

Food Insecurity: Time For a Serious Discussion

Colin Patrick MacDonald and Jerry Bannister

Allan J. MacEachen was a leading architect of Canada’s social safety net legislation, built in the 1960’s when he was a cabinet minister in Lester Person’s minority governments. He remained consistent in his views on the importance of positive government involvement, when necessary. On his retirement from public life in 1996, [he wrote an essay](#) that was published in *In Pursuit of the Public Good*, edited by Tom Kent, wherein he recounted a comment from a constituent from northern Inverness County in Cape Breton: “I hear you are not running again. You certainly kept bread on the table here in the north all those years.” MacEachen noted that “as a compliment, it was enormous.”

In that same essay, MacEachen reflected on the insight of that constituent: “His use of “bread” to identify projects and policies resulting in improved living conditions and services showed imagination and perceptiveness.” MacEachen went on to comment that, by the time of his retirement from public service, keeping “bread on the table” had fallen out of favour as an aim of government. In the eyes of his constituent, however, it was the positive face of a government that was making a difference.

In 2026, it seems obvious that Canada has a literal “bread on the table” crisis for millions of Canadians from coast to coast to coast. The numbers seem hard to fathom for one of the world’s wealthiest countries. In 2024, Canadian food banks saw more than two million visits per month from people needing assistance to make their budgets work and feed their families. Food Banks Canada, a leader in addressing food insecurity in Canada, [noted in their 2025 report](#) that there are over 5,500 food banks and community organizations in the country that have stepped up to meet the demand. Nevertheless, nearly eighty-six percent of those food banks reported rationing their supplies, or running out of food entirely.

The first food bank in Canada opened in Edmonton in 1981. The growth in need has been phenomenal since, and governments have been slow to respond—if they respond at all—in a meaningful way. From 2019 to 2025, the number of Canadians relying on food banks has doubled. Over the past forty years, this crisis has been largely addressed by local citizen groups, churches, and average folks. They have been generous with their volunteer time, annual financial contributions, and amazing responses to food drive campaigns, to ensure their neighbours have enough to eat.

The crisis is not only impacting the most vulnerable, such as senior citizens and children (of those total monthly food bank visits, more than 700,000 are for children). Families with working parents, whose incomes are so stretched that they cannot afford the basics, are forced to reach

out for food assistance before their next paychecks. Almost twenty percent of food bank clients are employed in full-time work.

This issue is one that almost every Canadian understands. Many respond by contributing their time and money to assist local food banks, organizations such as “Meals on Wheels,” and breakfast programs for hungry kids arriving in schools every morning. But the need continues to grow. Food banks are increasingly running out of resources and cannot meet demand on their own. There are a lot of competing pressures on the public purse these days but keeping bread on the table must be a higher priority.

Clearly, we need to have a more vigorous public debate about solutions when almost twenty-five percent of households in Canada are struggling to meet their basic needs, including feeding their families. The underlying reasons for food insecurity are complex, and there are numerous aspects that require different policy approaches. The extraneous costs that result from food insecurity, however, do not need much explanation. Poor nutrition leading to higher medical costs is one obvious connection. Hungry students leading to poor education metrics is another. Schools have now taken on the responsibility for feeding breakfast to our young children, and we have food banks in most Canadian colleges and universities. Obviously, there is a gaping hole in our social safety net.

[In the closing paragraph of his 1996 essay](#), MacEachen sounded optimistic that there was a role for government when a national issue affecting millions of citizens was not being satisfactorily addressed.

Here are his words:

“The question is: who puts bread on the table when private markets fail to do so? The long-term role of the state will not be determined by the necessity, in the short run, to solve fiscal problems. . . . The avoidance of social disharmony makes it imperative that those in authority will not lag behind their public in realizing that the state has still a role in keeping bread on the table. The people as a whole will have the final say in determining the future role of government. I am content to rely on their judgment.”

We at the MacEachen Institute endorse that sentiment. We plan to lead vigorous discussions on policy options for governments to consider in the coming year and encourage others across the country to do the same. We need a national debate on this issue: food insecurity in Canada should be decreasing, not increasing.

About the MacEachen Institute

The MacEachen Institute for Public Policy and Governance is a nationally focused, non-partisan, interdisciplinary centre that supports progressive public policy and citizen engagement.

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