

# Out of Milk

Infant Food Insecurity in a Rich Nation

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# Introduction

## THE INVISIBILITY OF INFANT FOOD INSECURITY

During the 1990s, I coordinated a prenatal and early infancy program in rural Nova Scotia targeted at families living in low-income circumstances. This program was funded by the Public Health Agency of Canada, and the mandate was to address risks that led to low birth weights and low breastfeeding rates among vulnerable families. The overall goal was to improve health outcomes for Canadian children. I was directly responsible for prenatal and postnatal nutrition-based programming for mothers, which included breastfeeding promotion and support. But in truth these objectives were the long game, often side-tracked by the immediate realities of poverty and food insecurity.

My official tasks were to coordinate monthly food box deliveries, cooking workshops, prenatal and postnatal education, and breastfeeding support. Unofficially, much of my work day and many non-work hours were spent driving families to the food bank, calling churches for food vouchers, and at times securing donated infant formula from wherever I could, including my own family doctor and generous friends. It didn't take long before I shelved the prenatal nutrition assessment tools of the program and left them to gather dust. For food insecure pregnant women, nutrition assessment that made visible a "healthy" pregnancy diet often evoked shame about too many days surviving on toast and tea. For many, feeding themselves and their children was a constant struggle. For me, while my work was supposed to be about improving maternal and infant nutrition, the undermining effect of food insecurity and poverty was sometimes paralyzing.

During this time, I birthed and fed four children of my own. I produced perhaps 2,800 litres of human milk over ten years, yet many of the women I worked with – those who could benefit most from the cost savings of producing their own milk – habitually experienced problems doing so and found themselves facing unaffordable alternatives. Of course, this is precisely the paradox that policymakers were attempting to address through targeted programs such as the one for which my job was designed.

When access to food is compromised, one might expect mothers to breastfeed in order to maximize nourishment both for the infant and, by extension, for the rest of family by freeing resources that would otherwise go to the baby. Breast milk is thought to be a free food and thus, even in a food insecure household, the breastfed infant would have access to reliable, readily available, and affordable nutritious food. Yet I was reminded daily that infant feeding in food insecure homes is far more complex than a casual onlooker might suppose. I understood that my efforts to shape feeding practice had little power to address the poverty that mothers faced when making decisions about infant feeding. But when onlookers asked me why low-income women tended to formula-feed, usually forming judgments about the perceived illogicality, I would pause and mumble a short and inadequate, “It’s complicated.”

This book is my long answer. It explores, through the experiences of mothers, the *breastfeeding paradox*: why the women who can least afford to buy infant formula are the most likely to use it. It also discusses the opinions of policy workers, community-based program staff, and women themselves about how Canadian policy domains have responded to this paradox, or failed to do so.

My analysis is based on interviews with low-income mothers, a critical review of the formal and informal public policy woven into their stories, and the insights of policy actors and community-based service providers. By examining the everyday social relations of infant feeding under conditions of financial deprivation – and the multiple policy domains that intersect with and shape those experiences – I was able to develop a picture of how household, maternal, and infant food insecurity is experienced, conceptualized, and addressed (or not) in policy and in practice. I have not attempted to provide a detailed policy analysis of infant food insecurity. Rather, through a case study of Nova Scotian mothers living in low-income

circumstances, I identify and contextualize where public policy is embodied in the lives of families, report on the current state of the Canadian social safety net for early childhood, and reveal policy tensions concerning infant feeding in food insecure circumstances. Information about the conceptual tools, methodology, organization, and participants involved in the research on which this work is based is found in the [Appendix](#).

My premise is that household food insecurity is a social determinant of infant feeding practice, and that infant feeding (both breastfeeding as a food production system and alternative ways of feeding a baby) represents a special case for consideration when setting food security policy. I argue as well that infant feeding policy needs to consider food security as a necessary condition for optimal infant nutrition.

In high-income countries, food insecurity at either the household or the individual level refers to lack of access to food due to financial constraints, and it encompasses a range of experiences – from anxiety and vulnerability related to food access to consumption of poor-quality food, the need to obtain food by undesirable methods, and various degrees of food deprivation.<sup>1</sup> In Canada, low income has been identified as the strongest predictor of household food insecurity.<sup>2</sup> The outcomes are multidimensional: the material dimension of lack of food or nutritionally inadequate food; the psychological dimension of worry and stress; and the social dimension of societal exclusion in response to deviations from norms related to food.<sup>3</sup>

About 3.2 million people in Canada faced some degree of food insecurity in 2014. Of these, 1 million were children. With 15.4 percent of households experiencing food insecurity in Nova Scotia, where most of the research for this book took place, the province had the highest rate in Canada outside of the territories. Even more alarming, 22 percent of Nova Scotian children were reported to live in food insecure homes. Household food insecurity disproportionately affects households with children, and the risk is especially great for lone-parent families and families receiving state welfare benefits.<sup>4</sup> Food cost and affordability research from across the country provides evidence that neither the minimum wage nor provincial income assistance is high enough to allow households with children to purchase what's needed for a basic nutritious diet, revealing how family food insecurity is rooted in overall political and economic conditions.<sup>5</sup>

How does this affect health? The health-related consequences of food insecurity have been the most frequently reported, with the result that the issue is positioned largely within a public health context in Canada.<sup>6</sup> Canadians who are food insecure are more likely than those who are secure to report their health as merely fair or poor, and more likely to have multiple chronic diseases.<sup>7</sup> For Canadian children, heightened nutritional vulnerability in early childhood can be devastating. We now know that the first 1,000 days from conception to two years is the most crucial time for optimizing growth and development throughout the life course.<sup>8</sup> Hunger in childhood can impair development, affect general health, and increase the odds of chronic health problems for the child at the time and in the future.<sup>9</sup> Less is known about the impact of food insecurity on infant feeding practices, the pathway to infant nutrition, pointing to the crucial need for research in this area. Understanding the breastfeeding paradox requires examination of not only household food insecurity and its outcomes but also many other social constraints surrounding the work of feeding a baby – which is one piece of the overall work of social reproduction.

Social reproduction encompasses the activities, behaviours, responsibilities, and relationships we engage in to ensure human social, emotional, moral, and physical continuation each day and down through generations.<sup>10</sup> Feeding is one of those responsibilities and, like social reproduction more broadly, it is highly gendered in most societies. Feeding work is typically socially constructed as part of the expected social reproduction practice of mothers, and recent Canadian research upholds implicit gender assumptions across ethnocultural and income groups about women's food work within the family.<sup>11</sup> And naturally, the biological imperative of breastfeeding, a component of family food work, makes it impossible to detach from female responsibility. Thus, feeding infants is arguably even more deeply enshrined in ideas about women's natural disposition for feeding work.

Yet there is a discrepancy between a mother's care responsibilities during early maternity – and resulting inability to rely on market forces – and the social welfare programs meant to provide the income security to enable her work of feeding a new infant. The social contract between Canadian governments and Canadian families over the raising of children as a public good has weakened since the 1990s. Neo-liberal social welfare

reform has taken the position that care work, including feeding the baby, is a family responsibility, increasingly beyond the sphere of the state.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, fulfilling this responsibility has become more and more challenging economically.

Mothers are held primarily responsible for infant feeding at a time when they often have diminished incomes precisely because of this obligation, and despite pregnancy and early infancy being times of special and costly nutritional needs. Canadian women's access to federal maternity leave has also declined because they have become more likely to have non-standard work arrangements with changing labour market conditions. Additionally, eligibility criteria have been more challenging to meet for women since the mid-90s.<sup>13</sup> If a woman is deemed eligible, the federal maternity leave entitlement is just 55 percent of earned income, a statistic with a particularly sharp impact when one considers that women's income in general still falls behind men's.<sup>14</sup> The gender pay gap in Canada is the seventh largest among countries surveyed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.<sup>15</sup> Our poorest mothers, those receiving welfare benefits, experience only limited maternity protection from the requirement to seek or engage in employment as a condition of income security entitlements.<sup>16</sup> It is not surprising that gender-based income inequality and increased caring responsibilities mean women have higher poverty rates than men in Canada, and that infants have the highest poverty rate of all Canadian children.<sup>17</sup> Greater poverty in families with young children is rooted in gender inequality, the mismatch between increased care responsibility and decreased earning potential, and inadequate measures of income security to make up the shortfall during early childhood.

The dynamics of family poverty, along with other social constraints, affect decisions about *how* infants are fed.<sup>18</sup> Society sexualizes the breast, impedes public breastfeeding, and poses contradictions between breastfeeding and paid employment.<sup>19</sup> We know that infant feeding trends vary by socio-cultural group, geographical location, and income,<sup>20</sup> and that breastfeeding success is linked to a woman's social position, but researchers have only recently begun to explore how food insecurity shapes the social dimensions of lactation and what and how infants eat in high-income countries.

Historically, breastfeeding has been essential for infant food security, as Gabrielle Palmer describes in *The Politics of Breastfeeding*: “Lactation is the very core of our identity; the process evolved even before gestation and each mammal has evolved, over the millennia, a milk unique to its requirements, its behavior and its environment. It is such a spectacular survival strategy that we call ourselves, after the mammary gland, mammals ... animals that suckle their young.”<sup>21</sup> Valerie Fildes, a well-known historical scholar of infant feeding, puts it simply: “An infant was breastfed by its mother, or some other woman, or it died.”<sup>22</sup>

Today, this is true around the world for formula-fed babies if their access to formula is disrupted by war, natural disaster, or formula contamination or shortage. Although geographic differences exist, infants have an undoubtedly unique experience of food insecurity. Those under a year old have distinctive consumption patterns and limited diets, and their recommended method of food intake relies on lactation typically generated by the mother–infant dyad – a human milk production and distribution system – or access to appropriate breast milk substitutes along with the introduction of solid foods after six months.

I argue that *infant food insecurity* – infant vulnerability with respect to food access, sub-optimal food quality, and inadequate quantity due to household financial constraints – as a social problem, a health and nutrition equity issue, and a public policy focus – suffers from invisibility and poor conceptualization. This is true even though early nutrition conditions are known to be key to the potential of infants to thrive in a host of important areas. While Canadians associate the image of a hungry infant with low-income nations, the risk of food insecurity among Canadian infants needs to be examined. Evidence is mounting of household food insecurity in this country, particularly in households with children,<sup>23</sup> and of a high poverty rate among women and children under one.

In 2005, *Healthy Eating Nova Scotia*, a provincial plan to address nutrition-related health issues, prioritized the promotion of breastfeeding *and* food security.<sup>24</sup> To support the latter goal, the plan outlined an action item to increase the proportion of Nova Scotians with access to nutritious food, which included breast milk for infants. The document did not mention how food insecurity might be implicated in breastfeeding outcomes. This should not surprise us as breastfeeding, and infant feeding more broadly,



is usually discussed as a distinct policy issue, far removed from policy debate about food insecurity. Rarely is breastfeeding conceptualized as a food system that may be susceptible to sustainability issues, akin to other food systems.

When infants *are* mentioned in food security documents, whether policy focused or academic, the emphasis is invariably on breastfeeding as a food security strategy. Some argue that breastfeeding represents a sustainable food system in that human milk is readily available, reliable, self-regulating, and environmentally friendly, and thus supports infant food security.<sup>25</sup> Others make the link between breastfeeding and food security because breast milk is a complete food that serves as the major source of nutrition for the more than 140 million infants born annually worldwide.<sup>26</sup> They contend that breastfeeding not only benefits infant health but also helps reduce fertility and increase the time between pregnancies, both of which contribute to food security among infants.

Conversely, breast milk substitutes are associated with high rates of infant mortality and morbidity in the developing world and high morbidity in certain Canadian populations.<sup>27</sup> Infant food insecurity encompasses problems such as the unaffordability of formula, formula contamination and unsafe preparation, environmental costs linked to bottle feeding, the cost to the health care system, and formula shortages due to increased global demand and unregulated trade.<sup>28</sup>

But Canadian public policy has largely ignored infant food insecurity. Canada participated in the Food and Agricultural Organization's 1996 World Food Summit and was a signatory on the resulting *Rome Declaration on World Food Security*.<sup>29</sup> The declaration affirmed food as a human right and committed Canada to action on food security domestically and abroad. Yet the right to food is not established in constitutional agreements in Canada, nor has it been implemented into law. *Canada's Action Plan for Food Security*, a response to the summit, outlined actions centred on the right to food and poverty reduction.<sup>30</sup> Infant feeding was identified as a food security concern and breastfeeding as a key strategy for infant food security particularly, but not only, in low-income countries. No explicit link was made between infant feeding and poverty reduction in Canada.

Subsequent progress reports on the *Action Plan* demonstrate a dilution of food security policy priorities in general. Additionally, action related to

Canadian infants (breastfeeding support to mothers under the Canadian Prenatal Nutrition Program) merited just a single mention in all the progress reports. In 2008, the last progress report marked the end of federal monitoring. Public health experts Catherine Mah, Catherine Hamill, Krista Rondeau, and Lynn McIntyre argue that these reports demonstrate a dwindling national commitment that foreshadowed a government backlash in 2012 against a report by UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food Olivier De Schutter on Canada's food insecurity problem.<sup>31</sup>

In 2017, the Canadian federal government signalled a renewed commitment to address domestic food access through the development of a national food policy. *Everyone at the Table*, Canada's first-ever food policy, was announced in August 2019, in part recognizing that "too many Canadians aren't able to reliably access enough healthy food."<sup>32</sup> While there is much to celebrate with a systems approach to tackling food problems, particularly the recognition of the need for a national school lunch program, the food policy is missing targets on reducing income-based food insecurity and fails to recognize the unique concerns of infant feeding. Furthermore, there is no commitment to a rights-based approach to food access in Canada, a silence consistent with persistent allegations that Canadian governments have ignored domestic food insecurity as a human rights issue.<sup>33</sup> Despite acknowledgment at the federal level that food access is a matter of concern – and some mention in federal, provincial, and international food security policy discussions of the unique concerns of infants – most policy and programming surrounding infant feeding lies within the domain of health policy, where it is not framed as a food security issue. The focus has been on the health benefits of breastfeeding and the ill-health effects of formula. Government resources are aimed at promoting, protecting, and supporting breastfeeding, while regulating the marketing of breast milk substitutes. Apart from the federally funded Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program, designed to support vulnerable mothers in their breastfeeding, little policy addresses the many social and economic factors that undermine breastfeeding as a sustainable food production system in contemporary society – and specifically within food insecure households.<sup>34</sup>

This book is a response to that invisibility. In it, I offer the stories of twenty women with infants, present details of the policies shaping their

experiences, and describe the perspectives of a variety of policy and program workers. These stories expose the link between infant feeding and food insecurity due to financial constraint, revealing how the dynamics of gender inequality intersect with those of social class. They illustrate nutrition inequity and the need for food justice to inform policy jurisdictions in Canada and similarly high-income countries. The stories identify infant food insecurity in high-income countries as an urgent social problem. We need to discover how best to address food insecurity as a social determinant of infant feeding, and how best to support early nutrition in our most vulnerable populations.

# 1

## Doing Without

### HOUSEHOLD FOOD INSECURITY AND THE FOOD WORK OF MOTHERS

What if I took your bankcard from you, and your credit card, and your car, and you were living on 210 bucks a month for groceries and your kids have to eat? What are you going to do?

– ANGELA

I suspect some readers know what would happen if they were faced with Angela's predicament. Perhaps you've lived it or know someone who has. Or you might have no experience of such matters, yet you think, "I'm resourceful. I have people I can turn to. I could make do." But how long could you make do? When would your supports run out? And when would the way you live, the way you eat, and the way you feed your children start to change?

The stories in this book tell us about lived experiences of household food insecurity. They reveal the complex relationship between mothering, food work, family dynamics, and food insecurity, and the multiple social relations that shape the interplay of these activities and factors. The families I spoke to differed in terms of composition, size, income sources, and age of children. When asked to describe their monthly household incomes, however, the mothers I spoke with expressed similar feelings of inadequacy, using words such as "broke," "nothing," "poor," "horrible," "not enough," and "sucky." Five women who had once been on income assistance as single mothers considered themselves better off than in the past, describing their income as "adequate" or "okay now" because

they were living with an employed male partner, or what one mother termed “a bread winner.” Yet four others still considered themselves poor because their partners’ wages were low or their employment precarious.

All the women had a child under the age of two and most had more than one preschool-aged child, so they found participating in the workforce challenging, particularly the nine who were parenting on their own. None were in the labour market at the time of the interviews, and only two were receiving or had ever received federal maternity benefits. One of the two, Erica, attributed her poverty to inadequate maternity payments. Other mothers stressed insufficient income assistance or barriers to employment. Their stories also highlighted how various social policies – or the lack of them – contributed to or trapped them in poverty.

The demands of motherhood were key to the women’s weak attachment to the labour market. Most aspired to work outside the home when their babies were older, but they saw the barriers as insurmountable for two reasons: lack of affordable and accessible child care; and (for those on income assistance) lack of opportunity to find a job with a living wage. As Anne said, “When you are on assistance you are trapped. You can’t get out. You want to get out, but unless you have a good paying job you can’t.” Kimberly elaborated on this point, explaining how working outside the home when her children were very young only made her life more difficult:

The kids were with a sitter. One was a baby and I would make bottles, I would pump. I worked at night time. I didn’t work too long, a year, then I quit and stayed home because I was working and on welfare at the same time, but they would deduct my paycheque off my welfare cheque. It just complicated my life; there was no benefit for me to work. I wasn’t gaining anything.

Mary and Heather still welcomed the prospect of employment, however, regardless of the challenges it posed. Mary couldn’t work because of her high-risk pregnancy, but even though having seven children and no car or public transportation had made working very

discussion of poverty revolved around problems stemming from income assistance policies, whether about rates, eligibility for various entitlements, or more generally how the program was delivered. Income assistance rates were regarded as woefully inadequate in comparison to the real costs of living. One might expect that receiving child support would enhance income security for those who were parenting alone, but four mothers stressed that it did the opposite by leaving them vulnerable to the whims and/or poverty of their former partners.<sup>3</sup> Anne, Mary, Susan, and Sally noted that child support was classified as “other income” to be factored into the overall household financial assets when determining income assistance payments, and was deducted dollar for dollar from welfare entitlements.<sup>4</sup>

For half the families in this study, monthly child tax benefits were the only income available for children’s food, because income assistance in Nova Scotia does not provide personal allowances for children. Although child tax benefits are not targeted at food provisioning, in practice they constitute a state-provided children’s feeding program for families relying on income assistance – albeit one that is highly compromised by other needs. It was common for mothers to refer to child tax benefits as the “children’s food money” and discussions about this income source centred on its importance for this purpose. As Lorraine said, the “assistance part of what I got was not enough” so the child tax benefit “saved” her. The women also very much appreciated the lack of entitlement regulations governing child tax benefits and, in contrast to income assistance, the lack of stigma and surveillance.

### **Food Insecurity and Feeding the Family**

Despite government transfers, the twenty women I interviewed were riddled with anxiety over the routine provision of food for their families. Their stories were consistent with qualitative research in Nova Scotia and Canada that describes household food insecurity as involving a range of experiences, beginning with worry about having enough food and leading to compromises in quality and ultimately quantity of food.<sup>5</sup> Angela remarked, children “constantly eat, constantly, constantly eat. So if it runs out, it runs out. You just can’t pick it off a tree.” Through the mothers’ experiences, we see how various

constraints – high workloads, lack of time, the obligation of parents to defer to the needs of their children and, overshadowing all, the material limitations of poverty – shape choices concerning family food consumption.

Mothers' stories of food work – all the tasks associated with budgeting for, acquiring, and preparing food, and feeding their families – were peppered with persistent worry about need surpassing income, as Angela attested:

Pretty soon we are going to be eating dirt off the ground, cause \$3 for a loaf of bread that in my house will last a day and \$7 for four litres of milk that last a few days – What the hell? And the price of meat and fruit and vegetables? You can't secure food. What are you supposed to? Hide it? I have done that a few times, hidden lunch food so I would have food to send to school, and then you feel like crap. How am I going to hide food from my kids?

Jessica described her own experience of food deprivation when her baby was only a few months old:

I worried about running out of food all the time. Every month. Every month. For a while I was spending all my money on trying to keep it [the house] warm for her and I never bought groceries the whole three months that I lived there. People would bring me, like, crackers and a few canned goods.

Multiple financial demands routinely resulted in not having enough money to buy food. Hannah described this monthly predicament in relation to high housing costs:

We get behind in rent and we always have to play catch up to keep the bills paid. We didn't have enough to pay for this place because the rent is \$900 a month with nothing included. It was the only place that we could find that was three bedrooms. We were taking my whole child tax benefit plus \$300 from what he was making to try and pay for this place. Then it was not having enough groceries to get through.

Sally and Angela experienced a similar lack of funds for food while living on income assistance:

I found it very insecure to keep groceries in the house. By the time your cheque comes you barely have any food left in the cupboard so go out and buy ... \$150 to \$200 of groceries for the month. Any fresh fruit, vegetables, milk, bread, you run out of, and then you just have to scrounge until your next cheque because you have to pay this bill, and this bill, and this bill. Then the cycle starts all over again. It was an every month struggle for food when I was on assistance. To plan for a whole month was hard. I would sit down and I would figure out, this many days, this many meals, never having enough to get what I wanted. (Sally)

Some months are ten times worse than other months. Like, some months, things are on sale and you can get a little bit more, but every month I struggle to buy food for my kids, and it is not because I am a bad mother or because I drink. I haven't even bought myself clothes since I had my kids. I just don't. I don't even have a bed; I sleep on the floor. I gave my kids my bed, because their bed is broke. (Angela)

Stories about cutting into the food budget to pay bills were consistent with published research in Canada revealing that food budgets are often compromised because they are more elastic than other budgetary components, such as rent and heat.<sup>6</sup> All the mothers on income assistance who did not have access to subsidized housing had to use part of their monthly child tax payments to cover housing costs. Angela and Margaret described how their children's food budget was compromised in paying for other basic needs:

I'm on my own with four kids, so I have to pay everything. I have to pay bills, I have to buy my groceries, I have to get diapers, milk, formula, wipes and clothes, and school stuff, and lunch stuff. My rent is \$1,350 a month, cause I can't find a place cheaper, and no matter where you go you are not going to find a place any cheaper. I only get \$620 from social assistance for rent. That is all they will give you, so I am taking the rest of it out of my family allowance, and then whatever is left is for food, her diapers, and milk, and I can't take my rent [money] and buy food



and I cannot *not* pay my power to get food. It is just always rent or food, or power or food. It is always something. It drives me insane. (Angela)

They [the Income Assistance program] give me \$620 for my rent and \$200 for my living. But they take \$200 off because I get that much in child maintenance [from the children's father]. But then I get my \$1,500 [child tax benefit]. They don't give me enough money to pay my rent, so I am already dipping into my kid's money to pay my rent. It's their money. They [the kids] are paying for it. Last month, we were out of everything and we had a full week that it was a bare minimum. We had one loaf of bread by the time I could go get groceries. The kids were having jam sandwiches. There was no sandwich meat left. I don't even know if we had canned vegetables left. I have never been that bad before. (Margaret)

While these stories show that often food budgets are compromised in order to pay bills, two mothers discussed being more likely to buy food than pay bills, leaving them vulnerable to owing money, being short on rent, or having services disconnected. Beverly said,

I have heard that people are more likely to dip into their food budget to pay other bills. Me, I'm the opposite. I will take from my cable bill and my rent to make sure we have food in our house because that is a priority to me, as long as we have a roof over our head and food in the house.

Regardless of whether they prioritized buying food or paying bills, however, the mothers confirmed that they could not do both.

Additionally, lack of affordable transportation added to the difficulty of getting enough food for the family. Food acquisition was challenging and costly without the use of a vehicle. Families routinely relied on lifts from relatives and friends or taxis, and then needed to pay for this transportation with money that came directly out of their food budget. Those who had access to public transportation still found acquiring food arduous, especially mothers without child care support:

I have to take all four kids to the grocery store. I get on the bus to go there, and I usually spend maybe \$5 to \$10 to get home in a cab, and

if I don't have the money for a cab, I have to carry it on the bus. You have to have the stroller closed up because it is a hazard, but what are you supposed to do? I can't strap the baby onto my back and carry the groceries all at the same time. You should see it: in the store I have to push the stroller and push the cart, and people are staring at you like you are an idiot. It also limits what you can buy. If I wanted to go buy \$200 worth of groceries, I can't because I can't carry it, so I will have to buy \$80 worth of groceries and go a couple of days later and buy more, and sometimes you have to go to the convenience store and pay twice as much as you would have to at the grocery store, and then by the time you go back sometimes, you don't have any money left to buy groceries. I don't know anybody with cars, and if you do you have to pay them gas. (Angela)

I don't have a car. I have a friend that takes me or I walk. I take the little ones and I walk down and I fit whatever I can in the stroller, in the bottom of the stroller. I don't take more than I can handle. And sometimes, I'll go down three days in a row to get a grocery order. I'll walk to town and fill up as much as I can and then I'll go back the next day ... It is half an hour away. (Emma)

The mothers did not indicate that their children were or had been chronically hungry because of household food insecurity, but several referred to rationing the quantity of food. Mary explained that her anxiety over her food work was mostly a supply issue, what nutrition scholar Kathy Radimer has termed the psychological dimension of food insecurity.<sup>7</sup> She said, "It is more worry, really. Most of your time is spent worrying about running out." Jean said she thought child hunger was "a very unrecognized problem" and that "people don't think that there's hungry kids out there" but "there definitely is":

Did you ever go to bed and wonder if your child was getting enough to eat? I am constantly concerned that my kids are getting enough to eat. My one and only worry is, are they getting enough to eat? Even with my oldest one, I am constantly worrying if he is getting enough to eat. I go to bed and I think, did [my child] get enough to eat? He would start crying in the night and I would think that he was hungry.

It was more common, however, for mothers to discuss a qualitative dimension of child food insecurity than actual food deprivation. They articulated a distinction between survival eating (keeping the body free from hunger) and healthy eating (keeping the body healthy). The latter was a desired but unobtainable standard. The comments of several women revealed that the capacity for healthy eating was realized only with a certain degree of what French philosopher and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu termed *distance from necessity*.<sup>8</sup> Bourdieu uses the concept to explain distinctions of taste between social classes. In other words, the social construct of good taste, or what is good or preferable in terms of behaviour, is influenced by how close to actual need the person or group of people is. He argues that those with low social status exercise a taste for necessity based on the function of feeding rather than the pleasure of eating. In the interviews, discussions of food and eating reflected a range of aspirations, usually combining concern that food perform the function of keeping children full and concern that children be “properly” nourished, following sanctioned dietary guidelines. Most mothers believed they fell short of their aspirations to feed their children nutritiously.

Mary, for example, discussed the challenges of creating a healthy meal when living in low-income circumstances: “Look at how many people out there in my situation are feeding their kids chicken nuggets and French fries almost every night because they are cheap ... Chicken nuggets are leftover meat from whatever. How healthy is it?” Angela also referred to “bad food,” food that was not nutritious but that she could afford:

I have to feed the kids Kraft Dinner and hotdogs or chicken nuggets, or crap, because that is what is in the house and that is what I can afford. When it is gone, it is gone, and I say you guys have to stop eating so much, and it is awful to tell them that, because they are growing, they are hungry.

A healthy diet was often discussed with reference to the food groups laid out by *Canada's Food Guide*.<sup>9</sup> For example, Lorraine talked about a “balance” of “nutritious foods” and how she strived to provide at least one such meal a day:

I try to do meals that have some kind of balance and some kind of nutrition in them, but they're not always nutritious and they're not always balanced, but I try. Even if it's one meal of the day, which is not exactly the best, I try to add it [nutritious food] in somewhere else so that at the end of the day we all have had something good.

Anne also talked about food groups and being able to manage only a limited range of fruits and vegetables, with certain vegetables seen as luxury items:<sup>10</sup>

For lunch I try to make things quick and easy, a can of soup, and for supper, something that has three groups in it. I buy potatoes and carrots. I don't get the luxury of broccoli and cauliflower, and all the other fruit and vegetables I could have. I just have enough to make meals and have food groups.

Sally also referred to *Canada's Food Guide* as guiding her food work since stopping income assistance, in contrast to how she was fed as a child:

My mom ... really didn't care what we ate. Like, she would feed us healthy but if you want a snack, [she'd say] go get a cookie. But I just pretty much want my kids to be healthy, so I just give what's healthy for them. Don't get me wrong; they still have the odd junk and like that. Every kid does. For the most part they have pretty much every food they need in the run of the day and as many servings as per the Canada health guide, and they usually follow that. But being able to afford it is hard, and I couldn't when I was on income assistance.

This qualitative evidence supports food cost research from Nova Scotia showing that certain families receiving provincial income assistance and/or in minimum wage employment cannot afford a basic nutritious diet.<sup>11</sup> Faced with insufficient income, mothers were forced to make compromises such as eating undesirable, cheap, and less nutritious food, highlighting the distance between food preferences and the actual food purchasing context. Buying cheap food was a necessity but clearly not a choice for most of the mothers. Several described the impact of lack of money on their food purchasing patterns, and spoke of feelings of stress and guilt

over buying cheap food that was insufficiently nutritious and rarely fresh. Faced with shopping only at the end of the month, when assistance payments arrived, mothers were forced to adopt strategies designed to “keep food in the house,” such as buying canned or frozen fruits and vegetables with longer shelf lives, and cutting out more expensive, healthier foods completely:

Trying to eat healthy is expensive. It’s a lot cheaper to go out and buy a whole lot of junk than it is to try to get your fruits and vegetables and your meat. And on a low budget it is very hard, very hard. There was never really any fresh fruits and vegetables when I was on assistance. That never really happened. If there were bananas and certain things on sale maybe, but other than that it was canned vegetables and frozen vegetables and just the cheapest things you can find. It would always make you feel guilty. [My daughter] always had food but whether or not it was healthy for her? It wasn’t the necessities she needed, it was, “This is cheap so this is what you are going to eat.” But she was never upset about it. She had food and she didn’t care, but there was always that guilt in the back of your mind that you wish you could do more. (Sally)

I would get my family allowance and my welfare cheque, but they came so close together it was really hard to plan for a whole month. I would just buy frozen vegetables and canned fruit because I had to plan for a month and fresh produce doesn’t keep. I don’t think I ever bought fresh vegetables until I got off social services. (Cathy)

One entire paycheque goes to the rent, so that leaves one for everything else and it was really hard to get through the month when buying groceries for an entire month. Of course all your fresh stuff has to be eaten right away or else it’s going to go bad, and when you have a two-year-old you need to make sure she is getting healthy food, so I would have to buy a lot of applesauce and stuff that wouldn’t go bad but still had some sort of nutrition to it. I feel bad buying these canned fruit and little fruit cups and I will rinse them off with water because I want to make sure there’s nothing extra on them. I worry about her getting enough nutritious food, because if we run out of all the fresh stuff, what is she eating? (Lorraine)

A lot of times in the grocery stores, I skip the meat aisle. Can't afford it. Been there, done that. Sometimes, healthy snacks, can't afford them. I've been to that point where you have to make a decision between what you can't afford and what you can have. (Emma)

Emma also mentioned that food marketed to children seemed to be particularly expensive, and though not always that good for them, forced her to make choices that left her feeling guilty:

Anything targeted towards children is – you know – a box of cereal – \$8 – peanut butter – cheese strings. It's expensive, maybe a lot of people would feed their children better or be more focused on nutrition if they could really, truly afford things. When you're in the grocery store and you're on a fixed income and you have to make a choice between this and that and they're both good choices but you can't have them both, that's a bad feeling, when you know that this would be good for my children but I can't afford it.

Angela stressed that fruit was a treat in her household, and while her children preferred healthy food, she could afford to feed them only what she considered “crap”:

Well, the problem is, and my kids don't understand, maybe I buy \$200 worth of food. Well then in four days it is gone, other than the meat that is in the freezer. The problem, they want everybody to eat healthy, but once you buy a bag of apples, that is three or four apples for four kids and it is gone. So next week? Then what? My kids love eating fruits and stuff and they are so expensive, so I go splurge and go buy a bag of oranges and like that is seven bucks and that will last me two days, but if I bought them three bags of chips that would last me almost a week.

For mothers living with the most serious income constraints, quantity was prioritized over quality of food in purchasing decisions, and ensuring full bellies preceded ensuring nutritional quality. Only Beverly stated that the quality of her children's food was more important to her than its quantity: “I find we might not get as much food as someone else because my preference is healthy food and that is more of a priority to me. I would

rather get less food but healthy food than get a whole bunch of junk, than [that] my family isn't getting what they need." She and Erica, the most food-secure mothers in the study, both indicated they routinely exercised choice concerning healthy food – but both also admitted that this came at the expense of bill payments and led them to incur debt.

### **Parental Food Deprivation**

Parents faced with insufficient incomes adopted various strategies to maximize food consumption for their children. The most frequent was to alter their own eating practices. Such intra-household variation of food consumption is commonly demonstrated in the household food insecurity literature. An Atlantic Canadian study reported that lone mothers are more likely than children to have food intakes below recommended nutritional levels, because they modify their intake to spare their children from nutritional deprivation.<sup>12</sup> Several qualitative studies have supported the findings of this research.<sup>13</sup>

In the current study, all but two mothers admitted to skipping meals to make food stretch or saving certain food items for their children. They described this practice as commonplace, rational, and the obvious choice considering the circumstances. Mary and Emma, for example, asserted that their children had never been hungry but that *they* went without themselves. Emma said, "We've never been that desperate, but myself, I've went without. Of course I have," and Mary indicated that she could "go a day to two days without eating." Anne talked about "doing without" as routine:

When my son started eating, like I always try to make sure that I have food for him, ... that he's got what he's got first, and then I come last. It happens a lot, because the money does not go very far when you have to buy diapers and milk and pay power, so I would think as long as I have enough food to keep him fed and stuff then I can do without. I'm not bothered by it.

Similarly, Jessica talked about her long-time habit of not eating as if it were unremarkable, normalizing her deprivation:

I don't really think about it very much. I usually just get up in the morning and I just do my normal everyday thing looking after [my daughter]. I

usually don't really think about eating myself till the evening when she is in bed. Then it's like she goes to bed and I sit down and suddenly I am starving and I should eat something now. I do that a lot. It's just a habit, I guess. I've just been used to having, like, no food at all, not being able to afford it. For a long time I lived in a place where there was never any food.

Jean and Lorraine rationalized prioritizing children's food as a parental responsibility for proper development, in contrast to their own survival-based eating. "I know when I'm having lack of food," Jean said, "but my children aren't going to." Lorraine spoke of her daughter being the first in the house to get healthy food, while she and her husband ate whatever they could:

It doesn't really matter. We're eating because we need to live, so we will eat plain rice or whatever for three meals, but I can't do that with my daughter. She's three, she's growing, she needs healthy stuff, so I try to make sure she's the one that's getting all the healthy stuff, all the fresh fruit and veggies. I'm finished growing; I have a responsibility for this person that can't do anything for herself.

Hannah also noted that she and her partner "would go without first" so that the children didn't have to.

It was also common for parents to "save the good food" for their children, avoiding it even if they were very hungry. Good food in this regard either meant "nutritious" food (most notably milk and fruit) or food the children desired, such as pizza and other food marketed to children. Elaine remarked,

I just try [to] save most of what I have for [my daughter] so I'll eat the canned beans over a can of ravioli. I don't really like beans, but I'll eat them because I'll save the good stuff for her. I honestly don't eat as much as I should. My kids eat before I do, and my three-year-old eats more than I do. It's hard to keep especially milk in the house because she likes to have chocolate milk and she likes to have cereal and I make, you know like hamburger helper and sometimes it has milk. So milk, and butter, I would say would be the hardest.



Emma talked about how difficult it was to keep milk in the house and indicated that she avoided eating fruit: “Parents go without. You don’t use the milk for tea or coffee because you are saving it. You make sure your kids have enough before you eat, even if they want seconds. I won’t touch bananas, because that is for [our daughter].” Sarah and Sally also went without fruit in order to save it for their children.

In a few households, parental food deprivation resulted in family mealtime dynamics whereby children rarely ate *with* their parents.<sup>14</sup> Angela and Jessica ate only at night when children were in bed, both indicating not only that they were too busy caring for children to eat throughout the day but also that the habit formed due to household food scarcity. When I asked Angela how she managed to not eat during the day, she replied,

I’m just so busy, and people look at me and don’t believe that I don’t eat, cause I gained so much weight from having the kids that I just can’t get rid of it. I’ll eat if I’m hungry and I’ll snack or I’ll grab something that I shouldn’t be grabbing to eat. If all I have is one frozen pizza, I won’t touch it, cause my kids will each eat two pieces. I’ll eat leftovers from a month [ago] if I have to cause I’m not going to touch their food ... I’ll get all their plates up and ... wait until I see if they want seconds. If they don’t then I’ll put it in the bowl for later. Usually they come back later and say “I’m hungry,” and if I ate it, I would feel like crap because I just ate their food.

When I asked if she ever ate with her children, she answered,

Well, I’ll sit at the table with them. Like, there are four chairs and the baby is in the highchair, and I’ll sit at the table while they eat their supper feeding her, but no, I don’t get to sit down and eat with them because I’m busy feeding her or there is not enough or whatever. And I’m really cautious about milk, because I can’t afford milk. I’m like, “Have a glass of juice. That milk is more for cereal tomorrow. If you drink it now you will have no cereal tomorrow.” And how are you going to tell your kids that no, you can’t have a glass of milk? Or no, you can’t have a second bowl of cereal? Your kids are looking at you like you are doing it on purpose or you are just hateful. My kids have told me, you are so mean.

Mary also commented that she purposely did not sit with her children at the table because she waited to see if there was enough for her:

After they are done eating then I'll usually eat if there is anything left over. Sometimes I'll pick from their plate if there is food left on it. I'm kind of scared to do that with the babies because there might be some spit-up food. Not very often do I sit at the table. There is not enough seating, for one thing. Maybe at Christmas, but there are not a lot of times when I'm eating at the same time as them, because I'll let them eat first. My kids would never really see me eating. They don't really pay too much attention to it. It is probably something they are used to.

Eating together is an activity of “constructing family” and a platform for the socialization of food norms. Feminist sociologist Marjorie DeVault argues that the structure of family is in fact formed largely through everyday food practice.<sup>15</sup> She discusses the way in which feeding brings individual family members together whom the public world pulls apart. Eating together is at the heart of the social relations whereby we create family and friendship.<sup>16</sup> Margaret agreed that eating together should be a family activity and is important for teaching proper eating practice:

How are they supposed to know what they are supposed to eat? If you are just feeding them this but don't eat yourself, why should they, eventually? My kids see me eat. I try to eat lunch when they eat lunch. I always eat supper unless I am really busy, but for the most part, when I make a meal, I make it for all of us. I do that.

The goal of the pleasurable “big family meal,” however – or even a mundane unhealthy meal, for that matter – was extremely challenging for Heather. She said that the children noticed and worried when she and her husband did not eat, and they would sit at the table and play games to disguise their lack of food intake and ease their children's worry:

There would be a week at a time that me and my partner would eat nothing and just be going on coffee ... We would feed the kids first and if they didn't eat everything we would take what was left on the plate.

Even if it was a spoonful it was something and we would do it just so they could see us eating something. They're smart. When you are sitting at the table with your kids and they are all eating, and they look at you and they say, "Mom, how come you are not eating?" They aren't supposed to worry about that. And I don't want to put that worry on them but what do you tell them? So I would say, "Hey, I'm just waiting for you guys." And their dad would say the same thing. They would get done and get up and go away and play and we would finish what they had when they weren't looking. And it breaks your heart. Or sometimes we would make a game of it, and say, "Give me your supper, give me your supper!" Tormenting them. They would play around getting the spoon going to you and you would eat it so to get them playing and they get to see you eat at the same time. But they don't really know that I am eating this because I don't really have anything else.

Heather's story of the dinner table shows how despite her desire to eat with her children, severe parental food deprivation creates social conflict and ruptures food norms.

### **Turning to Food Charity**

As participants in projects run under the Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program (CPNP) umbrella, the mothers I interviewed had some access to food supplementation, although these programs are not uniform across Canada. Some projects don't provide food at all, others provide it only prenatally, and still others both pre- and postnatally. When provided, the offerings vary: home delivery of milk, a carton of eggs a week, or a monthly nutritious food box. Some mothers in this study did not receive food supplementation, and some that did still needed food charity. Mothers turned to food banks the most, although food vouchers from churches, food items from other community organizations, and community dinners were other options. One mother received a donated vegetable box from community-shared agriculture. Some sought extra help from family resource centres (those operating the CPNP project) when all else failed. The staff delivered food themselves or advocated and arranged for food charity sources to make special exceptions when mothers' needs did not align with food banks' service times. Centres were also proactive in

designing food projects such as backyard gardening, community gardening, food-sharing cupboards, cooking workshops, and free meals or snacks during all programs.

Eleven of twenty mothers in this study had recently visited a food bank. Of these eleven, eight were single mothers. Five others had used food banks in the past. Only four mothers had never resorted to food charity, all of whom had a working partner. Two of these four sought other means of coping with food shortage, such as adjusting their diets and borrowing money (Lorraine and Margaret), and two indicated that food charity was not needed (Erica and Rosemary).

### **Problems of Access**

The women's stories revealed the inadequacy of food banks when it came to meeting their needs. Some mothers timed their visits to prevent food shortage, and others made regular visits when they were eligible as a necessary component of their long-term household food security work. Heather described several strategies she used when food ran low, from pleading with the food bank for more to finding a different church, and eventually to borrowing money:

I do go to the food bank quite a bit but they only let me go once a month. And I can't go to any other one because I am within the boundary of this particular one. And they will mark it [your visit] down and if you come before you are allowed they will tell you to go home, saying, "You were already here for this month." In March I went to the food bank and got a couple of things to last a couple of days. I still had three weeks to go before I could go again. So I had to actually call up and explain to them that I had been ... [but] that I have three kids and that I really need help. They told me come in and they would give me a couple of things. It got me through the next couple of days until I could find another option. Like then I could get a food voucher from [a church], and then when that runs out I would have to find someone to lend me \$10, \$20. That is always my last resort.

Limited hours of operation and rules governing entitlement mean access to food banks is restricted. While food banks in urban areas may open three days a week, rural food banks tend to open for just a few hours

a week or every second week. Elaine described how the system worked in her area:

You can only go to a food bank once a month. There is one around here that is every three months. Also you can go to [one farther away] every three weeks, but you can't go to two food banks that are involved with [the provincial organization]. The reason you can go to [the more distant one] is because they are not involved with [the organization]. But it is all the way downtown and somebody like me who has to take the bus with two kids ... and then back with all that stuff, it is too hard, and I don't have the money for a cab to get home. So I stick to the one here, and it's kind of a pain when you can only go like once a month. That would probably be my biggest challenge, because I try not to have to rely on the food bank but I have to, obviously. I do go every month.

Lack of affordable transportation also limits the ability of families to use food banks, regardless of whether they live in rural or urban areas. Angela described the challenge of getting to the downtown food bank that Elaine mentioned, which she called the "best" one because it operated independently and gave more food than most, with fewer restrictions on the frequency of visits:

It is all the way downtown, so I would have to get on the bus with four kids, and if you are not there at eight o'clock in the morning you won't get in. You will be the last on the list and you will get absolutely nothing, so if you are not there at six o'clock in the morning you shouldn't bother going cause they will line up at the door at six o'clock. It is open three days a week, but you have to get on two buses to get down there and two buses to get home and then figure out a way to carry your stuff with the kids on the bus, so unless I have a drive I can't go there.

Heather also preferred this food bank, but getting there was equally challenging for her:

That has got to be the best one. Wow. They give you so much stuff it's unbelievable. But I have to find \$2.25 to get across the bridge and \$2.25

to get back and I have to fit the food in the stroller. That is if the bus driver will let the stroller on, especially with that much stuff hanging off your stroller with all your kids too. I lost my shame a long time ago because I didn't have a choice. I'm going on the bus and people can stare at me. I don't care. I have to feed my family.

The work of food acquisition from regular sources was daunting for those with little or no access to transportation and several children in tow. Heather's exhaustion, resulting from her combined food work of shopping and charity acquisition, was apparent: "Three out of four weeks you are looking for the food. That's not living."

### **Denial of Choice, Lack of Quality**

Apart from problems of access, food charity denied mothers the ability to make choices, a situation they lamented but accepted as routine. The women cautiously discussed their experiences, implying that they knew they were not supposed to complain or appear ungrateful yet wanting to explain how lack of choice made such charity an ineffective response to food insecurity. Mothers noted that the food they received was rarely what they would have chosen on their own, or what they or their children preferred to eat. As a result, this food sometimes sat in the cupboard and was consumed only in the direst circumstances. One mother even spoke of donating the rejected items during a school food bank drive, joking about whether she would get it again on her next visit to the food bank. Angela told of avoiding food banks for this reason, even though she routinely ran out of food:

I have used food banks, but I try to not even go to them, cause, and I don't mean anything disrespectful to them, but half the time you don't get anything you can use. There is only one food bank downtown where you can pick what you want ... [At some places] you might get two bags, and half the time the kids won't even touch it. A lot of it just ends up sitting there. Yeah, but sometimes you don't have the choice; sometimes you just do what you have to do. But my kids, they just won't eat certain things.

Hannah said she simply wouldn't eat food from this source: "There are times that the canned food, which is crap food that you get from the food

bank, will sit in our cupboard forever. My husband will eat the canned food if he has to. I refuse. I would rather go hungry. It is gross.” Heather was similarly repelled by the unfamiliarity of the food she was given, telling of receiving a mysterious item she was unable to identify:

There was this one time I was at the food bank, I had this thing that was in my bag. I didn’t have a clue what it was so I phoned these guys and they told me what it was. It was frozen in this Ziploc bag and they told me it was deer meat. I cooked it up and fed it to my family. I would not eat it. I would not touch it. I didn’t tell them because I knew they wouldn’t eat it. Most people get to go grocery shopping. We take it or leave it. But what do you do if it is your only resource?

Kimberly discussed the issue in terms of nutrition:

It wouldn’t be the food that we would normally eat. It would be like more bread and pasta, and I always bought fruits and vegetables and I would always try to keep a healthy meal, but when the time came and we had to go to the food bank we would have to eat what they gave us. We would eat it; we would have to. They didn’t ask you what you wanted. They just gave you what they gave you.

Mary raised another problem when she recounted a visit to the food bank on the day of her interview, showing me the items she had received and remarking on the difficulty she would have in making a meal from them: boxes of cookies, cans of soup, a box of tea, salad dressing, ketchup, granola bars, generic macaroni and cheese, and a large piece of frozen salami:

I had to fight for those apples, and the only meat I got was a big frozen hunk of salami, leftover meat by-products, and really you don’t even want to think about what makes it up. What was the most healthy thing I got? Processed cheese slices, made of I don’t know what, and six eggs, that would be one each, and a carton of milk. Show me the meal that I make out of that other than Kraft Dinner. You end up with all these things you didn’t have a plan for; most people have the privilege of deciding what

they want to make and going to a store to buy it and putting a meal together. We only get that on the 20th [the date the child tax benefit arrives]. For maybe a week and a half you are a little bit happy about the meals you can make.

Jessica also commented on the challenges of preparing a meal from food bank items:

Mostly they give you canned stuff, I find, and bread. They give us a lot of bread. It's always the same thing: beans and more beans. You wouldn't believe the size of the cans of soup that we got. It was like enough to feed like a family of twenty. It was ridiculous. And then they give you cookies and they give you like a bunch of random granola bars and little juice boxes, but they don't really give you anything nutritional ... There is not really much there to make a meal with. It's a lot of junk food. Like, they give us like chips and granola bars and like, just crackers. It's all non-perishable foods.

Lack of food choice was closely linked to concerns about food quality. The women felt that they were left with only the choice between "bad food" or no food. Bad food was not just undesirable; it was also of poor quality or unsafe, again leading families to reject it or eat it only as a last resort. Kimberly said, "At the food bank you get pretty much the bottom of the barrel. You could play hockey with the bread; there are bent-up cans. I know it is there when you need it, but they could make it more ... not desirable, but maybe more better?" Kimberly's words reveal that she thought it might be too much to ask for food bank food to be appealing, but she cautiously proposed that it could at least be of better quality. Emma, with a surprising and forgiving sense of humour, told of receiving a box of food that had expired decades ago:

They give you out-of-date products and frozen buns and bread. It's horrible. My daughter and I decided we were going to make a box of Kraft Dinner we got from there and we cooked the noodles and we went to put the package of sauce in and it was golden brown and it was so rancid and I looked at the date and it was 1985. I'm not kidding. I could cry, because I had to explain that to [my daughter], how that could have



happened. I had already told her that the food bank gave us all this stuff for free and helped us and how positive it was and then we make a box of Kraft Dinner and the date is so horribly expired and it's disgusting and how do you put a positive spin on that after telling her that these places are here to help us? Maybe it got under or on top of something and it just happened to get stuck? I don't think that it was an intentional thing – but it was pretty gruesome. And it just doesn't make you feel good about what it is that you're getting, you know? Everything is in a can or package. I have never seen a vegetable.

Other mothers mentioned similar concerns over dented cans, stale bread, rotten produce, mysterious meats, and goods that had been handled by unknown food bank volunteers.

### **Socially Just Food Acquisition**

While much of the discussion about food charity centred on its problematic nature – barriers to access, denial of choice, poor quality – the women were not devoid of gratitude. Jessica, Emma, and Elaine clearly appreciated the support they received from the food bank. Mary praised the non-judgmental support she received from a church in her area, and Hannah, Heather, Angela, and Elaine all commented positively on the volume of food support certain food banks provided. Yet their feelings were mixed, and were accompanied by highly insightful comments about the barriers that tempered the effectiveness of charity in addressing food insecurity.

A cornerstone of food security is the ability to acquire food in ways that are socially acceptable and just. Beverly and Sally expressed indifference about needing to use food charity: it was doing what you must do as a mother. Beverly asserted, “It is fine with me. I needed it for me and my kids,” while Sally said, “At the time I didn't really feel bad about it or low about it, because I needed food and I didn't have money. What else are you going to do?” It was far more common, however, for mothers to express feelings of shame. Sarah talked about her discomfiture:

There have been times when I went to the food bank for some cans of food, but it's embarrassing, right? I hate it. It sucks, because it's like what

do you do, right? And, it's like you should be able to have food, there's no reason why we shouldn't have enough. That's how I feel and it's so embarrassing there.

Research in Canada and the United States has shown that coping measures such as food bank usage are often a last resort when other personal management strategies have failed, and that they are both experienced as an indignity and perceived to be an essential community service.<sup>17</sup> Some suggest that they have become institutionalized.<sup>18</sup> The very existence of food banks functions as an important marker of food insecurity and hunger in Canada, and the number of food bank users has served as an indirect measure, although inadequate, of the extent of the problem.<sup>19</sup> Many argue not only that food banks are an inadequate response to food insecurity but that they cause social harm themselves.<sup>20</sup> As Graham Riches, a widely published expert on domestic hunger, writes, "It is highly unlikely that charity alone can adequately feed the hundreds of thousands of hungry Canadians, let alone address their nutritional well-being in other than *ad hoc* and socially unacceptable ways."<sup>21</sup>

### **Borrowing and Stealing**

Apart from (and sometimes simultaneously with) compromising their own diets and/or accessing food charity, the women I interviewed had developed other strategies to cope with food shortage. Elaine accurately captured the variety of outcomes mothers experience in the face of food insecurity when she said, "We have to beg, borrow, and steal, and sometimes it has come down to me stealing food from a grocery store for my child." Borrowing money from either friends or family, on credit, or through the process of pawning was discussed by thirteen of the twenty mothers. Susan commented that she would "get very stressed out about the lack of funds" and "usually ended up having to borrow money from someone before the end of the month." Beverly noted that she had on occasion borrowed money specifically for food, and Anne commented that she "would have to borrow money from someone to do until the next time I have money coming in."

Borrowing money from family members often kept Kimberly, Sally, Cathy, and Lorraine from needing to resort to food charity. Cathy described her situation:

I have to say that when I was on social services I had more of a challenge to keep milk in the house and you are down to your last few things; you had to borrow money because there was nothing in the house. I would always have to borrow money. I would be borrowing money from my sister. She didn't have kids and I did. Then I would have to owe them my welfare cheque.

Kimberly said, "I had always been independent until I met my fiancé. I had always worked, and when I wasn't working I found ways to get food. I didn't go to extremes cause I had a little bit of family support to help me with food." She noted that it was difficult to ask for help, however, as it took away "your sense of pride," and she stressed that it was important to be careful choosing whom to ask for help "cause then you owe them big time," but she still preferred to borrow money for food than to go to the food bank. Sally, on the other hand, depended on her mother to buy food for her:

Every month was a struggle for food when I was on assistance. There were a couple times I went to the food bank, but usually I went to my mother and she would buy it for me. I would be like, "I have no money, no food," and then she would usually go and pick me up some groceries to get me through the next two weeks or week and a half until the child allowance came. Every month Mom would get a phone call between the 8th and the 11th and she would know what it was for. She never once complained about it, because she knew the circumstances I was in.

Elaine and Heather talked about how the debt created by borrowing money in this way made the next month's food budget even less sufficient. Elaine elaborated:

I don't like to borrow money from people, but I did. So when I get my next child tax [benefit], I have almost \$400 that I have to pay out to

people and it will be hard to feed myself and my kids and you know it kinda sucks.

Emma and Jessica talked about using credit to buy food. Before Emma declared bankruptcy, she had paid for food and baby items on credit, while Jessica relied on her roommate's use of a credit card:

I have been desperate enough to use my credit cards, when I had them before my bankruptcy, for milk and diapers. So had I not had the credit cards, I suppose I wouldn't have been able to really afford it. I suppose I would have had to rely on reaching out to family members that I normally wouldn't, or friends, or I would have done whatever I had to do to get it. Well, not "whatever," but you know. (Emma)

My roommate is really helpful. She has a Visa. So she charges it on her card and I usually give her the money back because I hate taking her money, because she needs it like I do, too. But she is really good with the baby, too. She is sixty-nine years old. And she's not on much herself either. She's on very little. She is so helpful. I don't know where I would be. I am eating a lot more, probably because of her. I am a lot more out there now, because of her. But she is really good with helping me out with the baby. If I am out of something, she will get it for me. I always pay her back. (Jessica)

Pawn shops and payday loans were other ways of borrowing. Jessica, Emily, and Heather used pawn shops to secure small loans so they could buy food. Jessica said,

I actually have done things like pawn my things that I own – my own personal things – just to get money to buy food. So, like, I used to put my iPod in there all the time and they would give me twenty bucks for it and then I would have to pay thirty bucks to get it out. And every week that went by that you don't go back to get it, they charge you an interest of \$10. And then if you don't go back after a month or something, then they put it out on the shelf and sell it on you. Yeah, I lost so much stuff

there that I wish – I regret it. I had a docking station. I had a flat-screen TV. So much stuff. And I could cry. I regret it so much. But I don't regret it because it was for her, but I just wish that I didn't have to go through that.

Jessica also struggled with payday loans, as did Kimberly. Jessica had defaulted on a loan and had to change her phone number and bank account in order to hide from creditors:

Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god. I [took out a payday loan]. And when you're on social assistance, they will only allow you up to a \$100 loan, right? I could not afford to pay them back. I still haven't paid them back. I probably owe about \$700 or more by now. They harassed me and harassed me and harassed until eternity, until I changed my number. I should never have done it. I live under the poverty line; how the hell do I pay it back?

Kimberly and her husband were in a vicious circle of repeatedly taking out high-interest payday loans to get through the month:

There is a no-win situation there. You pay it the next payday you get, or you can make payments in between. We have to get a loan to pay off the loan. I have been on loans now for four years and I would like to get out. And you try to get out and they say, well you can wean yourself off. And you have to be careful with payday loans if you are on social assistance. If they find out you borrowed, they can actually dock you, cause that is another income. No win, it is crazy, and then they wonder why there are starving kids.

Five mothers talked about stealing food. Hannah, Mary, Elaine, and Angela provided details on how it was possible to steal bags of groceries and larger items from grocery stores with the use of recycled bags and store "purchased" stickers. Mary's cousin regularly stole food that she gave to Mary and once, when Mary herself stole, she was caught: "I will admit that I stole once from Walmart and I got caught. I had to do it for the kids. I had to do an adult provision something-or-other, and I had to pay \$75 to

the [Children's Hospital]." Elaine talked about knowing people who stole "two or three times a month":

It could be food, meat; it could be baby food like the jars; it could be formula; it could be diapers, wipes, anything that's supported around feeding children, you know – not just themselves, but children. It's mostly children, you know, and that sucks. They didn't have to be brought into poverty, and this is what we are living in. We're living in poverty because of why?

For Heather and her husband, stealing was the last resort for feeding their children when all other options were depleted:

If I am going to do that to feed him [the baby], then I am going to do it. And my partner, if he is at work and he is packing up a box and he sees \$20 lying on the floor he's going to put it in his pocket instead of putting it in the box, because he knows that he has to feed his boy. And the boss finds out they are out \$20, and then they are all up shit's creek because he doesn't want to admit he has to feed his boy. But we did what we had to do. We might have only done it a handful of times but we did it. I am not proud of it but we did it. My kids are still alive.

Angela's experiences with food charity had been so frustrating, unhelpful, and degrading that she preferred stealing:

You have to beg and plead so that is why, if it comes down to it, I will do whatever I have to do to get money for my kids. If I have to choose between begging and stealing, I'll steal, because you don't feel so degraded, and if you get caught, well, you get caught. At least I didn't have to beg.

### **Feeding and Motherhood**

Much has been written about food work as symbolic of good mothering, and about the "proper" family meal as an indicator of family well-being.<sup>22</sup> The current study also revealed the centrality of food in the daily work of mothers and in family routines, illustrating that mothers took pride in

their feeding work when they had the resources they needed. At the same time, their experiences illustrate how food insecurity can constrain food work and shape the dietary intake and nutritional status of families living in poverty.

I asked the women to describe the significance of food in their households. Sally responded, “I have five people in the house to feed, so food is important.” Lorraine described food as the thing that kept the family “nourished, full, and happy and healthy.” The task of feeding children was the primary activity of their mothering, and acquiring food, preparing food, feeding, and cleaning up afterward consumed a large proportion of each mother’s time. The interviews also revealed acutely ambivalent attitudes toward food and feeding. Food had the power to bring great pleasure as well as great anxiety and frustration, depending on how secure a mother felt about her capacity to keep food in the house that was desirable to family members. A full fridge and a cupboard with a variety of food symbolized security, the opposite despair. Jean stated,

Some people describe shopping as one of those joyful things to do. Me, it’s grocery shopping. Well, I guess not really the process of grocery shopping, [but] I enjoy going to the fridge and seeing all kinds of different things to pick from. When I open the fridge and see stuff there, I feel awesome, just the variety of different foods and knowing that I have all kinds of different foods.

As food work constituted so much of the daily work of mothers, the capacity to perform that work well symbolized accomplished mothering for some. Hannah described the pleasure she experienced in cooking a “big meal” and being able to share meals with others outside her nuclear family:

I like cooking meals for people, which makes our budget even tighter. I’m like “Let’s have all these people over and I’ll make the food.” Can’t afford to do it, but I like to. I love cooking for people. I enjoy it. I like to be able to sit down and watch people enjoy a meal. [My husband] enjoys the fact that I cook because his mom only ever made things like macaroni noodles with tomato soup on them and that would be like their meal for

a month on end, or it would be like a Hamburger Helper. And I'm more like, okay, let's have some haddock and broccoli and carrots or let's have pork roast done with mushroom soup and some broccoli and rice – just big meals.

Mary, who had five children to feed, also mentioned the concept of the big meal, which she too equated with “goodness,” in contrast to meals that used prepared food products:

I have to make things like Hamburger Helper, which is a bad meal, but I guess you are still getting all your stuff in it. But the kids like big meals, like potatoes and pork chops, meatloaf and another vegetable, and that would be like a big meal, but I can't make them very often and I feel bad. If I was to buy a roast, like one you would buy for your whole family, I would have to cut it in two and get two meals out of it, so there are no times when people get seconds. They don't get that opportunity.<sup>23</sup>

For both mothers, the big meal did not mean large quantities of food for each person but rather the ability to feed many people “properly,” meaning with non-processed food items that included meat, potatoes, and vegetables.

While producing a “good” meal brought pleasure and feelings of accomplished mothering, stories of daily food work were far more likely to focus on the non-pleasurable, mundane, and frustrating work of producing the routine “simple” meal. This was consistent with a study in the United States revealing how food work in low- and middle-income families is often perceived as demanding and guilt ridden, when constraints limit the ability to perform food work in ways that match the ideals of the proper family meal.<sup>24</sup> Elaine described the ambivalence she felt about food, and how this manifested itself in her feelings about herself as a mother:

When it comes down to it, I'm in emergency situations quite a bit. When I'm in a good place, like you know my cupboards are full, my fridge is full, and my freezer is full, I'm feeling pretty good and you know, it makes me happy, like I'm doing a good job as a mother, but when my fridge



starts getting empty, and my milk starts getting low and I'm running out of things that [my daughter] will eat it, doesn't make me feel very good as a person or as a mother. (Elaine)

When mothers fell short of the ideal of properly providing for children, they experienced guilt, shame, and despair. Heather talked about feeling suicidal when she believed she could not provide:

Sometimes honestly I just wanted to jump off the bridge or have someone hopefully stab me because what kind of mom or dad can't provide for their child? You feel like a piece of poop. I brought this child into the world and I can't take care of it. I don't know. You get through it. They keep you going and you always manage to find a way somehow. The kids keep you going.

Cathy said, "It doesn't make you feel good [when you run out of food] and you think, 'How am I going to feed my kids for the month?' It does stress you out. It was hard." Susan commented that she now avoided going to the food bank because of the way it made her feel: "I used to go, when I had my first son, quite often, but now I don't go at all. I don't really, like I don't like going, because it made me feel like I couldn't afford to look after him properly."

The issue was not limited to self-criticism. Jessica frequently had to call her income assistance worker when she ran out of money for food, but she soon learned that asking for help led to judgment about her ability to care for her child:

I was calling almost every month for a purchase order for food and [the income assistance worker] started saying, "What are you doing with your money?" and she started getting really nasty and I kept trying to tell her, "Well I am living in this house which has no heat and I am trying to put oil in it every week." But [she] tries to make it look like you are not taking care of your baby and stuff.<sup>25</sup>

Emma, who was working extremely hard raising four children on her own, was accused of sitting home and doing nothing all day. She knew this wasn't

true and tried to be strong, but the pressure of the work and the criticisms still deeply affected her:

I have my bad days. I have times when, you know, I cry all day, but then I don't let it get me, you know? I have to get it out and I have to find a solution for whatever the problem is because I am very focused. I have to be. It's not a choice. I can't slack off. I can't not be responsible – I have to do right by these children. It's my job. Then people will say to you that you're sitting home and you're doing nothing.

Elaine, Mary, Angela, and Emily all talked about fearing that child protection services (CPS) would take their children from them because of their struggles to provide.<sup>26</sup> Mary had a history with CPS: one daughter was already living in permanent foster care and her other children had once been temporarily removed. Emily's child was apprehended at birth and remained in foster care until she was twelve months old. Angela and Elaine argued against claims that they were “bad mothers”:

Every month I struggle to buy food for my kids, and it is not because I am a bad mother. People look at you and they judge you. I have felt guilty or ashamed having to ask anybody for help, but if it comes down to it, I would come here [the family resource centre] and ask, but then I worry, are they going to call Children's Aid on me because I don't have enough money to feed my kids and I'm here begging for help? That is another problem too, like if you cannot afford to feed your kids or you come to too many people looking for help, they can take your kids from you, no matter how well you are trying to do it. But I say, well then give me more money to do it then. You are going to take my kids from me because I don't have no money? All my money goes to my kids, every cent I get. (Angela)

I have had people in the last year tell me that I am not a good mother, I do not provide for my children, that CPS is going to come to my house and that I better have a clean house. I've had people tell me that my kids are going to get taken away from me because I don't care for my children ... I know I am doing the best job I can with the resources that I have, and for somebody to tell me that I'm not doing a good job? They

can go to hell ... I know that I am not the best mother because I do have my breakdowns, but I am a good mother. (Elaine)

Being food insecure while having the responsibility to feed children left mothers feeling that they were set apart from people who acquired food through regular channels, buying and eating what they wanted. Mary indicated that “mothers like us” could participate only occasionally in the normal routines of food work and food consumption. Heather remarked that people in poverty had to “take it or leave it” when it came to relying on charity, while others had the privilege of grocery shopping and choice. These feelings of social exclusion illustrate well Kathy Radimer’s conceptualization of the social outcomes of food insecurity that are manifested in deviations from social food norms.<sup>27</sup>

### **What about the Babies?**

These stories of family poverty, household food insecurity, maternal food work, and the social policy dynamics that help or hinder that work bring to light the need to examine infant feeding as a component of the overall financial constraints on the feeding work of mothers. They also suggest that food practices shaped by poverty and food insecurity may differ by gender, age, and social position within the family.

Thus, infants’ experience of food insecurity differs from that of other household members. The social status of infancy, and the fact that babies are (or are not) fed through the bodies of their mothers, is an element of the overall gendered work of feeding the whole family within food insecure conditions, at a time in life when material resources are limited by intensive caregiving responsibilities. The stories in this chapter reveal a great deal about the environments within which infants are fed, illuminating the challenges of food access and food quality in general and mothers’ food access in particular. The following chapters focus on how various infant feeding practices are shaped by the social condition of household and maternal food insecurity. They develop a typology of infant food insecurity that demonstrates how infant feeding can shape the social condition of household food insecurity and, even more significant, how the social condition of household and maternal food insecurity shapes infant feeding practices.<sup>28</sup>

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