calculation only includes Indigenous Peoples living off-reserve

Data source: PROOF 2024

The widespread impact of discrimination across various groups in Canada underscores the complexity of food insecurity and the limitations of existing policies. Despite rising food insecurity, especially among marginalized communities, current income redistribution efforts fall short of tackling the underlying causes. Universal income redistribution programs like a Universal Basic Income can help address poverty more equitably across populations. By providing adequate financial support to everyone, these programs create sustainable solutions to income disparities, with a critical focus on historically marginalized communities (Basic Income Network 2021; Banting & Thompson 2021).

SECTION 7: THE FOOD INSECURITY POLICY LANDSCAPE IN CANADA

"If you frame the issue of hunger as hunger, you get a food solution and you get charity. If you frame the issue of hunger as poverty, which is actually where it sits, you get policy and a more human rights-based focus on how you solve the problem." — Nick Saul¹¹

Despite clear evidence of effective policy solutions, household food insecurity rates in Canada continue to climb. This underscores the paradox of prevention policy, especially in the context of food insecurity. Despite a strong body of evidence showing that income redistribution policies and programs are more effective than short-term, food-focused interventions, the latter continue to dominate the food insecurity discourse in Canada. To prepare for the in-depth discussion on the paradox of food insecurity policy, this section provides a high-level overview of the current food insecurity policy landscape in Canada, with more detailed descriptions of specific policies and programs provided later in the paper.

7.1. Household food insecurity: food-focused policies and programs

Food-focused policies and programs are the most prevalent interventions used to address household food insecurity in Canada, despite ongoing debates about their effectiveness in tackling the root causes (Tarasuk & Mitchell 2020; Tarasuk et al., 2022a; Li et al., 2023). Food distribution initiatives like food banks and other charitable food programs are the most

¹¹ Saul, N. (2020). Transcript: poverty, food, and COVID-19. *TVOntario*. <https://www.tvo.org/transcript/2612426>

widespread approach. Organizations like Food Banks Canada and other provincial and local food banks distribute millions of pounds of food to a growing number of Canadians annually (Food Banks Canada 2023). Similarly, food (re)distribution and waste diversion programs like Loop Resource and Second Harvest reduce the amount of food that goes to landfills, while also claiming to address food insecurity by redirecting most of the food to charitable organizations (Loop 2024; Second Harvest 2024). Policies that offer tax incentives for food waste reduction further support these initiatives by incentivizing businesses and large food corporations to donate food waste instead of sending it to the landfill (National Zero Waste Council 2018).

Food-focused policies and programs are widely promoted in Canada as effective solutions to food insecurity, yet they provide little evidence of addressing the financial disparities (Huisken et al., 2016; Tarasuk et al., 2021; Tarasuk et al., 2022a; Tarasuk et al., 2022b; Li et al., 2023). Community-based initiatives like community kitchens and government-led efforts like the National School Food Program (which aims to provide meals to 400,000 school children annually) are promoted as key interventions to address food insecurity in Canada by providing free or low-cost food (Office of the Prime Minister of Canada 2024; Romero 2024; Cheung 2024; Smith 2023). Nutrition and food skills programs like garden projects are programs that seek to empower individuals with the knowledge and skills necessary to make good food choices. However, these programs are often framed as food insecurity interventions, which perpetuates the narrative that food provision and skill-building programs address the needs of food insecure households (Guelph-Wellington Food Charter Toolkit 2013; Leeds, Grenville and Lanark County 2019). This frame obscures the reality that financial deprivation is the root cause of food insecurity and diverts attention and resources from income redistribution policies.

7.2. Household food insecurity: income redistribution policies and program

As household after-tax income increases, the risk of food insecurity decreases (Tarasuk et al., 2021; Tarasuk et al., 2022a; Li et al., 2023). Despite the commitment to the 1996 Rome Declaration on Food Security and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Canada has made limited progress in developing effective income redistribution policies to address rising food insecurity (McIntyre et al., 2018; Li et al., 2023; UN 1948; UN 1996). Income assistance programs and income supplements provide direct financial support to low-income households and some of these programs have moved the needle on household food insecurity in certain population sub-groups (McIntyre et al., 2018; Tarasuk et al 2014; Men et al., 2021; Ionescu-Ittu

et al., 2015; McIntyre et al., 2016b; Loopstra et al., 2015; Li et al, 2015; Brown & Tarasuk, 2019; Pratt 2023). The Canada Child Benefit, a monthly tax-exempt cash benefit for eligible households with children under six has been shown to significantly reduce moderate to severe food insecurity among households with young children (Men et al., 2023). Additionally, the Guaranteed Income Supplement contributes to the reduction in food insecurity rates seen in people over 65 (McIntyre et al., 2016b; Tarasuk et al., 2019; Tarasuk et al., 2021; Tarasuk et al., 2022a; Li et al., 2023). Over the years, several provinces have implemented income redistribution programs that have successfully reduced poverty, such as the Ontario Child Benefit (Tarasuk et al., 2019) and Newfoundland and Labrador’s poverty reduction strategy (2007 – 2012), which included increased social assistance rates (Loopstra et al., 2015). Despite their success, most of these programs were short-lived.

The food insecurity policy landscape in Canada focuses predominantly on charity, food distribution, and education programs. Despite their claims, these federal, provincial, and community-based programs fail to reduce rates of food insecurity in Canada. This focus on short-term solutions diverts attention from more impactful income redistribution policies, highlighting the disconnect between evidence-based approaches and the dominant food insecurity policy narrative in Canada. The next section will explore why governments struggle to implement policies that effectively address household food insecurity. This will be achieved by weaving together the three theories put forward by Cairney & St Denny (2020) and the case of food insecurity in Canada.

SECTION 8: THE PARADOX OF FOOD INSECURITY POLICY IN CANADA

“Food banks allow some people to be less hungry. That’s all. They can’t even begin to address the deep chasm of poverty and its underlying gender, racist, and ableist inequities” – Elaine Power, Paul Taylor, and Valerie Tarasuk¹²

When civil society is dissatisfied with a policy decision (or lack thereof), they often claim “the government lacks the political will” to address the issue. This phrase simplifies complex societal problems into a single cause, which can discourage deeper inquiry into the underlying reasons for ineffective action. Shifting all blame to the government prevents a more nuanced understanding of an issue, its complexity, the broader environment, and the roles of other actors.

¹² Power, E., Taylor, P., & Tarasuk, V. (2021). Food drives are not the answer to poverty and hunger. *The Toronto Star*. <https://www.thestar.com/opinion>

In this way, “lack of political will” functions as a *thought terminating cliché*, a simple catchphrase that shuts down critical thinking and problem solving (Montell 2024). Such phrases often take a defeatist tone (Montell 2024), akin to the political discourse version of, “it is what it is”. Rather than examining *why* governments often fail to implement prevention policies, this statement shifts all responsibility onto the government, overlooking the broader politics of agency – who holds the power, how it is distributed, and the constraints political leaders face (Greer 2022). While such critiques may sometimes be justified, they often overlook the complex realities of the political landscape. Further, the repeated use of this phrase can condition the mind to accept it as an unquestioned truth that shapes decision-making (Montell 2024). Calling for government-led solutions while simultaneously relying on clichés that accuse the government of lacking political will creates a contradiction that can ultimately lead to inaction (Montell 2024).

The phrase “lack of political will” is often used to explain inaction around public health issues like food insecurity (Greer 2022; LeBlanc 2023). In reality, the factors influencing food insecurity policy are far more nuanced and complex than government inaction alone. Using MSA, SCPD, and Complexity Theory, this section of the paper looks beyond “lack of political will” to offer an in-depth analysis of the paradox of food insecurity policy in Canada, specifically why policies often fail to address the root causes and why this misalignment persists despite decades of research and advocacy.

8.1. Multiple streams analysis and food insecurity

8.1.1. The Problem Stream – household food insecurity

It is widely agreed that food insecurity is bad, but there is far less consensus on what should be done about it. For decades, food insecurity has been framed primarily as a problem of food access or skills, rather than as an issue of income inequality. These incorrect narratives have profoundly shaped the food insecurity policy landscape (Tarasuk et al., 2021; Tarasuk et al., 2022a; Tarasuk et al., 2022b; Li et al., 2023). The primary approaches to addressing food insecurity have included food distribution and provision, food (re)distribution, and nutrition education and skill-building. The least effective approach, which addresses income inequality and material deprivation, has received comparatively less attention in the policy space. Each of these frames is examined below, with examples of related interventions.

Frame 1 – Food distribution and provision

Distribution: Food banking and charitable giving

Terms like “charitable giving” and “putting food on the table” elicit warm feelings of generosity, good will, and community solidarity. These ubiquitous phrases lead to the perception that charity is a noble and effective way to help those “in need” (Azadian et al., 2023; Power et al., 2021). Framing food insecurity in this way is insidious and distracts from the real problem of income inequality. Canada has spent 40+ years framing food insecurity as a temporary, emergency situation where a household or individual suddenly and unexpectedly finds themselves in need of food. This framing, which focuses on the *temporary lack of food*, directs policy interventions toward food provision policies and programs like food banks, soup kitchens, food pantries, and other food types of organizations that provide free or low-cost food.

In 2020 the federal government announced \$100 million in funding to food banks across Canada with Prime Minister Trudeau claiming that, “*Many Canadians rely on food banks and local food organizations to feed their families and find support in hard times. Now, with more Canadians turning to these supports, and donations and available volunteers decreasing, they need our help more than ever*” (Office of the Prime Minister of Canada 2020). The Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food, The Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau further stressed that “*Food banks and local food organizations are on the front lines making sure people get essential food support in their time of need*”(Office of the Prime Minister of Canada 2020). Framing “food as instrumental in the fight against food insecurity” was widespread prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and it remains the dominant frame.

Tarasuk et al., (2020) define food banking as “the mobilization of food donations and volunteer labour within communities to provide food to those in need” (Pp. 841). Food banks originated in the USA in the 1960s but have since spread to many other Western nations including Australia, the UK, and other European countries (Tarasuk et al., 2020; Riches 2002; Riches 2018; Azadian 2023). In the early 1980s, the combination of a deep recession onset and an inadequate federal unemployment insurance program led to the appearance of food banks, which were meant to be a temporary solution for households struggling financially (Tarasuk et al., 1996; Riches 2002; Riches 2018; Azadian 2023). Since then, food banking in Canada has become synonymous with food insecurity and food banks have become institutionalized across Canada while the social welfare system has declined (Tarasuk et al., 1996; Riches 2002; Ronson & Caraher 2015). Throughout the 1990s, robust social programs became increasingly stringent

and penalized people for failing to move quickly into the workforce (Riches 2002; Tarasuk et al., 1996). As social protections waned, governments downloaded social responsibility to citizens through promoting charitable giving as an important act of solidarity and framed charity as the most effective anti-poverty solutions (Riches 2002; Riches 2018; Tarasuk et al., 1996). This careful framing of food insecurity has been supported by powerful food corporations and large civil society organizations (CSO) like Food Banks Canada (FBC), the National Zero Waste Council (NZWC), and Second Harvest Food Rescue (SHFR) who satisfy corporate interests by shifting focus away from causes of income inequality like inadequate wages and social safety nets and towards less controversial interventions like food redistribution and charity (Azadian 2023; Mendly-Zambo & Raphael 2019; Mendly-Zambo et al., 2021; Riches 2022; Riches 2018). Today, food banks are the primary intervention associated with household food insecurity in Canada.

Provision: meal program

Promoting food programs, nutrition education, or school gardens as effective food insecurity interventions contributes to the narrative that food insecurity is a food availability, education, or skills issue. In April, Budget 2024 committed \$1 billion to a National School Food Program (Office of the Prime Minister of Canada 2024), with Prime Minister Trudeau stating, *“For moms and dads, it will mean the peace of mind that your kids are taken care of and do not go hungry. For kids, it will mean healthy meals – helping them learn, grow, and reach their full potential... The Program will be a safety net for the kids who need this support the most. The lack of access to food disproportionately impacts children from lower-income families and from racialized and Indigenous communities. With this program, we’re getting healthy food on the plates of growing kids”* (The Office of the Prime Minister 2024). After the release of the budget, food insecurity experts quickly pushed back on this announcement, stating that *“This problem of inadequate access to food due to financial constraints denotes a broader experience of financial hardship and material deprivation.... school meals cannot resolve food insecurity for the same reason food provision initiatives cannot; they do not deal with the impoverish financial circumstances [of families]”* (Tarasuk et al., 2022b). The NSFP is promoted as an evidence-based strategy to reduce food insecurity among children and their families, which creates a problematic and incorrect narrative that school meal programs can successfully address the financial deprivation at the root of household food insecurity.

All levels of government in Canada perceive food programs as effective solutions to address food insecurity. To understand the nature of food insecurity framing across governments and political parties in Canada, McIntyre et al., (2016a; 2018) examined legislative debate records from 1995 – 2012. The research team looked into four Canadian jurisdictions: the federal government and the provinces of British Columbia, Nova Scotia, and Ontario. The researchers found that references to food insecurity emphasized food as instrumental in addressing the issue, with considerable focus on food programs. Statements like that from the NDP Official Opposition (2007) highlight this perception; *“Kids who are hungry at school don’t learn well... we strongly encourage governments to fully adopt and implement ... funding to expand community kitchen and school hot meal programs....”* (McIntyre et al., 2018 Pp. 155). McIntyre et al. (2016a; 2018) highlight that Canada has incorrectly framed the causes of food insecurity for decades, making it extremely difficult to shift the narrative. While food provision and distribution programs may offer other valuable benefits to communities like social connection and reduced isolation, they do not address the financial deprivation underlying food insecurity (Community Food Centres Canada n.d.).

Frame 2 – Food (re)distribution

In addition to traditional food banking, school meal programs, and community food initiatives, food waste diversion and redistribution have gained popularity as strategies to prevent food waste by redirecting food destined for landfills. Originally an effort aimed at reducing greenhouse gases emitted from decomposing food, these programs are now promoted as solutions to food insecurity (National Zero Waste Council 2018). Governments use policies like tax incentives to support food waste diversion, but organizations such as The National Zero Waste Council often present these measures as solutions to food insecurity rather than as part of broader climate change mitigation strategies (National Zero Waste Council 2018; Mendly-Zambo & Raphael 2019). (National Zero Waste Council 2018; Mendly-Zambo & Raphael 2019). While these organizations correctly highlight the environmental impacts of food waste, linking food waste reduction and redistribution to food insecurity perpetuates the misleading narrative that food insecurity is primarily a problem of food availability rather than financial deprivation. Additionally, many view the reliance on food waste as a means to address food insecurity as undignified and stigmatizing (McIntyre et al., 2017).

Diverting food waste to food insecure households is a powerful food redistribution frame in the fight to address food insecurity. This frame is appealing to those who support food charity and those committed to addressing food waste for environmental protection (Riches 2018). However, this frame conflates the problem of food waste with income inequality, which can lead to similar policy decision making as Frame 1, i.e., the provision of food to address food insecurity. Diverting food waste is seen as a “win-win” – it protects the environment while also feeding people (Riches 2018; Tung 2022). Like food provision programming, food redistribution programs do not change the economic conditions at the root of food insecurity. They do, however, incentivize large food corporations and grocery stores to divert their food waste to food charities, who are then burdened with the task of sorting all that is donated (Riches 2018). This is the power of framing; instead of working to reduce food waste and simultaneously ensure Canadians have adequate income, these programs and policies use the former to “address” the latter.

Frame 3 – Nutrition education and food skills training

Nutrition education

Nutrition education and skill-building programs are often mistakenly conflated with effective food insecurity interventions. Initiatives like community gardens, greenhouses, food skills kitchens, and school food education are often created as a means to combat food insecurity across the lifespan (Huisken et al., 2016). However, while these programs contribute to broader food security efforts by improving food skills and local food availability, they cannot alleviate poverty, particularly for households facing severe food insecurity.

Moreover, such programs reinforce the individual lifestyle discourse prevalent in public health, which frames sickness as a result of personal behavior and poor lifestyle choices. In Canada and many other Western nations, food insecurity is framed as an individual issue, like inability to properly budget or food illiteracy (Huisken et al., 2016; Mendly-Zambo & Raphael, 2019). This perspective was highlighted in the study conducted by McIntyre et al., (2018). The same 2007 statement about kids going to school hungry goes on to provide recommendations to address food insecurity among school aged children, including “...*agriculture and classroom studies and additional programs to enforce healthy eating habits among BC’s students*” (by the NDP Official Opposition McIntyre 2018 Pp. 155). The latter half of this statement, particularly the word *enforce*, is key to understanding how the “individual lifestyle” frame downloads

responsibility and blame onto individuals, in this case onto children. Framing childhood food insecurity as a skills-based issue suggests that they have the agency to change their household financial situation, something over which children have no control. Certainly, learning about different food within neutral and relaxed settings is an important part of child development, but punishing children by “enforcing” specific eating patterns that may be more expensive, time consuming to prepare, or difficult to procure (Bukambu et al., 2020) offers a clear example of the power of framing and its ability to shift social change.

Framing the problem of food insecurity as an individual responsibility perpetuates misleading public discourse about food insecurity and poverty, allowing governments to evade accountability (Mendly-Zambo & Raphael 2019; Tung et al., 2022; McIntyre et al., 2016a; McIntyre et al., 2018). Suggesting that hunger can be solved through education and enforcing specific eating habits sends a clear message: if you do not understand how to follow healthy eating patterns, falling into food insecurity is your fault. The fourth food insecurity frame helps shift food insecurity narratives away from individual responsibility and towards social and structural change.

8.1.1.4. Frame 4 – Income inequality and material deprivation:

Income and household food insecurity have an inverse relationship; as household income decreases, food insecurity rates increase (Tarasuk et al; 2021; Tarasuk et al., 2022a; Li et al., 2023). Framing food insecurity as an income inequality issue has the power to shift public discourse away from food (re)distribution to income redistribution (Tung et al., 2022; Tarasuk et al; 2021; Tarasuk et al., 2022a; Tarasuk et al., 2022b; Li et al., 2023). Those who frame household food insecurity around income inequality typically work within non-governmental spaces, including research, community activism, public health, or non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Governments are less likely to promote the income narrative (Tarasuk et al., 2014; Riches 2018; McIntyre et al., 2016a; McIntyre et al., 2018), so participation of these diverse actors within policymaking is crucial. However, evidence shows that when pushed, government actors understand and agree that food insecurity is a problem of an insufficient income (McIntyre et al., 2016a; McIntyre 2018). Further, The Food Policy for Canada explicitly states that income support programs that reduce poverty can also reduce food insecurity (Agriculture & Agri-Food Canada 2020). Despite these acknowledgements, concrete policy actions inevitably shift towards charity, food programming, and education (McIntyre et al.,

2016a; McIntyre et al., 2018). While the federal government links income to food insecurity in The Food Policy for Canada report, their main program, The Local Food Infrastructure Fund remains the primary tool to address food insecurity across Canada (Agriculture & Agri-Food Canada 2022).

Consensus on whether a problem exists is only the first step in effective policy design. The next step is far more challenging – agreeing on a frame that will successfully elicit effective solutions. Within Canadian policy discourse, food insecurity is predominantly framed as a lack of food rather than inadequate income or financial disparity. This incorrect framing perpetuates ineffective solutions like food banks and nutrition education programs, which fail to tackle the problem of insufficient income. Next, the policy stream explores why simple, *status quo* policies and programs often prevail.

8.1.2. The Policy Stream – household food insecurity

Most public health problems involve complex and intersecting social phenomena, making concrete solutions challenging to identify. Cairney & St Denny (2020) highlight that one attractive, yet potentially problematic, part of the policy stream is that prevention can be adopted as a broad idea lacking concrete policy instruments. The term *idea* can mean something vague or concrete, and household food insecurity policy falls into both categories (Cairney & St Denny 2020 Pp.41). Food insecurity as an income problem is a concrete idea, but the solution (i.e., more equitable income distribution) is vague, broad, and far more complex. This presents significant challenges within the context of fast-paced policy environments where priorities constantly shift (Cairney & St Denny 2020).

Decades of high-quality research identify inadequate income as the root cause of food insecurity, but the problem lies in translating that research into concrete policies that are readily available when policymakers turn their attention to the issue. The factors contributing to inadequate income are deeply complex and systemic, rooted in Canadian institutions that were built to perpetuate inequality. Income inequality intersects with many other social determinants like education, housing, material deprivation, exposure to marginalization and discrimination, and others (Li et al., 2023; Cairney & Sy Denny 2020). These determinants are shaped by the intersection of class, gender, ethnicity, and race, which are in turn influenced by the unequal power dynamics that facilitate issues like discrimination and marginalization (National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health 2022). The daunting nature of these complex

and intersecting issues, combined with a vague understanding of prevention policy shifts decision making towards policies that are more visible, action-oriented, measurable, and historically relevant (Cairney & St Denny 2020). Framing food insecurity as an issue of food facilitates policies and programs that are concrete and actionable, readily available for the brief policy window, and more politically appealing than tackling inequality. Organizing free food is much easier than designing income redistribution policies that tug at the fabric of our institutions (Riches 2002; Riches 2018; Fisher 2017). As time passes, these food-focused interventions have become entrenched in organizational, societal, and political food insecurity discourse in Canada (Riches 2002; Power 2019; Tarasuk & Li 2023).

Food insecurity experts understand this. Coalitions of researchers and advocates have long told a persuasive, evidence-based story that correctly frames the problem of food insecurity and offers clear and concrete policy solutions. They publish research that identifies the extent of food insecurity in Canada, the implications for society (e.g., economic, social, and healthcare costs), and repeatedly advocate for evidence-based solutions (e.g., increasing minimum wage, basic income programs, improving social assistance rates, and increasing the Canada Child Benefit). Using technical policy language, they communicate their findings through accessible sound bites and remain ready with policy solutions should the policy windows open (Brown & Tarasuk 2019; Men et al., 2023). Despite their efforts, income redistribution policies and programs are passed over for simpler and ineffective ones. The “battle of the frames” remains swayed in the direction of charity.

8.1.3. The Political Stream – household food insecurity

Social policy change, including food insecurity policies, is inherently political. As Paul Taylor (2023) aptly put it, "Anyone who tells you that food is not political, they're wrong." Food insecurity and income inequality are deeply intertwined with power, politics, and social justice (Taylor 2023; Dhunna & Tarasuk 2019). The political stream helps explain the intractability of effective food insecurity policy solutions by highlighting the complex intersection of elected officials' values and beliefs, national mood, competing interests, political agendas, and powerful interest groups (Cairney & St Denny 2020). To maximize a window of opportunity policy advocates, entrepreneurs, and interest groups must be skilled at efficiently connecting a single, clear problem with clear policy solution(s). Leading food insecurity researchers in Canada are skilled at this task, yet shifting policy towards structural change remains challenging.

The political stream creates a complex and challenging policy environment, which can hinder rather than help the policymaking process (Cairney & St Denny 2020). This is particularly true for issues where many policy interventions exist, and each interest group is vying for their preferred solution (Cairney & St Denny 2020). Organizations and interest groups have varying levels of power and influence, distinct relationships with government (e.g., in quality and length), and differ in their advocacy skills (Cairney & St Denny 2020). Income redistribution policies are shaped by federal and provincial governments, which makes it important for food insecurity advocacy groups to understand how different levels of government function and how leaders and elected officials perceive social issues like food insecurity (Cairney & St Denny 2020).

Assessing elected officials' values and beliefs

Government dialogue and ideology contribute to the intractability of food insecurity. As part of Canada's Westminster parliamentary system, sitting government and opposition leaders engage in legislative debates. This Question Period provides an opportunity for Canada's elected leaders to debate current issues (McIntyre et al., 2016a; House of Commons 2024). When McIntyre et al. (2016a; 2018) reviewed the Hansard records of legislative debates related to food insecurity (1995-2012), they found that, while many speakers from major political parties clearly linked low income to food insecurity and increased food bank use, few proposed income redistribution policies as a solution. Conservative Party and Reform Party speakers blamed the low income and food bank use on high taxes and a stagnant economy. Conservative speakers framed food insecurity as a problem of "big government" and their financial management failures (i.e., high taxes) and stressed the moral authority to protect private wealth (e.g., through tax reforms). These comments show that, while Conservative and Reform Party elected officials made the connection between low income and food bank use, their proposed interventions did not include income redistribution policies. Instead, they focused on the importance of building a robust economy that produces long-term jobs, which are "*the best social program of all*" (REF Opposition, McIntyre et al., 2018 Pp. 156).

In general, socially progressive parties focused on the moral obligation of governments to fight poverty and protect Canadian citizens through robust social policies (McIntyre et al., 2016a;2018). In one instance, an NDP Opposition leader (federal) framed the existence of food banks a societal failure, stating, "*we do not want to have food banks that people rely on. People*

need a decent income” (McIntyre et al., 2018 Pp. 16). Interestingly, despite their stance that food banks should not exist, the same speaker also positioned food charity as an integral part of supporting low-income Canadians, suggesting that the government consider “...*implementing a tax credit for farmers who donate surplus crops to food banks*” (McIntyre et al., 2018 Pp. 158). Despite understanding the connection between low household income and food bank use, and in some cases stating that food banks should not exist, many socially progressive speakers proposed interventions that focused on treating the symptoms (i.e., food) and not the underlying issue of poverty. The political center also spoke to the problem of relying on food banks. One Liberal Opposition leader (Ontario) stated that “*food banks clean up after the government*”, when referring to cuts to the social assistance program in Ontario (McIntyre et al., 2018). Discussions on food insecurity in the Canadian legislature between 1995 and 2012 reveal that government leaders acknowledged the link between food insecurity and inadequate income. However, most proposed policies and tabled legislation remained focused on food-based interventions, despite legislators' recognition that low income is the root cause of food insecurity (McIntyre et al., 2016a; 2018). Bipartisan consensus makes this policy focus particularly resistant to change.

Interest groups and their political influence

Relationships between government and interest groups profoundly influence the policy process. The problem of food insecurity involves diverse actors, including NGOs (e.g., Food Secure Canada, Community Food Centres Canada, Food Banks Canada), activist organizations (e.g., anti-poverty alliances), researchers and food security experts (e.g., PROOF – Food Insecurity Policy Research), and corporate interest groups (e.g., grocery chains and food corporations like Loblaws and Walmart). Interest groups inform and advise government representatives and policymakers, who often have limited knowledge about food insecurity. The information these groups provide varies based on their specific interests, leading to different perspectives on the issue (Cairney & St Denny 2020). The prominence of each problem frame and its alignment with government priorities significantly influences which policies are ultimately chosen (Cairney & St Denny 2020).

Corporate interest groups have significant power and influence over food insecurity policymaking and often build relationships with civil society organizations (CSOs) to advance their corporate interests. Governments, food-focused CSOs (e.g., Food Banks Canada or the National Zero Waste Council), and large food companies (e.g., Loblaws and Walmart Canada)

have cultivated mutually beneficial relationships that advance both their financial interests and philanthropic objectives (Mendly-Zambo & Raphael 2019; Riches 2018). These large food corporations sit on the boards of large-scale food CSOs and make large and public donations, which limits the ability for these CSOs to advocate for income redistribution policies (Mendly-Zambo & Raphael 2019; Mendly-Zambo et al. 2021). Large food corporations benefit by publicly engaging in corporate philanthropy and participating in the “fight against hunger” (Mendly-Zambo et al. 2021; Azadian 2023). In turn, these corporations generously donate to large-scale CSOs like Food Banks Canada, which eases their costly fundraising efforts (Mendly-Zambo et al. 2021; Azadian 2023)

The political power of these relationships draws government attention away from necessary systems change and social reform and towards public discourse and government policymaking centered around corporate “philanthropy” (Mendly-Zambo et al., 2021). These philanthropic partnerships signal to the public that corporations are leading the fight against food insecurity, despite their contribution to food insecurity through low-wage employment and anti-union activity (Mendly-Zambo & Raphael 2019). The *Fight Hunger – Spark Change* campaign, which began in 2017 as a collaboration between Walmart Canada and Food Banks Canada, provides additional insight into the darker side of these public-private partnerships. Mendly-Zambo & Raphael (2019) reviewed the Food Banks Canada *HungerCount* reports from 2010-2019 and tracked each report and whether their food insecurity messaging and policy recommendations shifted. They found that earlier versions emphasized the problem of low wages and poor employment conditions while the 2019 report emphasized Canada’s failing social safety net, making no mention of wages or worker benefits (Mendly-Zambo & Raphael 2019). As CSOs like Food Banks Canada become more entangled with corporations, the quality of their food insecurity advocacy shifts.

Governments benefit from these relationships as well. Providing tax incentives to large food corporations as part of the “fight against hunger” gives the perception that governments are showing accountability to the public and acting on the problem of food insecurity.

Institutionalized food banks are so powerful within political spaces that “...[they] have become an integrated and institutionalized second tier of Canada’s social welfare system” and “...act as a voluntary back-up to a public safety net that has fallen apart” (Riches 2002 Pp. 653). The financial and political power of lobbyists and corporate interest groups incentivizes governments

to favour policies that protect these interests, making it difficult to prioritize and implement long-term structural changes. Large-scale food banking, backed by these powerful groups, also saves the government money it would otherwise need to spend on social programs, further entrenching reliance on short-term, inadequate solutions (Fisher 2017; Riches 2002; Riches 2018; Mendly-Zambo et al., 2021; Azadian et al., 2023)

Food insecurity discourse in Canada has long been mired in a misalignment between how the problem is framed and effective policy solutions. MSA provides helpful insight into the paradox of food insecurity policy in Canada by illustrating the power of framing and its influence on decision-making and how powerful actors shape policy in mutually beneficial ways. (McIntyre et al., 2016a; McIntyre et al., 2018; Mendly-Zambo & Raphael 2019). Designing effective food insecurity policy is difficult for many reasons. It has complex root causes that do not lend themselves to quick and publicly visible policy solutions, there are long-standing ideological and political disagreements among governments, and large corporate interest groups financially benefit from the “hunger relief” frame, so continue to exert substantial pressure on government and civil society organizations. While MSA is useful for understanding how problems, policies, and politics converge to create windows of opportunity for change, it falls short in addressing the influence of power and deeply rooted social dynamics. Social construction and policy design helps explain why certain groups, such as those experiencing food insecurity, are marginalized in policy decisions. By integrating social construction with MSA theory, we gain a deeper understanding of how power dynamics, culture, and social narratives shape policy decision-making.

8.2. Social construction and policy design (SCPD)

Food insecurity policy in Canada has long been dominated by individualized food-related interventions, but governments also implement long-term income redistribution programs. However, these income redistribution policies are woefully inadequate compared to the emphasis on food-based interventions. Government reluctance to expand income redistribution programs is complex, and social construction and policy design (SCPD) theory provides insight into why.

A key assumption of social construction is that societies are built on and around shared meanings, beliefs, and social norms that are created and maintained through social interactions, cultural practices, and institutions (Cairney & St Denny 2020; Pierce et al., 2014; Schneider & Ingram 1993). Social construction is influenced by power dynamics within society – dominant

groups shape their preferred version of reality to maintain their power and influence (Pierce et al., 2014; Schneider & Ingram 1993). This process of socially constructing society to preserve power within certain groups plays a central role in legitimizing or discrediting other groups of people, which has profound impacts on policy design (Cairney & St Denny 2020; Pierce et al., 2014; Tung et al. 2022; Mendly-Zambo & Raphael 2019). These power dynamics play out across the food security policy landscape in Canada.

8.2.1. Socially constructing target groups

Humans simplify information by constructing narratives and creating stories, and this process is inherently biased. Policymakers employ heuristics, or mental shortcuts, to socially construct groups within society, which allows policymakers to quickly categorize people into target groups (Cairney & St Denny 2020). Heuristics require quick judgements, so groups are often categorized based on characteristics like race, gender, and socio-economic status. Socially constructing target groups based on biases and assumptions influences how different groups are perceived, which influences whether they benefit from or are burdened by policy decisions (Cairney & St Denny 2020; Schneider & Ingram 1993).

Following Schneider & Ingram (1993), a 2x2 matrix can be used to analyze how different groups are characterised in the ongoing debate over food insecurity policy in Canada (*see Table 3*). Group construction is influenced by social, economic, and political disparities marked by unequal power dynamics that cause some groups to be marginalized while others disproportionately benefit from their status. These socially constructed groups are reinforced over time by dominant and powerful groups who have a vested interest in controlling public discourse, politics, and public policy (Schneider & Ingram 1991; 1993).

Table 3: Schneider & Ingram 2x2 matrix & household food insecurity in Canada¹³

Social Construction	High Power	Low Power
Positive	<p style="text-align: center;">Advantaged</p> <p>Middle and upper-middle class households. These groups are seen as essential to productive societies so supporting them is a priority (e.g., CERB during COVID-19)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Dependents</p> <p>Low-income families, single parents, children, and the elderly. These groups are seen as powerless and deserving of assistance. Policies directed to this group are often symbolic (e.g., charity)</p>

¹³ Adapted from Schneider & Ingram (1993).

	Contenders	Deviants
Negative	Large food corporations and grocery chains These groups are labelled as powerful but perceived negatively. These groups contribute to the institutionalization of food poverty and food banking by securing policies like tax breaks for donating food or diverting food waste	People who use substances, people who are homeless, and marginalized groups (e.g., racialized; 2SLGBTQIA+). These groups are labelled as lazy or taking advantage of the welfare system, making them undeserving of support. Policies directed at this group may be punitive or reinforce marginalization

Advantaged – high power, positive construction

The advantaged group is characterised by its power, influence, and positive construction. This group, which includes middle- and high-income earners, highly educated individuals, business and interest group leaders, and those with economic and political influence, is often attributed positive attributes such as productivity, intelligence, and is considered important to civil society (Pierce et al 2014; Cairney & St Denny 2020). Positive framing helps governments rationalize their tendency to cater to advantaged groups by designing public policy that protects their interests. The alignment between government and advantaged groups can enhance policy legitimacy and bolster public trust (Schneider & Ingram 1993). Advantaged groups have power and political influence in society, including the ability to vote, lobby, or make financial contributions. Politically, this group aligns with policies and programs that demonstrate government action while preserving their status and quality of life (Cairney & St Denny 2020; Trottier 2024).

The upfront investment required for income redistribution programs is less politically palatable to the advantaged group compared to food-focused programs, which are perceived as less burdensome (Schneider & Ingram 1993; Pierce et al 2014; Cairney & St Denny 2020). Income redistribution policies like tax increases often require a sacrifice from this group, which is not politically appealing to governments (Trottier 2024). Recent discussions around the capital gains tax highlights the tension between creating systems change through income redistribution and the maintenance of the advantaged group’s status (Trottier 2024). Food charity programs, by contrast, create the façade of “fighting hunger” while avoiding the burdens of income redistribution that would impact this group. As income inequality grows in Canada (Statistics Canada 2024; Yassin et al., 2024) the advantaged group will continue to gain power, making it more challenging to implement sound income redistribution policies.

Dependent – low power, positive construction

This *dependent* group, characterized by low power and positive social construction, includes many groups affected by food insecurity, like low-income families, single parents, people with disabilities, and the working poor (Schneider & Ingram 1993; Tung et al., 2022). This group is viewed as experiencing food insecurity due to circumstances largely beyond their control, making them *deserving* of support (Schneider & Ingram 1993; Tung et al., 2022). The construction of the dependent group is shaped by stereotypes that portray them as weak and passive rather than active agents in their own lives (Schneider & Ingram 1993; Tung et al., 2022). Dependents lack political power and influence, allowing governments to implement short-term interventions that maintain the status quo but generate positive public sentiment, particularly from advantaged groups. Implementing long-term income redistribution policies would threaten the interests of advantaged groups who benefit from income inequality (Tung et al., 2022; Schneider & Ingram 1993; Riches 2018).

Institutionalized food charity is rooted in a paternalistic model that reinforces the social construction of the *dependent* group. Instead of fostering independence, charity models reinforce social hierarchies, where the advantaged group remains in a position of authority, dictating the terms of support (Tung et al., 2022; Riches 2018; Mendly-Zambo & Raphael 2019). The result is a cycle where the dependent group is kept in a state of reliance, while the advantaged group continues to benefit from a system that legitimizes their power and influence. Dependents are the poster group for charity-related “feel good” stories designed to appeal to the values of advantaged groups. These narratives allow those in power to publicly applaud themselves and government efforts while ignoring the underlying systemic issues that reinforce inequality and dependency. Media coverage of food banks and other charity photo-op events, like The Canadian Broadcasting Company’s annual Sounds of the Season national food bank initiative “turns feeding the hungry into an entertainment spectacle” (Azadian et al., 2023 Pp. 311) and reinforces the superficial narrative that these programs successfully address food insecurity (Power et al., 2021; Tarasuk et al., 2022b; Khaki et al., 2022; Food Banks Canada 2024b)

Some dependent sub-groups are perceived as more deserving than others, which is reflected in the design of income redistribution policies that target specific sub-groups. Public acceptance for income redistribution policies tends to focus on households with children or the elderly (Tung et al., 2022; Men et al., 2023; Brown et al., 2019). The issue of childhood poverty

is compelling, particularly to advantaged groups, so government implements income redistribution policies like The Canada Child Benefit (CCB), which benefits the lowest income households with children (Tung et al., 2022; Men et al., 2023; Brown et al., 2019). Despite the perception of children as deserving dependents, policies targeting financial deprivation among this, and other sub-groups remains limited in scope and impact (Tung et al., 2022; Men et al., 2023; Brown et al., 2019; Tarasuk et al., 2022a; Li et al., 2023)

Contenders – high power, negative construction

Contenders are characterised as having power and influence but are perceived as negative and undeserving or corrupt (Cairney & St Denny 2020; Pierce et al 2014; Schneider & Ingram 1993). Despite their negative characterisation these groups, which include large corporations like Walmart and Loblaws, exert significant power and influence over the food security policy landscape in Canada (Mendly-Zambo et al., 2021; Mendly-Zambo & Raphael 2019; Azadian et al., 2023). Powerful contenders in the food space have been instrumental in institutionalizing food charity in Canada, and have influenced what Andrew Fisher (2017) dubbed, the “anti-hunger industrial complex”, which describes the process by which anti-hunger movements have become lucrative business models for food corporations (Pp. 31). Large corporations have a vested interest in steering policymakers away from income redistribution policies like tax reforms, minimum wage increases, and stricter labour laws. These policies lead to more government regulations and increased operating costs, which threatens their bottom-line (Mendly-Zambo et al., 2021; Mendly-Zambo & Raphael 2019). Instead, these businesses promote corporate philanthropy via food drives and other charitable activities. The “anti-hunger industrial complex” thus maintains focus on the problem of hunger and the importance of charity, without advocating for structural ways to end it (Fisher 2017).

Corporate contenders thus benefit from promoting individual food-focused interventions that maintain the status quo and protect their profitability (Azadian et al., 2023; Mendly-Zambo et al., 2021). Further, contenders are eager to participate in charity-based civil society organizations by sitting on their boards or publicly donating to food banks. These actions allow corporate contenders to shape organizational policies, program development, and strategic planning, while also engaging in activities that are perceived as philanthropic, particularly among the advantaged group (Mendly-Zambo et al., 2021; Mendly-Zambo & Raphael 2019).

The economic and political power of contenders provides insight into government reluctance to significantly expand or reform income redistribution policies. Governments also benefit from relationships with large food corporations by avoiding the political and financial costs associated with implementing more robust income redistribution policies (Mendly-Zambo et al., 2021; Mendly-Zambo & Raphael 2019; Riches 2002; Riches 2018). The collaboration between corporate interests and government policies allows governments to act on food insecurity without challenging the broader economic structures that perpetuate it, thus preserving political stability and their relationships with powerful economic actors. These dynamics underscore the persistent paradox of preventive food insecurity policy in Canada.

Deviants – low power, negative construction

Deviants are characterised as having little power or influence and are negatively constructed. This group is perceived as “undeserving” of government support, especially financial. This group includes people who are homeless, active in substance use, are unemployed long-term, or have been connected to criminal activity (Tung et al., 2022; Schneider & Ingram 1993). Deviants are perceived as untrustworthy, lazy, cheaters, and are blamed for their circumstances (Schneider & Ingram 1993; Pierce et al., 2014). Intersectionality plays a significant role in deviant categorization; the more marginalized groups a person belongs to (e.g., involvement in criminal activity *and* belonging to a racialized or otherwise marginalized group), the less deserving they are perceived to be (Chavez & Rocheleau 2020; Pierce et al., 2014). A person living in poverty may be categorized as dependent or deviant but belonging to a marginalized group further increases the likelihood of being labelled as deviant (Chavez & Rocheleau 2020; Pierce et al., 2014; Li et al, 2023).

Members of the deviant group, particularly those with intersectional identities face the highest risk of experiencing food insecurity (Dhunna & Tarasuk 2021; Tarasuk et al. 2022a; Li et al., 2023). Deviants are the “undeserving poor” and are vulnerable to punitive government policies and programs (Riches 2018; Schneider & Ingram 1991; Schneider & Ingram 1993; Pierce et al., 2014). This label permits other more powerful groups to ignore government inaction or accept the punitive nature policies that burden deviants (Riches 2018; Tung et al., 2022). For example, Canada’s social assistance programs are grossly inadequate (Riches 2022; Li et al., 2023; Tarasuk et al 2022a). Most adults relying on social assistance live below the poverty line (as measured by the MBM), many live in deep poverty (as measured by the MBM-Deep Income

Poverty Threshold), and most are food insecure (Li et al., 2023; Laidley & Tabbara 2024). Black communities in Canada are less likely to qualify for and receive social assistance, highlighting the intersectional nature of group categorization and the disproportionate harm these policies inflict on marginalized communities (Block et al., 2019). Social assistance programs are designed to be inadequate to force labour participation, which is necessary to be considered “deserving” of government benefits (Tung et al., 2022; Riches 2002; Riches 2018). Living in poverty robs individuals of their agency and dignity, a condition that society is far more willing to tolerate for those labelled as deviant.

The deviant group construction also reinforces the acceptance of Canada’s evolving two-tiered food system (Riches 2018; Mendly-Zambo & Raphael 2019; McIntyre et al., 2016a; McIntyre et al., 2018; Riches 2002). The shame and stigma associated with food bank use is well documented (Riches 2018; Mendly-Zambo & Raphael 2019; Wakefield et al., 2012; Mendly-Zambo et al., 2021; McIntyre 2016c). Users often endure long lines in all weather conditions, face stringent requirements to prove their need for assistance, and are frequently denied the ability to choose their food (Riches 2018; Tung et al., 2022; McIntyre et al., 2016c). While economically advantaged consumers have agency to access high-quality food, disadvantaged groups are forced to rely on the “goodness” of others and be thankful for whatever food they can get (Tarasuk & Li 2023). The system of food charity serves as a policy gap filler – where social assistance fails, food charity helps to “*manage the hungry and discipline the poor*” (Riches 2018 Pp 106). Food waste that is diverted to food programs further entrenches Canada’s two-tiered food system. While affluent consumers select high quality food from grocery stores, farmers markets, or other high-end food stores, others are forced to line up for the rejected food that was destined for the landfill (Tarasuk & Li 2023; Power 2019; Mendly-Zambo & Raphael 2019). Socially constructing deserving and undeserving groups permits a food system which “...*effectively relegates [millions of] Canadians to second-class citizenry by recommending that they eat the garbage no one else wants*” (Power 2019).

Social Construction and Policy Design (SCPD) emphasizes how different groups are socially constructed by policymakers and other powerful actors, which influences whether and to what extent different groups benefit or are burdened by policy decisions. SCPD adds deeper insight into the paradox of prevention policy by highlighting how policymakers' perceptions of different social groups shape the policies they create, and how these policies align with the

interests of powerful, positively constructed groups who are less willing to challenge existing power structures and social inequalities. Within Canada's food insecurity policy landscape, governments prioritize food charity and avoid more politically costly income redistribution policies. This approach maintains the status quo, benefiting powerful groups while failing to solve the underlying problems. According to Cairney & St Denny (2020), governments often commit to the ideological desire to reduce inequalities while also preventing a small number of high-risk groups from using a disproportionate share of the public services for which other people pay (Pp. 43). The institution of food charity provides a middle ground; advantaged groups, policymakers, and government actors can participate in “fighting hunger” without risking their wealth, privilege, and place within society.

8.3. Complexity theory

Policymaking does not occur in a vacuum. The environments within which we live are complex, interconnected, and ever changing. Complexity theory acknowledges that social systems, like those that impact food insecurity, are complex, interconnected, and dynamic. This theory moves beyond the idea of “complicated” policy environments by articulating the dynamic and unpredictable behaviour that emerges as multiple systems, made up of distinct components, interact to influence natural and socially constructed policymaking environments (Cairney 2012; Cairney & St Denny 2020). Complexity theory conceptualizes policy environments as holistic rather than individualistic (Cairney 2012). Prevention policy is a complex system; it involves interconnected factors like the social determinants of health, economic conditions, the political landscape, and the civil society (Cairney & St Denny 2020). Successfully implementing prevention policies requires coordinating these complex moving parts through multi-sector collaboration, long-term planning, and adaptive strategies to respond to evolving challenges and unpredictable consequences (Cairney & St Denny 2020; Cairney 2012; Klijn 2008)

Food insecurity exists within a complex system of other social determinants that are themselves complex systems. Applying complexity theory to food insecurity policy acknowledges this complexity and enables policymakers to work within it. Analyzing current policy against effective food insecurity policy requires an in-depth understanding of social, environmental, economic, and political factors that influence how food insecurity is perceived. Effective prevention policy therefore requires policymakers to recognize the complex nature of policy environments (Cairney 2012). In their book, Cairney & St Denny (2020) present four

characteristics of complex systems and how they interact. Two of these are particularly relevant to food insecurity policy: positive and negative feedback and path dependence.

8.3.1. Positive and negative feedback

Complex systems interact in complicated and non-linear ways, making them difficult to predict (Cairney 2012). These nonlinear interactions are caused by feedback loops, where some interactions and behaviours become muted while others are amplified (Cairney 2012). The ‘bounded rationality’ inherent to all policy decision-making means that, at any given time, some information takes precedence over other information (Cairney & St Denny 2020). When information is ignored, it exists within a negative feedback loop, whereas amplified information enjoys positive feedback, which can lead to policy action (Cairney & St Denny 2020; Cairney 2012).

Many characteristics that make food insecurity an “intractable” policy problem also contribute to the tendency towards “negative feedback equilibrium”, stabilization, and stagnation (Cairney & St Denny 2020; Cairney 2012). The complex system of interconnected, “wicked” issues that lead to income inequality pushes the limits of human cognition, making it challenging (and unappealing) for policymakers to focus attention long enough to implement prevention policy (Cairney & St Denny 2020; Cairney 2012). On the other hand, food focused interventions are far less complex since they side-step the interconnected systemic issues. This results in disproportionate attention paid to ineffective but comfortable policies and programs

Governments recognize the link between low-income and food insecurity (McIntyre et al., 2016a; McIntyre et al., 2018), but the interaction between negative and positive feedback loops result in a reluctance to move beyond simple policy solutions. Acceptance of these inadequate solutions are further strengthened by the “bandwagon effect”, where policymakers and powerful interest groups, such as large food corporations and institutionalized food banks, simultaneously focus on the problem of food insecurity (Cairney 2012; Cairney & St Denny 2020). Over time, effective interventions like income redistribution are suppressed (negative feedback), which reduces the urgency for newer, more transformative policy measures (Klijn 2008; Cairney 2012; Cairney & St Denny 2020). Positive feedback loops further exacerbate this; reliance on existing approaches grows, making governments less willing to engage with new or challenging information that contradicts their existing policies (Klijn 2008; Cairney & St Denny

2020). Feedback loops underscore how policies become path dependent and increasingly hard to change.

8.3.2. Path dependence

Path dependence, driven by the persistence of positive and negative feedback loops, creates powerful momentum in food insecurity policy development and the institutionalization of large-scale food charities. The fast-paced, biased, and cognitively overwhelming policy environment often forces policymakers to exhibit path dependence and stick closely to previously used policies (Cairney & St Denny 2020; Cairney 2012). As such, historical policy decisions and established practices have become entrenched in the food insecurity policy landscape, making it difficult to shift the policy path towards different, yet effective solutions. The discourse around food charity has successfully contributed to the perception that civil society contributions, kindness, and solidarity are the most effective and morally righteous approaches to food insecurity, and to helping people “in need” more broadly (Riches 2002; Tarasuk & Davis 1996). The narrative has long overshadowed the important role of social programs (Riches 2002; Riches 2018; Fisher 2017). Powerful groups in society have contributed to this narrative, ultimately shifting how society perceives issues like poverty and food insecurity. Institutions within society have not only accepted these interventions, but celebrate them, further entrenching the food-focused policy path. This process of “increasing returns” has made it extremely challenging for governments to choose a different path (Cairney & St Denny 2020; Cairney 2012). In this way, the perception that “the government lacks political will” reflects, in part the difficulty of changing paths (Cairney & St Denny 2020). Large scale charity has been central to the food insecurity discourse for decades; challenging this status quo would be financially and politically costly, particularly if the new path led to income redistribution (Riches 2002; Tarasuk & Davis 1996; Cairney 2012; Cairney & St Denny 2020). Most governments are unwilling to face these costs, even as Canada continues to set new records for food insecurity (Cairney & St Denny 2020; Cairney 2012).

SECTION 9: CONCLUSION

“Food insecurity is a policy decision” – Li¹⁴

¹⁴ Li, T. (2021). A decade of proof on how to tackle food insecurity. Hill Times. <https://www.hilltimes.com>

The ongoing paradox of food insecurity policy in Canada illustrates the complex and often contradictory nature of policymaking. While evidence shows that food insecurity stems from inadequate income, the dominant narrative attributes it to food distribution issues, lack of education, and/or inadequate food-related skills. This misalignment shifts policy from income redistribution to ineffective food-based interventions like food banks and nutrition education. The failure to address the root cause – income inequality – reveals a troubling disconnect between what we *know* and what we *do*. This disconnect highlights a broader paradox in preventive policy: the difficulty of implementing long-term, systemic solutions in favor of more immediate, but less effective, interventions. To create a more nuanced understanding of this paradox as it relates to food insecurity policy in Canada this paper uses three policy theories—Multiple Streams Analysis (MSA), Social Construction and Policy Design (SCPD), and Complexity Theory—to analyze why governments struggle to implement effective prevention policies across many social and public health issues like household food insecurity.

Multiple Streams Analysis (MSA) provides insight into the process of policymaking itself, highlighting that policy change is more likely to succeed when three streams—problems, policies, and politics—converge, creating a "window of opportunity" when attention lands on a problem and policies are readily available. In the context of food insecurity, incorrect problem framing, and the political appeal of food-focused solutions hinders effective interventions. However, MSA is less effective at explaining societal complacency towards inequality, food insecurity, and Canada's two-tiered food system, which is where *Social Construction and Policy Design* excels. SCPD highlights how policymakers socially construct groups in society as "deserving" or "undeserving", leading to policies that are designed to favour powerful groups while marginalizing those most at risk for experiencing food insecurity. Framing food insecurity as an individual issue rather than a systemic one allows advantaged groups to absolve themselves of guilt while maintaining their status and perpetuating inequality. Finally, *Complexity Theory* acknowledges that policy decisions are influenced by interconnected actors, institutions, and systems that are in constant flux. It explains that entrenched feedback loops create path dependence, which lengthens the lifespan of politically convenient, yet ineffective food insecurity policies. Together, these theories demonstrate that attributing policy failures to a "lack of political will" often oversimplifies the policymaking environment. The persistence of ineffective food insecurity interventions reflects a complex interplay of social constructions,

institutional dynamics, entrenched political interests, and the ongoing challenge of aligning policy streams with the root causes of the problem. Given the profound social justice and public health implications of food insecurity in Canada, shifting the policy landscape toward more effective solutions is essential. *Right to Food*, which frames food as a human right, presents a powerful opportunity to reshape policies and prioritize interventions that address the root causes of food insecurity.

The right to food – NOT the right to be fed

The right to food, as recognized in international human rights law, underscores the obligation of governments to ensure that all individuals have access to adequate, safe, and nutritious food (UN (n.d.); Riches 2018; Tung et al., 2022). The right to food offers a unifying framework that links civil society with government, collective action with legal instruments, and food with income and equity concerns (UN (n.d.); Riches 2018; Tung et al., 2022). Designing food insecurity policies and programs according to the right to food could address the cross-cutting imbalances in political and economic power that influence ineffective interventions (Riches 2018; Tung et al., 2022).

In Canada, the right to food remains largely unfulfilled, as evidenced by the persistent and rising rates of food insecurity across the country. Part of the problem is that the right to food is often misinterpreted as synonymous with the right to be fed. The latter centers policymaking around food provision and (re)distribution (i.e., charity), while the former centres around ensuring that people have adequate resources to independently procure food (Riches 2018; Tung et al., 2022). The UN Human Rights fact sheet, *Right to Adequate Food* (n.d.) clarifies that the right to food is NOT the same as the right to be fed, rather it is:

“...primarily the right to feed oneself in dignity. Individuals are expected to meet their own needs, through their own efforts, and using their own resources. To be able to do this, a person must live in conditions that allow [them] either to produce food or to buy it. To produce [their] own food, a person needs land, seeds, water, and other resources, and to buy it, one needs money and access to the market. The right to food requires States to provide an enabling environment in which people can use their full potential to produce or procure adequate food for themselves and their families.” – (Pp.3)

In essence, the right to food is the right to *agency* over food. There is a clear distinction between passively receiving food – an act imposed on the powerless – and having agency to make one’s own choices around food – an act done by the empowered. The latter denotes a

response focused on social justice, while the former reinforces the paternalistic powerlessness associated with being fed (Tung et al., 2022; Ronson & Caraher 2015). The growing movement to "improve dignity" in food distribution programs risks blurring this essential distinction. While emphasizing agency over food promotes self-determination and dignity, efforts to make food charity programs more "dignified", though well-meaning, distract from the root issue of income inequality that drives dependency on these programs. It is crucial to distinguish between the dignity that comes from genuine *agency over food* and the illusion of agency promoted by programs designed to create "dignified" food charity models. Promoting these models is a red herring that diverts attention from the need for systemic change (Food Banks Canada 2024c). While safer, more welcoming spaces may improve user experience, they should not be confused with the real dignity that comes from self-determination and *agency over food*. Relying on food programs is inherently undignified, regardless of whether users can "shop" for their goods (Food Banks Canada 2024c). Framing these models as "dignified" food access obscures the reality that poverty, material deprivation, and lack of agency over food fundamentally violate human dignity (UN (n.d.); Tung et al., 2022; Vancouver Neighbourhood Food Networks 2023). Such models reinforce Canada's two-tiered food system and reduce the experience of poverty to a friendly face and a choice of soups.

Canada's worsening food insecurity crisis is a stark reminder that charity and food handouts are a band-aid, not a solution. It's time to reject superficial fixes that serve corporate interests and confront the systems that exacerbate food insecurity in one of the world's wealthiest nations. The right to agency over food has the potential to transform the food insecurity policy landscape and ensure all Canadians can "*live in the conditions that allow them to either produce food or buy it*" (UN n.d.). Addressing the root causes of food insecurity means moving beyond inhumane stopgaps and enacting systemic income security reform so no one is ever again forced to wait in line for a handful of old bananas and a bag of dried lentils. Are we willing to challenge the status quo by giving all Canadians the power to make their own food choices, or will we continue to accept a country where charity substitutes justice?

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Table A: List of social determinants of health¹⁵

Social	Environmental	Economic
Early childhood development (ACE's)	Access to safe water	Income/socioeconomic status
Disability/ableism	Clean air (indoor and outdoor)	Fair employment
Access to high quality health services	Safe workplaces	Job quality/satisfaction
Discrimination: racism; ageism; gender; Anti-2SLGBTQIA+	Geographical location	Household-level food security
Social policy and social supports	Safe/health promoting community environments	Affordable and safe housing
Anti-fat bias	Safe/affordable food/health promoting food	Welfare policies and social protection programs
Social inclusion (i.e., supports/networks)	Safe infrastructure (e.g., roads/sidewalks)	Fuel poverty
Access to culture	Healthy climate & biodiversity	Job creation
Access to high quality education	GHG emissions	Equitable investments in community development
Immigration status	Land use	Child poverty
Migrant/refugee status	Access to IT infrastructure	Wealth distribution/poverty reduction
Homelessness	Equitable urban planning	Economic accountability in governance
Health-promoting behaviours: physical activity, sleep, healthy food, smoking, risky sexual behaviours, etc.	Transportation infrastructure	

Source: Government of Canada 2024

¹⁵ This list is non-exhaustive