

Policy Recommendation Report:  
**Addressing Northern Food Insecurity**

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## **Introduction**

Health Canada defines food insecurity as “the inability to acquire or consume an adequate diet quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways, or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so” (cite). In particular, northern regions of Canada has long experienced disproportionately high rates of food insecurity. Indigenous populations made up the largest share of the population of the Territories. (cite) In 2016, the share of the Indigenous population in each territory was 86% in Nunavut, 51% in Northwest Territories, and 23% in Yukon (cite). In 2011, the federal government launched Nutrition North Canada (NNC), a program that aims to make food/essential items more affordable and accessible to northern communities. In this paper, we will explore the various factors that contribute to food insecurity in the Territories, provide a comprehensive analysis of Nutrition North Canada, and provide recommendations to program improvements.

## **Food insecurity in Canada**

In 2019, household food insecurity was identified as a priority in the Food Policy for Canada report (cite). Health Canada defines food insecurity as “the inability to acquire or consume an adequate diet quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways, or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so” (cite). For this reason, food insecurity is closely related to poverty. Based on Canada’s Official Poverty Line, the poverty rate in 2019 was 10.1%, meaning that 3.7 million or every 1 in 10 Canadians were living in poverty (cite). In 2019, 12.1% of Canadians were living on low income, which translates to around 2.7 million people (cite). In the context of inflation, poverty is a growing concern. To show, wage growth has not kept pace with increasing cost of living. Between July 2021 to July 2022, consumer prices rose faster than the average hourly wages on a year-over-year basis (cite). This indicates that people in Canada are experiencing a decline in purchasing power.

As a household's income or purchasing power decreases, the likelihood that the household will experience food insecurity increases dramatically ([cite](#)). Severe food insecurity is particularly sensitive to income for households with very low incomes and for those who receive support through social assistance, COVID benefits, and employment insurance ([cite](#)). Based on the Canadian Income Survey (CIS), 6,099,000 people (16.8% of the population) in the 10 provinces were living in food-insecure households in 2018. The Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS) reported that during 2017-18, 12.7% households (4.4 million people) in Canada experienced some degree of food insecurity ([cite](#)). It is important to also recognize that food insecurity is a wide-spread issue experienced by many working households. Over half of food-insecure households in 2021 reported having their main source of income from wages, salaries, or self-employment ([cite](#)).

Research has also shown that food insecurity is related to a multitude of factors including province or territory of residence, housing, demographic factors, and household structure ([cite](#)). One burdening source of household expenditure is shelter costs, particularly for renters. Additionally, renters are more likely to experience food insecurity than homeowners ([cite](#)). Food insecurity is a growing issue as during 2021-2022. Food Banks Canada revealed a 35% increase in total visits to food banks during 2019-2022 and a 15% increase during 2021-2022 ([cite](#)).

Statistics Canada claims that in September 2022, the yearly price increase for food purchased in stores was 11.4%, the fastest pace since 1981 ([cite](#)). CPI for food before 2019 was approaching 150 while this increased to 157.5 and 171.5 in 2021 and 2022, respectively. Since 2021, Canadians have experienced inflation in prices of food and other necessities due to global factors such as the Ukraine war and climate change which have placed strains on the global supply chain. On top of rising food prices, food insecurity is worsened by the fact other goods are also facing inflationary pressures.

## **Northern Food Insecurity**

### **The Situation of Food Insecurity in the Northern Territories**

Food insecurity in the Territories has been a longstanding problem due to colonial history. In 2012, the United Nations Special Rapporteur from the Human Rights Council reported that Indigenous communities in Canada's Territories experienced the highest rate of food insecurity rate than any other Indigenous population in a developed country ([cite](#)). From 2017 to 2018, 57%, 21.6%, and 16.9% of the population in Nunavut, the Northwest Territories, and Yukon experienced some level of food insecurity, respectively ([cite](#)). Of the three territories, Nunavut experiences the worst rates, as almost half of Nunavut's population is in severe food insecurity. This translates to one in four Nunavut households being severely food insecure ([cite](#)). As for child food insecurity, Nunavut and the Northern Territories have the highest rate in the country, where in 2017-2018 more than 1 in 6 children under 18 years of age lived in food-insecure households. ([cite](#))

### **Income Inequality as a Determinant of Poverty**

People in the northern territories face high living costs and a high risk of poverty. In 2018, 27.3%, 18.5%, and 10.9% of residents lived on low incomes in Nunavut, the Northwest Territories, and Yukon, respectively ([cite](#)). Earning gaps were the highest in the northern territories in comparison to the provinces. Employment in the northern territories is concentrated in the public sector and the mining, oil, and gas extraction industries. However, these positions are frequently filled by those from out-of-province ([cite](#)). Although all three territories had a median after-tax income higher than any provinces in 2018, income gaps are the largest in the northern territories between the non-Indigenous and indigenous populations (approximately \$84,000 versus \$23,000) ([cite](#)).

### **Homelessness and Core Housing Needs**

The northern territories also face the highest rates of hidden and visible homelessness in Canada. In 2018, about 7.8%, 5.9%, and 13.7% of people living in Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut had experienced unsheltered homelessness, and 24.4%, 17.7%, and 30.2% had experienced hidden homelessness ([cite](#)). A household is considered to be in core housing need if the household's housing falls below one of the housing standards (adequacy, affordability or suitability standards) and an alternative local housing costs 30% or more of the household's before-tax income. About 45%, 15.9%, and 14.4% of households in Nunavut, Northwest Territories, and Yukon were in core housing need in 2018, compared to 11.6% across Canada ([cite](#)).

Moreover, 32%, 9%, and 2.9% of households in Nunavut, Northwest Territories, and Yukon, respectively, lived in unsuitable housing accommodations where the dwelling didn't have enough bedrooms for the size and composition of the household, compared to 4.9% in the Provinces. Similar statistics are seen in the need for housing repairs. In 2018, 42%, 19.5%, and 12.9% of dwellings in Nunavut, Northwest Territories, and Yukon were in need of major repairs, compared to 7% for provinces. Major repairs included plumbing and electrical wiring renewals as well as structural repairs of walls, floors, or ceilings. ([cite](#))

### **Infrastructure Deficit**

Food availability also refers to a sufficient supply of food through domestic production or import. The infrastructure deficit (e.g., lack of all-season roads) contributes to food insecurity in Arctic communities ([cite](#)). For example, despite Nunavut having about 40% of Canada's shoreline, it only has 1 harbor ([cite](#)). The impact of climate change on infrastructure deficit is another raising concern; specifically, climate change could threaten to

break down roads and ports due to melting permafrost, which further jeopardizes food transportation in the north. In addition, colonial histories and difficulties with growing food in the northern climate have forced communities to come dependent on imported food. Heavy reliance on air and sea transport drives up transportation costs and weakens the supply chain. Rising CPIs show that the increasing costs of transportation, gasoline, and energy, potentially risking higher operating costs and consequently, higher food prices ([cite](#)). In 2016, groceries in Nunavut cost up to three times the national average ([cite](#)). In 2019, it cost \$422.07 per week to feed healthy meals to a family of four in the North, compared to \$225.25 in Ottawa ([cite](#)).

### **Colonial Policies and Climate Change**

Stability states that individuals and households should have access to adequate food all the time and not risk losing access to food as a result of sudden shocks (e.g. economics or climate crisis) or cyclical events (e.g. seasonal food insecurity). Environmental degradation has drastically reduced harvestable resources and changed hunting navigation patterns, increasing the risks and difficulties associated with local harvesting and hunting. This ties back to closely linked topic of colonial policies on Indigenous people's traditional food system. Hunting and harvesting for country food have been hampered by the diminishing intergenerational knowledge transfer and the high cost involved with the activities (e.g., equipment) ([cite](#)).

### **Food Sovereignty**

All the above mentioned hinder the development of food sovereignty in the North. Food sovereignty means giving people ownership and control over their food systems, which includes having sustainable food production, processing, transport, and storage capacity that

will allow residents to make their own decisions ([cite](#)). Food security will be hard to achieve without food sovereignty ([cite](#)).

## **Nutrition North Canada**

Nutrition North Canada program is a federal government retail subsidy established in 2011 within the department of Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada. The program aims to ensure a select list of nutritious food and some non-food items are available and affordable to eligible communities. The program expects each dollar of the food subsidy to be fully passed on to the consumer in the form of lower prices. ([cite](#)) The program's main objective is to offset the "inherent disadvantage faced by isolated northern communities which have no other option but to fly in perishable foods," not to combat food insecurity. ([cite](#))

## **Program Analysis of NNC**

### **NNC Lacks Effective Collaboration With Indigenous Populations**

Historically, food has been used as a tool to colonize Indigenous peoples, including the use of hunger and malnutrition in residential schools ([cite](#)). Subsequently, Indigenous peoples continue to face systemic obstacles in ensuring food security due to high rates of poverty, socioeconomic inequality, climate change, and environmental contamination ([cite](#)) These challenges are exacerbated even further in the Territories of Canada, as result of deficient investment in Indigenous communities and local infrastructure ([cite](#)).

In 2012, the NNC program was implemented by the conservative federal government at the time, despite criticisms that it did not take into account community demands. By not consulting with Inuit and Indigenous communities or implementing culturally sensitive policies, the program became highly reflective of Canada's larger colonial history. In 2018,



Inuit leaders criticized the NNC as an ineffective program and called for policy changes that would better serve their communities. This resulted in increased funding for NNC, rather than addressing calls for a fundamental restructuring of the program advocated by Indigenous leaders and grass-root organizations. ([cite](#)). The discontent was reflected by all five major Inuit organizations (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, Nunavut Tunngavik Inc, the Inuvialuit Regional Corp, Makivik Corp, & the Nunatsiavut Government), all withdrawing from the federal government's Indigenous Working Group on food security that same year ([cite](#)).

### **NNC Fails to Align with Traditional Indigenous Diets**

Although the NNC program serves both Indigenous and northern Inuit communities, the program's issues primarily stem from the foodways and diets of far-north Inuit people. Products like fresh and frozen fruits and vegetables are currently subsidized by the program, as stated on the official website of the NNC. According to a Eurocentric diet many of the listed fruits and vegetables are nutritious, however, Canadian Inuit people rarely consume them. The same is true for beans, bread, and milk. Because the diets that Inuit populations had traditionally eaten in the past are not considered, including foods that are disproportionately grown and produced in the south, the subsidy is discriminatory and ignores the community's needs ([cite](#)).

### **NNC Fails to Address Indigenous Drinking Water Crisis**

The NNC has failed to consider the context in which it operates and what would be beneficial to northern populations. The objective of the NNC program is to help make nutritious food and some essential items more affordable and accessible. Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated's (NTI) 2020 infrastructure report shows that the gap between Nunavut and the rest of Canada is large and widening. NTI evaluated Nunavut's water infrastructure as a "D",

the lowest across Canada. About 85% of Nunavut's drinking water infrastructure is in poor condition, and only 14% of Nunavummiuts are served by piped water. Most communities in Nunavut receive trucked water services. ([cite](#))

Yet, even though Indigenous communities are disproportionately faced with a drinking water crisis, it does not provide subsidies for bottled water ([cite](#)). For instance, a boil-water advisory has been issued for numerous communities in Iqaluit; Residents are forced to purchase bottled water, which is not subsidized by the Nutrition North Canada program, as their drinking water is unsafe. In these cases, a typical 24-pack of bottled water can cost upwards of \$30, whereas a pack in Winnipeg, Manitoba, would cost approximately \$5 in 2019 ([cite](#)).

### **The NNC Indicators Overlook the Multidimensionality of Northern Food Insecurity**

Socio-economic data analysis of the region has found that affordability is not influenced by NNC but rather by the community's socioeconomic strength. Therefore, although some prices have been reduced, the program has failed to effectively increase affordability ([cite](#)). This is also reflected in the programs measures of success which do not account for the multidimensionality of food insecurity. To show, the program uses three indicators to measure effectiveness: 1) the amount of food shipped to the North, 2) whether the price of the northern food basket stays the same or goes down over time, and 3) recipient compliance to ensure the subsidy is being fully passed on to the consumer ([cite](#)). The current structure of the NNC has reduced the prices of a select list of items through its food subsidy. However, this measure fails to consider consumer purchasing power, in which the average family of four can only afford half of the items listed on the Revised Northern Food Basket ([cite](#)).

NNC overlooks indicators that evaluate success based on its impact on poverty reduction, food security, or true food affordability in the North ([cite](#)). This is crucial considering the significant socioeconomic disparities among populations in the north, particularly between Inuit and non-Inuit populations. As a result, through NNC individuals receive the same subsidy regardless of whether they are from a high-income or food-insecure household ([cite](#)).

### **NNC Does Not Promote Traditional Food Acquisition:**

Food systems in Canada's northern regions have been dependent on the abundant land, water, plants, and wildlife of northern ecosystems for millennia. Hunting, trapping, fishing, harvesting, and other activities have been used to gather local foods from the land. These activities are still the foundation of the traditional economy and livelihoods, and they are essential to the culture and social connections in Indigenous communities. Over time, climate change, the extraction of natural resources, and the widespread effects of colonization have all contributed to the degradation of these traditional food systems ([cite](#)).

The Arctic's ecosystems are most vulnerable to the negative effects of climate change, as temperatures there are rising two to three times faster than the global average. The availability and safety of local foods are limited by environmental degradation brought on by a warming climate, industrial development, and environmental contaminants ([cite](#)). The patterns of travel and navigation that have existed for millennia have been altered by climate change, which has added an element of risk for hunters ([cite](#)). The ice is less reliable in many places, making travel difficult because it is either freezing later or breaking up earlier. Extreme weather conditions also pose a threat to animal populations. As the numbers, migration patterns, and composition of marine mammal, bird, and fish populations are affected by reductions in sea ice ([cite](#)).

As a result, research has found that traditional food systems in Canada's North have shifted away from traditional food sources and toward imported market foods purchased from stores ([cite](#)). However, climate change has also had a significant impact on the transportation infrastructure in northern regions, making it more difficult to transport food to these areas. Climate change has led to unstable ground from thawing permafrost, increased flooding, and more frequent severe weather events. In turn, this has resulted in difficulties building and maintaining roads, railways, and infrastructure that can be used for food transportation ([cite](#)).

A key flaw with the NNC subsidy program is that it discourages food sovereignty and does not come up with creative ways to support the food independence and agency of northern communities. Consequently, residents of Northern Canada are dependent on the NNC because the program subsidizes specific foods but not hunting and fishing gear, which locals could use to find more food for themselves. Importantly these methods of traditional food acquisition are more environmentally friendly than mass food production and transportation ([cite](#)).

## **Policy Recommendations for NNC**

### **Revitalize collaboration with Northern Indigenous Populations**

Despite many calls to review community eligibility, subsidy rates, and the list of eligible items that have been made by different committees, no significant changes have been made to subsidy rates and the list of eligible items until COVID-19, and no significant amendments to the list of eligible communities until 2016 ([cite](#)). Ultimately, NNC has failed to reflect and respond to the concerns and needs of northern Indigenous communities. Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada should revisit their consultation strategy to begin a more meaningful partnership for reviewing community eligibility criteria, subsidy rates and eligible items for NNC. Revitalizing collaboration with Indigenous

communities will require partnership with Indigenous communities in the program design and decision-making process. This can involve increasing transparency of the program through regular reports and better program evaluation to Indigenous communities regarding how funds are allocated and the impact of the program on community health and well-being.

### **Target Efforts Towards Food Sovereignty and Self-Sustainability**

Northern Communities should be provided with more food security and independence. The local and traditional acquisition of food is crucial to building food security. NNC can support this process by developing strategic options for locally produced food, as well as supporting harvesters by subsidizing necessary supplies and tools. These changes to NNC may be a reflective model or work in partnership with Canada's Local Food Infrastructure Fund (LFIF) ([cite](#)). LFIF has dedicated a portion of funding to help Northern communities build a food system by investing in local community-based and not-for-profit organizations to create longer term solutions to address food insecurity. Currently, LIFI has an investment of only \$20 million to meet the needs of Indigenous, Northern and remote communities ([cite](#)). Therefore, operating on a comparatively much smaller scale than NNC, which had a budget of \$131.3 million for 2022-2023 ([cite](#)). NNC incorporating food independence is a key tenant to reducing food insecurity in the Territories and this can be promoted through investing in community organizations to address local needs ([cite](#)).

### **Expanding Success Indicators Through A Multidimensional Lens**

As NNC predominantly serves Indigenous communities that have a history of colonial violence. Access to healthy and affordable food is often linked to larger socio-economic issues including rising shelter and utility costs ([cite](#)). Although NNC is intended to address the issue of food insecurity in these communities, it can be more effectively implemented

through targeted support toward socio-economic inequalities. Given the importance of economic strength for improving affordability, the effectiveness of the program can be better measured by broadening the indicators that assess consumer purchasing power and food affordability relative to income. These could help address the complexity of economic challenges faced in northern communities.

## **Conclusion**

Food insecurity in the Territories is a long-standing, systematic and complex issue that has been exacerbated by a multitude of historic and socioeconomic factors. Rising challenges such as high food inflation has exacerbated the issue and requires a new strategy by the federal government. The Nutrition North Canada program was established in 2011 to address some of these challenges, however, this paper calls its effectiveness into question. While the program has made some positive contributions, there is still much work to be done to ensure that all residents of Canada's North have access to nutritious and affordable food. Moving forward, it is clear that a more comprehensive approach is needed to address the root causes of food insecurity in the North. This will require revitalizing collaboration with indigenous communities to reflect and respond to their needs, targeting efforts towards food sovereignty, and developing new success indicators that assess consumer purchasing power from a multidimensional lens. Ultimately, addressing Northern food insecurity is not only a matter of social justice but also of public health and economic development. This challenge will require sustained effort and collaboration, and it is one that we must meet if we are to create a more just and equitable society for all people in Canada.

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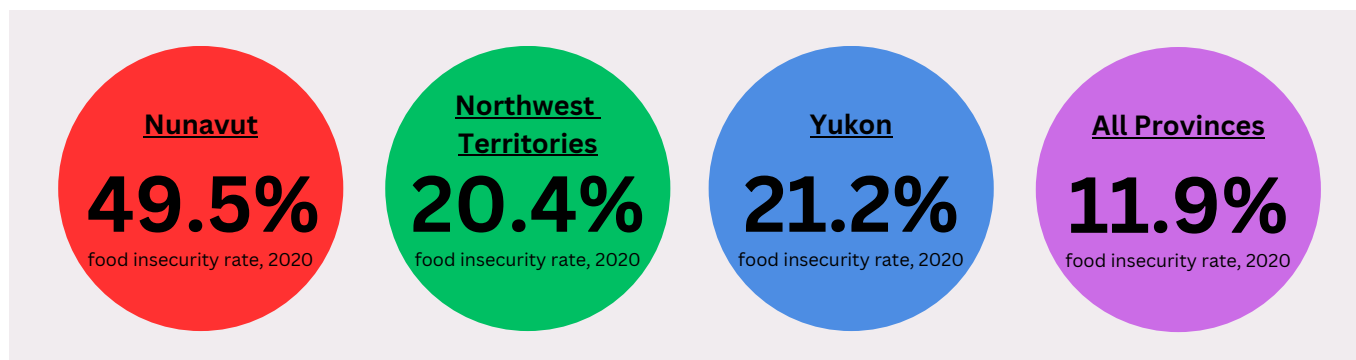
[http://www.srfood.org/images/stories/pdf/officialreports/20121224\\_canadafinal\\_en.pdf](http://www.srfood.org/images/stories/pdf/officialreports/20121224_canadafinal_en.pdf)

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## APPENDIX

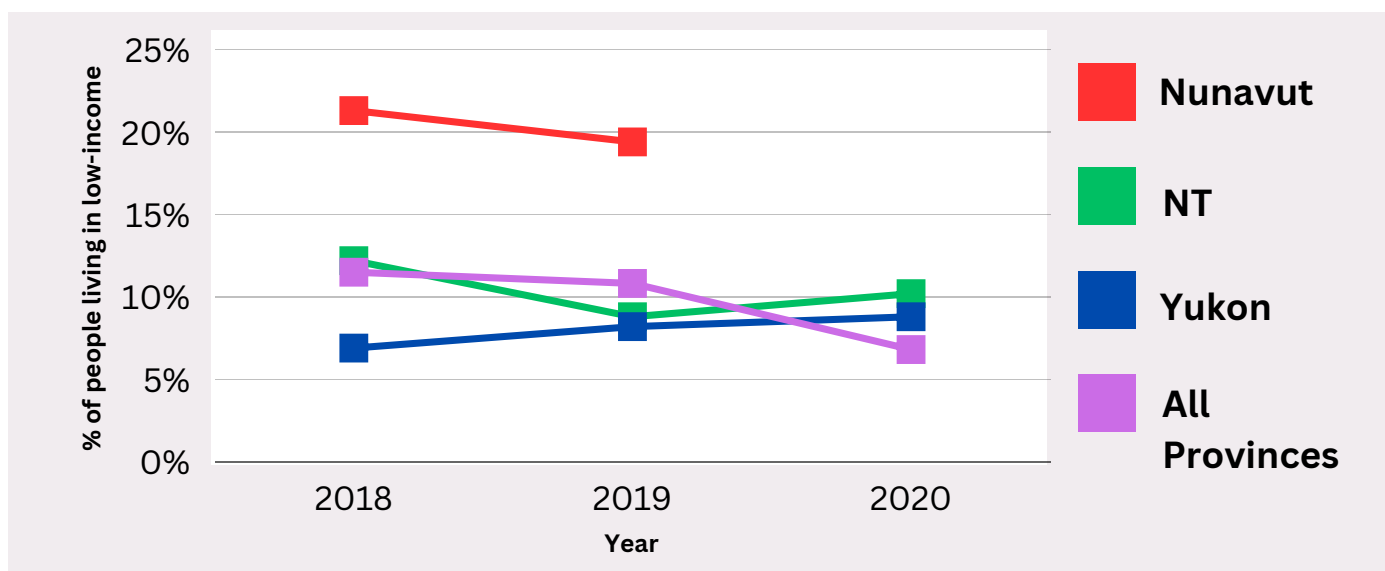
### **Appendix 1: Food insecurity rate in the three Territories compared to provincial average.**

*All three Territories had higher rates of food insecurity in comparison to the provincial average. In 2020, the average food insecurity rate in the Territories was almost three times higher than the Provinces.*



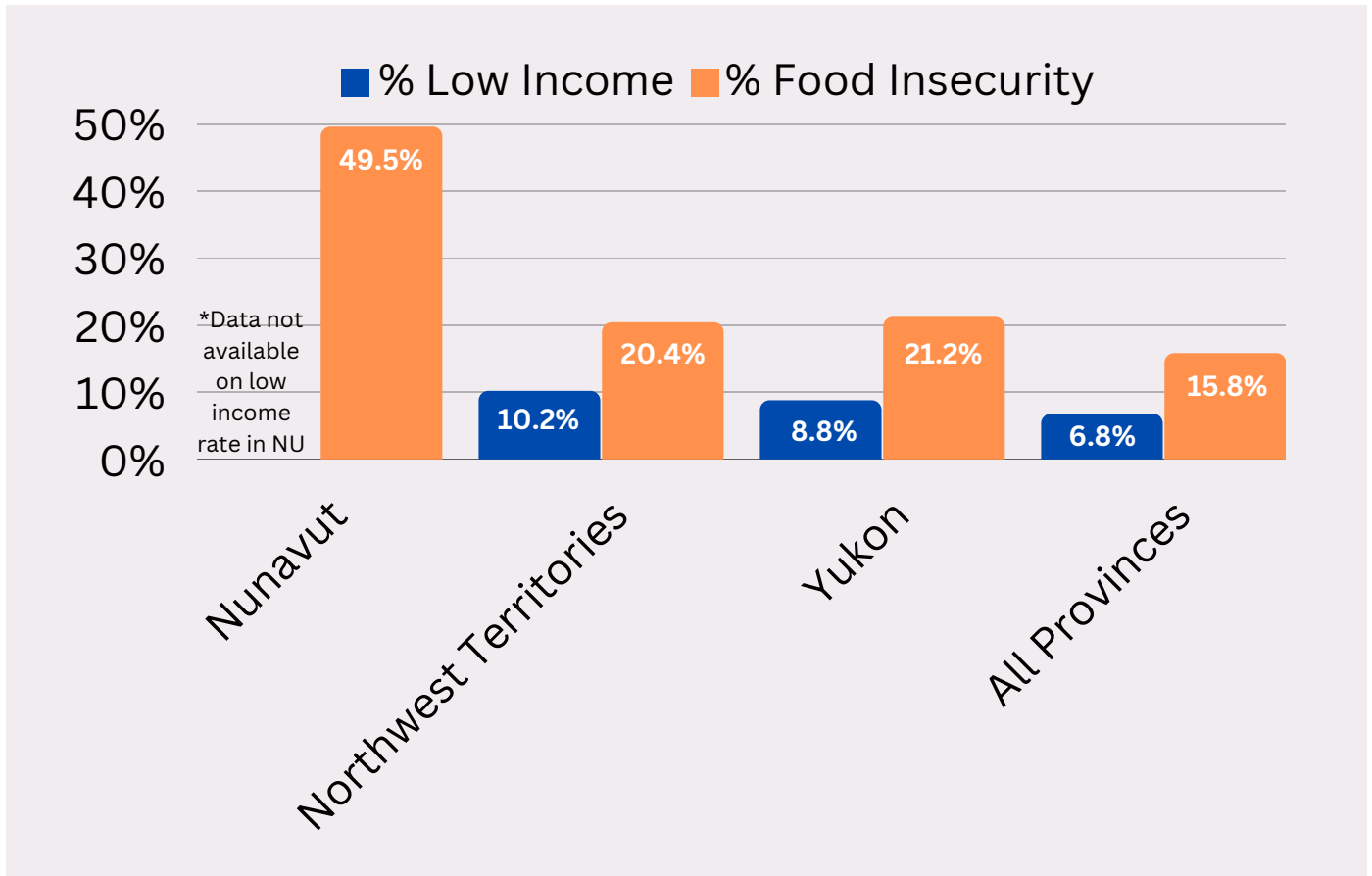
### **Appendix 2: Low-income rate in the three Territories compared to provincial average.**

*From 2018-2020, Nunavut has the highest percentage of people living in low-income amongst the Territories. While federal pandemic supports helped all Provinces decrease the percentage of people living in low income, the Territories saw increases.*



### Appendix 3: Food insecurity rate in the three Territories and Provinces compared to the low-income rate in 2020.

*The percentage of people experiencing food insecurity in 2020 was higher than the percentage of people living in low-income for both Territories and Provinces.*



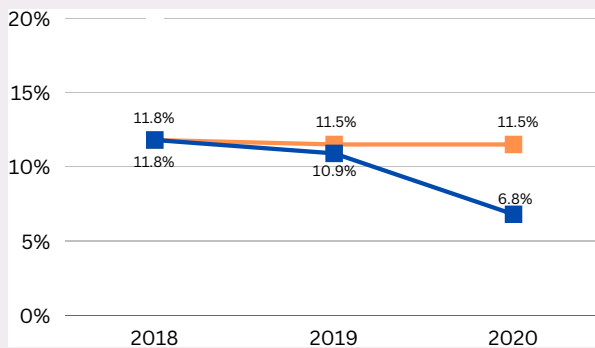
Source: Canadian Income Survey: Territorial estimates, 2020 (2022, November 3). Statistics Canada. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/221103/dq221103d-eng.htm>

## Appendix 4: Comparing food insecurity rates & low-income rates in Provinces.

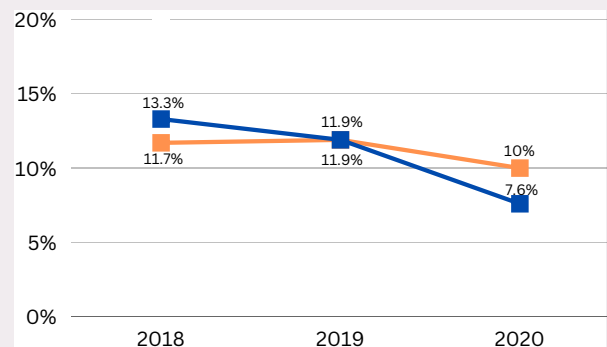
*Throughout 2018-2020 in Canada, the percentage of people experiencing food insecurity is higher than the percentage of people living in low income. The difference becomes particularly pronounced in 2020 mainly to the drop in people living with low income. This drop is likely due to temporary financial aid provided by the federal government during the pandemic.*



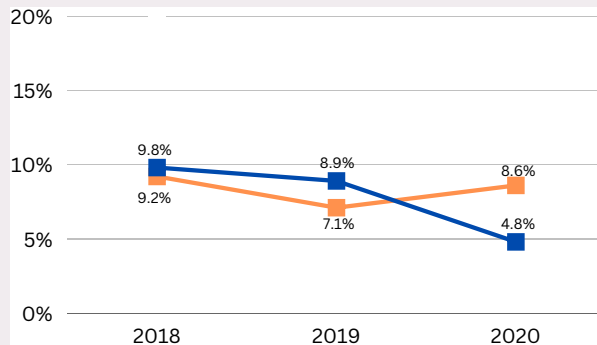
### Ontario



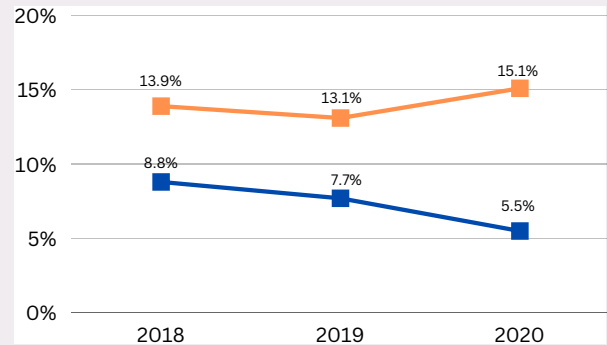
### British Columbia



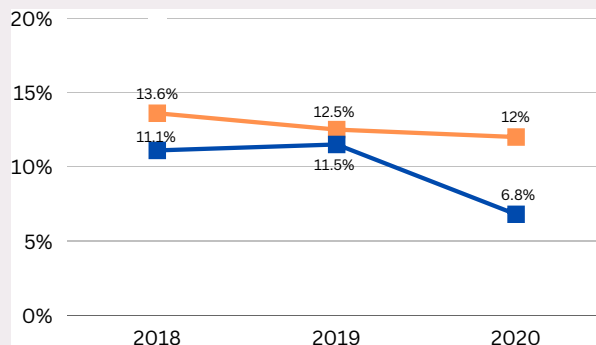
### Quebec



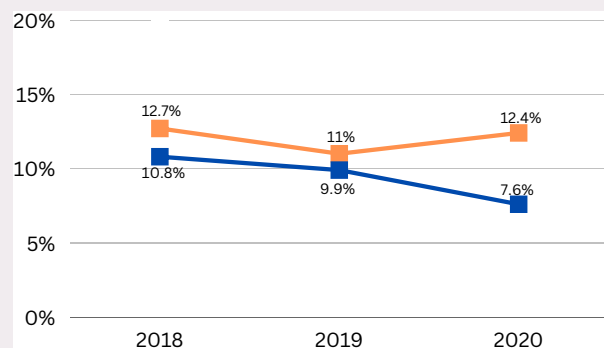
### Alberta



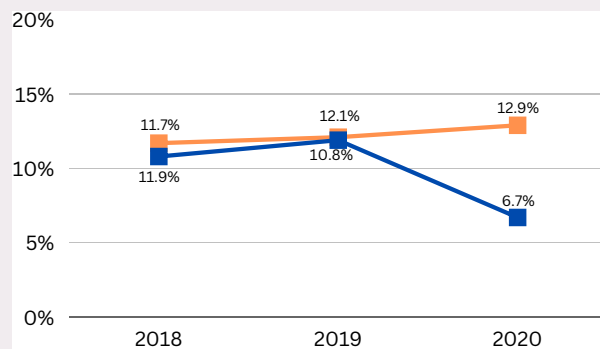
### Manitoba



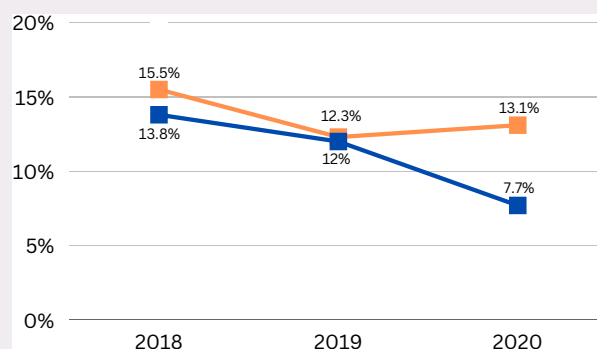
### New Brunswick



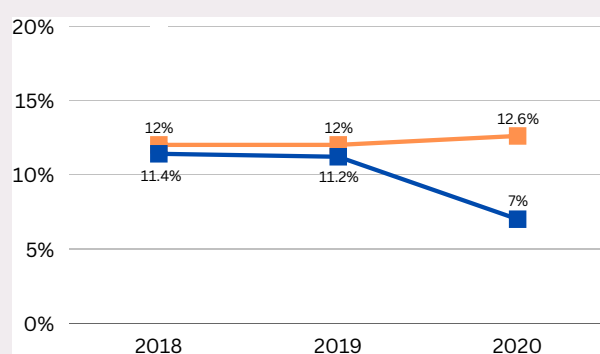
### Saskatchewan



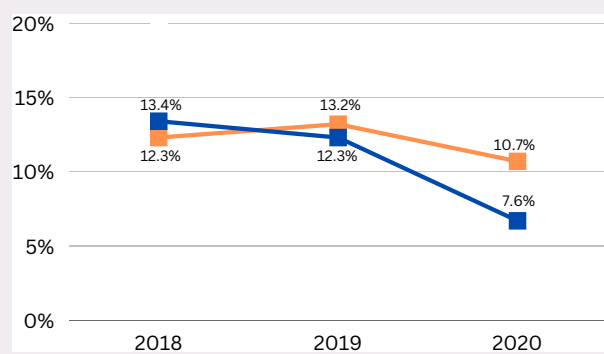
### Nova Scotia



### Newfoundland and Labrador



### Prince Edward Island



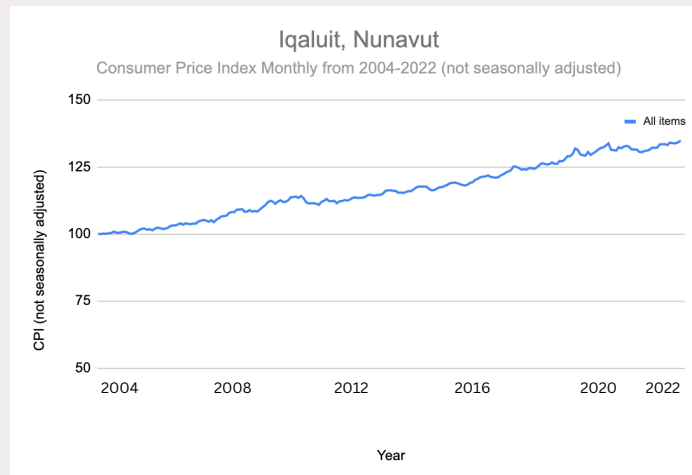
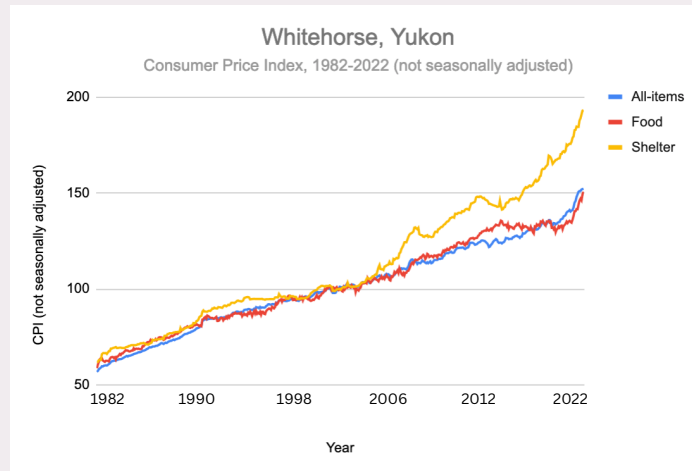
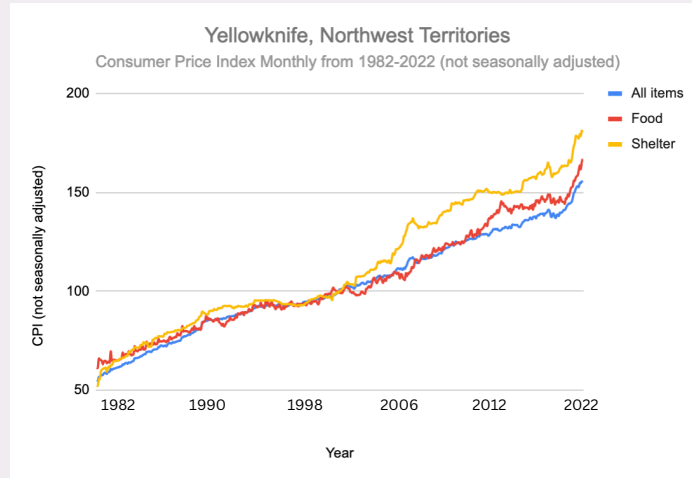
**Disclaimer:** Data for food insecurity rates were not publically available for the Territories until 2020. In 2020, the food insecurity rate in the Territories were the following: **49.5%** in Nunavut, **20.4%** in the Northwest Territories, and **21.2%** in Yukon. See Appendix 1 for more details.

Sources: Low income statistics by age, sex and economic family type (2022, March 23). Statistics Canada. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1110013501&pickMembers%5B0%5D=1.11&cubeTimeFrame.startYear=2018&cubeTimeFrame.endYear=2020&referencePeriods=20180101%2C20200101>; Food insecurity by age group and sex (2022, March 23). Statistics Canada. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1310083501&pickMembers%5B0%5D=1.11&cubeTimeFrame.startYear=2018&cubeTimeFrame.endYear=2020&referencePeriods=20180101%2C20200101>



## Appendix 5: Comparing overall inflation to food and shelter inflation in Territories from 1982 to 2022.

*Food and shelter inflation has risen at a faster rate than the overall inflation rate starting between 2005-2008.*



Source: Consumer Price Index, monthly, not seasonally adjusted (2023, February 21). Statistics Canada. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tb1/en/tv.action?pid=1810000401&pickMembers%5B0%5D=1.14&cubeTimeFrame.startMonth=01&cubeTimeFrame.startYear=1990&cubeTimeFrame.endMonth=12&cubeTimeFrame.endYear=2022> &r