BC youth experiencing food insecurity

McCreary Centre Society

The 2023 BC Adolescent Health Survey (BC AHS) was completed by 38,488 students aged 12–19. This fact sheet focuses on students in Grades 7–12 who experienced food insecurity (i.e., they went to bed hungry at least sometimes because there was not enough money for food at home; cut the size of their meals or skipped meals in the past year because there was not enough money for food at home; were deprived of lunch for school/money to buy lunch; and/or ate food from the food bank the day before taking the survey).

For more information about the BC AHS, please visit: ***mcs.bc.ca/about_bcahs***.

Introduction

Food insecurity is "the inability to obtain sufficient, nutritious, personally acceptable food through normal food channels or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so" (Davis & Tarasuk, 1994). Food insecurity rates vary across Canada (Liu et al, 2023). However, food insecurity is more common in households which include individuals under the age of 18 (McIntyre, 2023; Hammami et al, 2020). In British Columbia (BC) in 2023, 32% of children and youth under the age of 18 were food insecure, including 25% who were moderately or severely food insecure (Statistics Canada, 2026).

Social supports such as friends, family, school, and community can be positively associated with better mental health for food insecure youth. However, social supports cannot address the systemic problem of food insecurity (Hammami et al, 2020). Additionally, the health implications of food insecurity for 12–19-year-olds have not been extensively studied in Canada (Liu et al, 2023).

This fact sheet uses BC AHS data to look specifically at food insecurity experienced by youth aged 12–19 in the province, and compares the health and well-being of food insecure youth to their food secure peers.

Youth who experienced food insecurity

"Food is too expensive." —18-year-old male

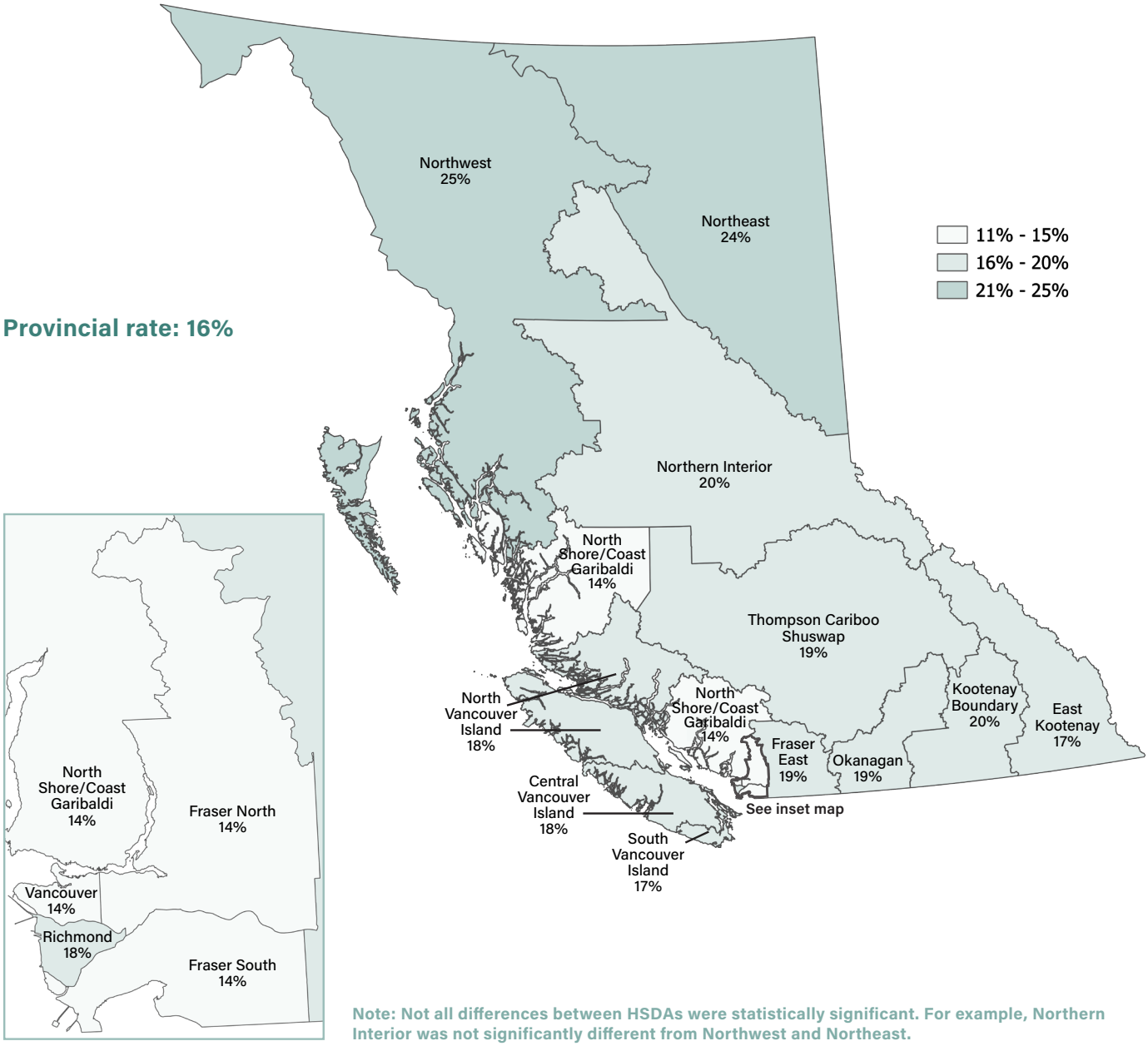
In 2023, 16% of BC youth in Grades 7–12 experienced food insecurity, with those aged 12 or younger less likely than older youth to have this experience (e.g., 13% vs. 17% of 17-year-olds).

Youth experienced food insecurity in different ways. For example, 9% went to bed hungry at least sometimes because there was not enough money for food at home (down from 10% in 2018 but above 7% in 2013); 6% cut the size of their meals or skipped meals in the past year because there was not enough money for food at home; 5% were deprived of lunch for school or money to buy lunch (vs. 4% in 2018); and 3% ate food from a food bank the day before taking the survey. More than a third (35%) of those who were food insecure experienced at least two types of food insecurity. Going to bed hungry was the most common form of food insecurity. Around two-thirds (66%) of youth who had cut or skipped meals also went to bed hungry at least sometimes, as did 41% of those who were deprived of lunch, and 28% of those who ate food from a food bank the previous day.

Reflecting research from the United States (Shanafelt et al, 2016), BC students in rural areas were more likely to experience food insecurity than those in urban areas (22% vs. 16%). At the Health Service Delivery Area (HSDA) level, food insecurity ranged from 14% in parts of the Lower Mainland to 20% and above in the North.

Youth who experienced food insecurity

Provincial rate: 16%



Note: Not all differences between HSDAs were statistically significant. For example, Northern Interior was not significantly different from Northwest and Northeast.

Youth more likely to experience food insecurity

In Canada, children and young people have been found to be more likely to be food insecure if they experienced lower socioeconomic status (Bhawra et al, 2021; McIntyre, 2023); lived in a single-parent home, without parents, or in a household with multiple children (Liu et al, 2023); were street-involved (White et al, 2024); or identified as a sexual minority (White et al, 2024).

This was also the case for 12–19-year-olds in BC. For example, sexual minority youth were more likely to experience food insecurity than their straight peers (23% vs. 14%). Additionally, gender minority youth were more likely to be food insecure (30% of non-binary youth vs. 16% of males and females).

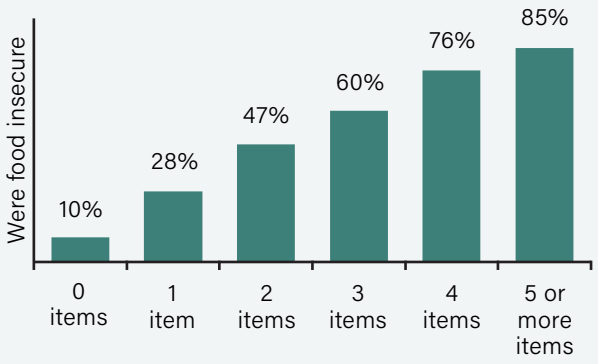
Immigration status

Immigration status has sometimes been linked to food insecurity (Liu et al, 2023). In BC, 33% of refugee youth experienced food insecurity, compared to 17% of those who were born in Canada.

Poverty and Deprivation

McCreary's Youth Deprivation Index considers material deprivation from a youth's perspective (Smith et al. 2022). In addition to the food insecurity item about whether youth were deprived of lunch for school or money for lunch, the Index asks about 10 other types of material deprivation (such as lack of money for extracurriculars and school trips, and lack of access to the Internet). Results showed that the more of these 10 items youth felt deprived of, the more likely they were to experience food insecurity.

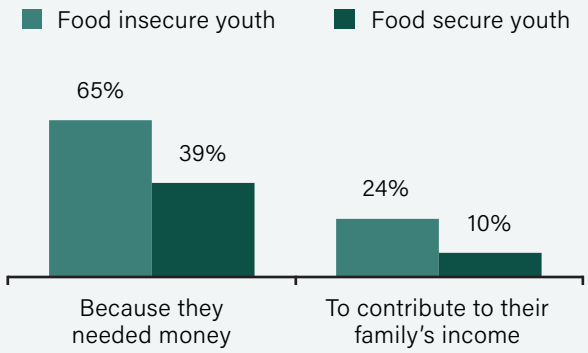
The more items youth were deprived of, the more likely they were to experience food insecurity



Note: The number of Youth Deprivation Index items counted did not include the item about having lunch for school or money to buy lunch.

Food insecure youth were more likely to work during the school year (36% vs. 31% who were food secure). Among those who were employed, food insecure youth were more than twice as likely to be working 21 or more hours a week (5% vs. 2% of food secure students). They were also more likely to be working because they needed money and to contribute to their family's income.

Reasons youth worked during the school year



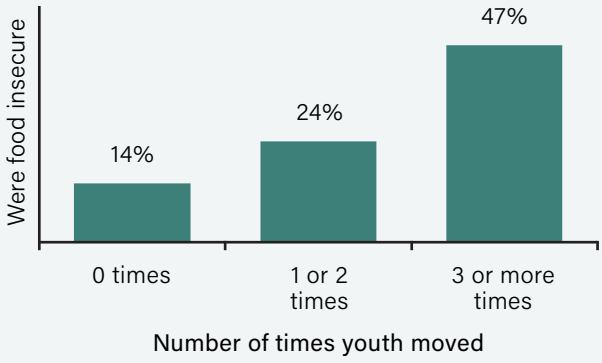
Living situation

"We need money support for families with kids—Food and housing are just so expensive. I'm one of five kids and we just can't keep up. Please help. I know my parents will never ask for it, and it's causing them to be super stressed out."

—12-year-old female

Housing instability was associated with food insecurity. For example, 62% of those who were homeless in the past year experienced food insecurity (vs. 15% who were not homeless during that time). Also, the more frequently youth moved in the past year, the more likely they were to be food insecure.

The more times youth moved in the past year, the more likely they were to experience food insecurity



Youth were more likely to be food insecure if they lived in a single-parent household, with other children or youth, with their own children, or alone. For example, 58% who lived alone were food insecure (vs. 16% who lived with other people). Also, 45% of those who had been in government care or an alternative to care reported experiencing food insecurity (vs. 14% of those without care experience).

Food insecurity and well-being

Food insecurity was negatively associated with youth's health and well-being.

Mental health

Previous research has found food insecurity increases the likelihood individuals will experience mental health challenges including depression and anxiety (McIntyre, 2023; Hammami et al, 2020), and suicidal ideation (Men et al, 2021). They are also more likely to utilize mental health services (McIntyre, 2023).

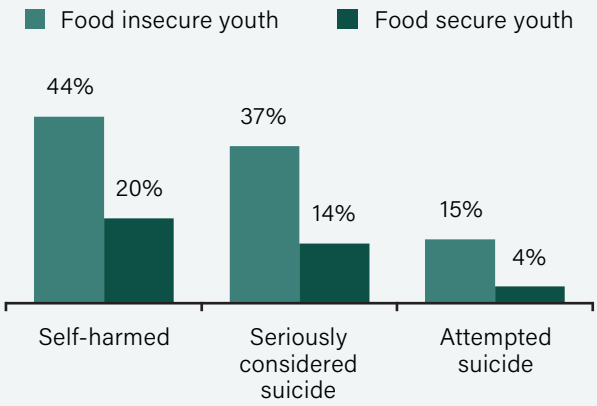
A minority of BC youth (37%) who experienced food insecurity rated their mental health as good or excellent, compared to 64% of those who were food secure. Also, a quarter (25%) rated their mental health as poor (vs. 9% of food secure youth).

Youth who experienced food insecurity were more likely than their food secure peers to have needed mental health services in the past year (47% vs. 26%). However, they were less likely to have accessed these services when they felt they needed them (32% got the help they needed vs. 40% of food secure youth).

Around 4 in 10 food insecure youth (41%) reported having a mental health condition (vs. 18% of food secure youth), with anxiety the most common condition.

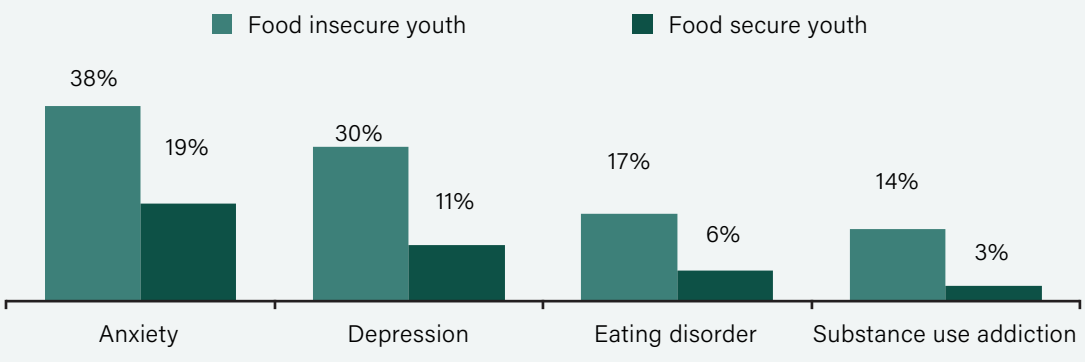
Food insecure youth were more likely to experience extreme stress (26% vs. 10% of food secure youth) and extreme despair (18% vs. 6%) in the past month. They were also more likely to have self-harmed and been suicidal in the past year.

Food insecure youth were more likely to have self-harmed and been suicidal in the past year



Youth facing food insecurity reported lower quality of life ratings, including being more likely to wish they had a different life (38% vs. 16% of food secure youth). They were also less likely to feel quite or very hopeful for their future (38% vs. 63% of food secure youth).

Food insecure youth were more likely to report mental health conditions



Physical health

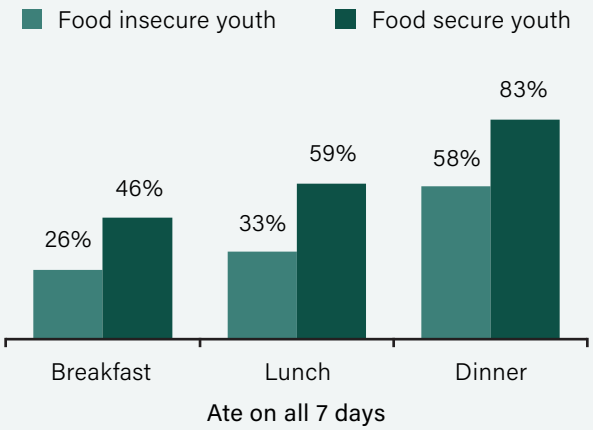
In the United States, food insecurity has been associated with poorer health, and reduced fruit/vegetable consumption, physical activity, and sleep (Shanafelt et al, 2016; Lue et al, 2026).

Similarly, BC youth who were food insecure were less likely to rate their physical health as good or excellent (52% vs. 77% of food secure youth). They were more likely to have needed medical care in the past year (49% vs. 37%), but also to have missed out on that type of care (38% vs. 14%; among those who needed medical help).

Food insecure youth were less likely than food secure youth to have eaten fruit, vegetables, or salad the day before taking the survey (77% vs. 88%). They were more likely to have consumed energy drinks (28% vs. 12%) and taken food home from a school food program (17% vs. 3%).

Compared to food secure youth, those experiencing food insecurity were less likely to eat meals and snacks daily in the past week.

Youth who ate meals every day in the past week



Youth experiencing food insecurity missed out on opportunities to engage in extracurricular sports and exercise. For example, 41% participated in weekly organized sports in the past year, compared to 51% of food secure youth.

Food insecure youth were also less likely to have slept 8 or more hours the night before taking the survey (28% vs. 44% of food secure youth), and were more likely to have had their sleep interrupted that night (42% vs. 23%).

Substance use

Food insecure youth may be more likely to engage in risk-taking behaviours, such as substance use (Hammami et al, 2020). Among BC youth who had tried the substance, food insecure youth were more likely to have vaped (21% vs. 12% who were food secure), used cannabis (16% vs. 6%), smoked tobacco (6% vs. 2%), and drunk alcohol (2% vs. <1%) daily in the past month.

School

Children and adolescents in food-insecure households are more likely to experience poor academic outcomes (Hammami et al, 2020).

BC students experiencing food insecurity were more likely to miss school than their food secure peers. For example, they were more likely to have missed school on 3 or more days in the past month because of:

- Their mental health (20% vs. 6% of food secure youth).
- Skipping (19% vs. 8%).
- Family responsibilities (10% vs. 3%).
- Bullying (5% vs. 1%).
- Work (4% vs. 1%).
- Suspension (2% vs. <1%).

Food insecure youth were also less likely to have plans to attend post-secondary (62% vs. 80% of food secure youth).

Food security is linked to better well-being and to future plans

This fact sheet has shown that youth who are food secure experience better health and well-being, feel more optimistic for their future, and are more likely to have positive future education plans. It has also highlighted the importance of ensuring no BC youth go hungry.

Resources

Contact the **United Way BC Helpline** for information on local free and low-cost food, meals, snacks, and other food-related programs (among other non-food related supports).

Call or text: ***2-1-1*** | Website with links and live chat: ***bc.211.ca***

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