



Food Accessibility for Newcomers Living in British Columbia



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The number of newcomers welcomed into Canada, particularly British Columbia, is increasing at rapid rates (Blackwell, 2023). In fact, approximately 118,398 newcomers entered British Columbia between July 2022 and April 2023 alone, surpassing the total number of arrivals during the previous year (approximately 116,000). Food insecurity — meaning limited or uncertain access to food — is a dire issue that many newcomers experience upon settling in Canada (Tarraf et al., 2017). In 2022, the number of food bank visits in British Columbia increased by 25%, exceeding that of the Canadian national average, which was 15% (Gomez, 2022). High rates of food bank usage in the province have been influenced by an increase in newcomers and refugees relying on the food bank (Gomez, 2022).

What are the consequences of food insecurity among newcomers?

Worsened health outcomes

- Newcomers may face physical and mental health deteriorations after arriving in Canada due to food insecurity (Dou et al., 2022). In fact, newcomers experience a greater risk of worsened health due to food insecurity compared to their Canadian-born counterparts (Tarraf et al., 2017).
- Reduced food intake may be caused by financial barriers to be purchasing nutritious and healthy foods, a lack of culturally diverse and familiar foods within food banks, and a lack of knowledge on how to prepare and cook new 'foreign' foods (Tarraf et al., 2017). As a result, newcomers are not comfortable eating a variety of foods, and may only stick to limited options or even skip meals, resulting in malnutrition (Dubey, 2023).
- Iron deficiencies, low hemoglobin levels, and higher obesity levels are common health issues among newcomers facing food insecurity (Tarraf et al., 2017).

- Newcomers from warmer climates may also be used to consuming fresh fruits and vegetables, rather than processed foods (Tarraf et al., 2017). In Canadian food banks, processed foods are more likely to be available than fresh produce (Tarraf et al., 2017). A change in diet and nutrient consumption contributes to poorer health among newcomers.

Negative mental health and increased stress

- Newcomers experience high levels of stress upon settling and attempting to learn all aspects of the Canadian society (e.g., searching for adequate employment, housing, education, and food security) (Dou et al., 2022).
- Newcomers facing food insecurity experience declines in their mental health, reporting worsened anxiety, depression, and feelings of isolation (Dou et al., 2022).
- Newcomers state that food insecurity takes time away from completing other tasks that are vital to integration, such as job searching or studying in school (Lam, 2022; Food Banks Canada, 2022).

Feelings of alienation and detachment from their culture

- It can be very stressful for newcomers to settle in a new country, which includes learning cultures, languages, and social norms that are different from what they are used to in their home countries.
- Connecting newcomers with their culture by providing them with familiar foods can help ease their settlement process and help them feel less alienated and alone (McGarvey, 2021).
- Newcomers with access to familiar cultural foods state that preparing and cooking meals they enjoyed back home helps reduce homesickness and stress and improves their mental health (McGarvey, 2021).
- Food is also an important aspect of holidays and celebrations. When newcomers cannot access traditional food, it makes it difficult for them to fully participate in their cultural practices. Offering the right choice of food and ingredients, therefore, is not only an issue of taste and preference, but respect and dignity as well.

Healthy immigrant effect

The healthy immigrant effect is commonly experienced by newcomers settling in Canada (Lu & Ng, 2019). This phenomenon describes how newcomers who are recent arrivals to Canada often have overall better physical health compared to their Canadian-born counterparts (Lu & Ng, 2019).

However, upon settling in Canada, newcomers' health worsens overtime (Lu & Ng, 2019). This deterioration in newcomers' health can be due to difficulties acclimating to a different culture and environment, and stress (Lu & Ng, 2019).

Malnutrition and lack of knowledge regarding how to properly handle and cook new foods may also contribute to deteriorating health outcomes among newcomers (Tarraf et al., 2017).

Why do newcomers face food insecurity?

Language and financial barriers are the most common reasons why newcomers depend on food banks for their nutritional needs (Vahabi & Damba, 2013).

Newcomers also experience cultural barriers when attempting to access nutritious and ethnic foods, especially from food banks. When newcomers face food insecurity, it does not only imply limited access to or unavailability of food in general, but, specifically, a lack of ethnic foods (Tarraf et al., 2017).

Language and financial barriers

- Newcomers are very likely to experience poverty when settling in British Columbia (SUCCESS, n.d.). Financial hardships occur because newcomers have trouble finding employment upon arrival to Canada due to English language deficiencies and a lack of Canadian education and work experience (SUCCESS, n.d.).
- Newcomers may not be able to afford to purchase food from grocery stores or markets (Vahabi et al., 2010). They may want to shop at ethnic grocery stores to access foods that are familiar to them, but they may not have the financial means to do so.
- Newcomers who are not fluent in English may not fully understand information provided to them regarding food accessibility and nutritional guidelines (Vahabi et al., 2010). Although newcomers may receive information booklets or instructions on how to prepare and cook certain foods, they may not comprehend what is being communicated to them.

Cultural barriers

- Newcomers settling in British Columbia, particularly the Surrey region, arrive from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds (Bathe, 2018). However, the food options available at the Surrey food bank do not match the diversity of the people it serves (Bathe, 2018).
- A lack of ethnic foods available at the food bank perpetuates the cultural barriers newcomers experience when attempting to access the food bank. For many newcomers, ethnic dishes or ingredients are not merely a dietary preference, but are an integral part of their culture, religion or traditions.
 - For instance, around 80% of the households accessing the Surrey food bank have Muslim backgrounds (Lam, 2022). Muslims have specific dietary needs, especially around consuming meat-based products, as their food must be handled according to halal practices (Qureshi, 2023).
 - The Surrey Food Bank provides limited halal meat options (Lam, 2022). Often, the food bank attempts to make up for the lack of halal meat options by substituting it with alternative protein-rich foods that Muslims can consume, such as lentils and chickpeas

(Lam, 2022). However, halal meat is a vital part of Muslim culture and is regularly incorporated within most meals (Lam, 2022). Individuals may feel disconnected from their culture and uncomfortable with removing meat entirely from their diets, leading to increased difficulty with integrating and feeling less welcome in Canadian society (Lam, 2022).

- Additionally, many newcomers may not be used to handling or preparing certain foods that are commonly donated to the food banks.
 - Canned foods are the most donated items. However, many newcomers are not familiar with eating canned foods, and may not own or know how to use a can opener (Bathe, 2018). This leads to newcomers no longer visiting the food bank or throwing away food, which further perpetuates the food insecurity crisis (Dubey, 2023).

What have other food providers done successfully to better serve and include newcomers?

Partnerships

Several food providers have partnered with grocery stores, non-profit organizations, government and the community to increase supply of culturally diverse products within food banks. Here are some examples.

- The **Immigrant Link Centre Society (ILCS)** in Coquitlam, British Columbia developed a free food program called 'From Pollution to Solution'
 - This program gathers extra food that is unsold by grocery stores (and is close to the best before dates) and provides it to newcomers and refugees experiencing financial instability (ILCS, n.d.).
 - Volunteers work to meet dietary specifications and aim to collect as much culturally appropriate foods as possible.
 - It is estimated that over \$5 million worth of food is redistributed and kept out of landfills each year through this program alone (ILCS, n.d.).
 - Not only does this program contribute to less food waste in our landfills, but it also prevents hundreds of tons of CO₂ emissions (ILCS, n.d.).
 - In 2022, the program received \$50,000 in government funding to help support their efforts (BC Gov News, 2022).

- The **Ottawa Food Bank** partnered with farmland owners to develop the ‘Community Harvest Program’
 - Farmland was donated to the Ottawa food bank by local farmers. The food bank implemented the Community Harvest Program, which uses the donated lands to grow fresh crops and produce that is provided as donations to food bank participants.
 - Volunteers and members of the community worked towards maintaining the garden.
 - In 2021, as the newcomer population increased, so did the demand for cultural foods and produce. Volunteers developed a project to grow ‘cultural’ produce not typically grown in Ottawa’s crops, such as okra and eggplant. The project was very successful, with the food bank reporting that it was the best year yet for the Community Harvest Program (Food Banks Canada, 2022).
 - Not only did the program diversify the food options available at the food bank, but it also promoted healthy eating among newcomers by providing them with fresh, organic produce (Food Banks Canada, 2022).
- **Food Banks Canada** developed an ‘Afghan Refugee Food Support Fund,’ with support from Walmart Canada and the Walmart Foundation, to help food banks access culturally appropriate food and other supports
 - Funding — \$200,000 of which was contributed by Walmart — was put toward providing donations to the food bank, and implementing educational programs that inform food banks about the importance of offering ethnic foods (Food Banks Canada, 2022).
 - Through this fund, the North York Harvest Food Bank in Ontario was able to offer halal chicken across several food bank locations (Food Banks Canada, 2022).

Opportunities for newcomers

Some food providers have provided more food bank involvement opportunities for newcomers.

- The **ILCS** provides newcomers with volunteer opportunities and encourages them to become involved in the community
 - The program involves a wide diversity of volunteers from over 15 different countries (ILCS, n.d.).
 - Volunteers collect and sort food to be delivered to individuals experiencing food insecurity (BC Gov News, 2022).
 - Providing newcomers with opportunities to get involved helps them gain work experience and allows them to interact with others in the community (BC Gov News, 2022).

Educational opportunities

Some food providers have offered educational opportunities for both newcomers and Canadian-born individuals to learn about different cultural foods.

- The **Wood Buffalo Food Bank** located in Fort McMurray, Alberta offers newcomers educational programs regarding new, 'Canadian' foods
 - Volunteers teach newcomers how to prepare and cook foods that are typically donated and distributed to food bank clients but may be unfamiliar to newcomers (Dubey, 2023).
 - Clients are offered a wide variety of both ethnic and non-ethnic foods to choose from. This way, they have the option of choosing either ethnic foods that they are used to or 'new' foods that they can try and acclimate to.
 - Teaching newcomers about the Canadian food guide, its importance, and how to use it while shopping for ingredients and preparing meals can also help them discover a variety of healthy foods in Canada. This includes recognizing similarities between familiar and unfamiliar foods, and learning about alternatives in case substitutions are necessary or familiar items are unavailable.
- **Food Banks Canada's** 'Learning and Knowledge Exchange' hosted free webinars and presentations for food bank staff, providing them with knowledge about the importance of providing ethnic foods, which could also be shared with donors
 - One particularly successful part of the webinars focused on religious dietary restrictions which certain newcomers may adhere to. For example, halal diets—what do they consist of and what foods are permissible/not permissible to eat (Food Banks Canada, 2022)?
- The **Community Harvest Program** in Ottawa provides Canadian-born individuals with an opportunity to learn about and appreciate new foods and cultures that they may be unfamiliar with
 - Canadian-born volunteers in the program can learn about cultural foods by working alongside newcomers to promote and better appreciate cultural diversity.

How can the Surrey food bank better cater to their Muslim clients?

As stated prior, approximately 80% of food bank clients in Surrey come from Muslim backgrounds (Lam, 2022). Considering this large proportion, it is necessary that food banks in the region adopt practices and services that will best cater to most of their clients.

Strategies to ensure that the needs of Muslim clients are addressed include the following:

1. Provide food options that are halal or which Muslim participants commonly request

- Examples include:
 - Halal meat (e.g., chicken, beef, turkey). Halal meat can be identified with the label ‘halal certified’ or ‘Zabiha’ on the product. Most grocery stores have a section in the poultry aisle labeled ‘halal meats.’
 - Each Muslim may have differing opinions regarding what food is considered ‘halal’ and what is not (e.g., some Muslims deem it permissible to eat any meat as long as it is not pork-based, however other Muslims may exclusively consume products labeled ‘halal’ or ‘Zabiha certified’).
 - Products without pork ingredients. Note that pork is a common ingredient in foods with gelatin (e.g., Pop Tarts), gummy or jelly-based foods, and certain dairy products such as yogurt.
 - Ethnic foods (e.g., pita/naan bread, which is common to have with most meals; spices/seasonings; rice).
 - Provide more fresh produce rather than processed foods.
 - For more details on the definition of ‘halal’ and what is considered halal, see [livestrong.com/article/273072-muslim-diet-restrictions](https://www.livestrong.com/article/273072-muslim-diet-restrictions)

2. Provide more leadership opportunities for Muslims within food banks

- Muslim individuals may have unique insights on how to develop and implement programs to better cater towards Muslim clients.
- Leadership opportunities can include:
 - Volunteer or employment roles at the food bank.
 - Program and/or services coordination (including workshops, information sessions, training, etc.).
 - Event planning and/or implementation (both at the food bank and within the broader community).

3. Collaborate with halal food suppliers in the community

- Building relationships with Halal food suppliers can help bring a consistent supply of suitable foods to the food bank for Muslim participants.

- Halal food suppliers may be owners of locally owned Muslim/Middle Eastern shops and vendors, halal butcher shop owners, and Muslim/Middle Eastern restaurant owners or chefs.
- When approaching food suppliers, you can educate them about the lack of culturally diverse food options at the food banks, the large proportion of food bank clients who are affected by this barrier, how the issue is impacting them, and how the supplier can help.

4. Provide educational materials or programs for Muslim clients so they can better identify which foods are Halal or permissible for them to eat

- Educational materials may include pamphlets, posters, or other online resources that are easily accessible to individuals, whether they are accessing food at the food bank or grocery stores.
- Materials should be translated into participants' commonly spoken languages (e.g., Arabic, Farsi, Pashto).
- Educational materials may include what a 'Zabiha' or 'halal certified' label commonly looks like on halal foods, or how to skim through an ingredient list to identify ingredients Muslims cannot eat (such as gelatin or pork).
 - This tip is especially important because Muslim newcomers may have lived in countries where all foods provided in grocery stores were halal, so they may not be familiar with having to go through the process of identifying which foods are halal certified and which are not.

5. Provide educational materials for food bank supporters (i.e., funders or donors) that encourage them to be culturally aware when donating food to the food bank, and specify which cultural/ethnic foods are most needed

- Food bank donors may not know there is a high demand among clients for cultural or ethnic foods, especially halal foods.
- Educational materials, such as pamphlets or information sheets, may include specific foods or ingredients that are in high demand and/or regularly requested by clients, such as halal meat, and where to purchase such foods.

Summary of best practices

- Provide newcomers with leadership opportunities through volunteer programs and/or employment at food banks and other food service providers.
- Provide newcomer clients of the food bank with translated information sheets or booklets explaining how to handle and prepare unfamiliar food items that are regularly donated (e.g., how to open and use canned goods).
- Seek out, listen to, and act on the voices, opinions, and concerns of newcomer clients of the food bank, rather than make assumptions yourself or act on false beliefs or stereotypes.
- Be open to learning about other cultures and ways of doing things, such as cooking certain foods, beliefs surrounding whether a certain food is healthy or unhealthy, and eating certain foods that are not commonly eaten within Western societies.
- Work alongside other food providers (especially cultural food suppliers) for added support to diversify existing food options at food banks.
- Educate food providers that donate to the food bank (e.g., big-box stores, community donors) on the importance of considering cultural appropriateness when choosing which foods to donate.
- Encourage newcomers to step outside their comfort zone and work alongside them by informing them how to prepare/cook various nutritious meals from all over the world (not merely foods that they are used to from back home), while keeping in mind religious and cultural dietary restrictions.
- Provide more hands-on activities for newcomers to become involved with, such as community gardens or workshops. This way, newcomers can be directly involved, and they have an opportunity to connect with others within their community.
 - Donations for the community garden can be sought from local farmers or department stores, organizations and not-for-profits that regularly partner with food banks (e.g., Walmart).

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South Fraser Refugee Readiness Team

The South Fraser Refugee Readiness Team (RRT) supports the capacity building and enhancement of services and supports for all settlement serving agencies, community organizations and other stakeholders in the arrival, settlement and integration of newcomer refugees and displaced Ukrainians in the South Fraser Region of BC. Visit us at dcrs.ca/rrt.

DIVERSEcity Community Resources Society

DIVERSEcity Community Resources Society, a registered charity with a 45-year history, helps newcomers and other diverse communities build the life they want through our programs and services in settlement, language, employment, community engagement, mental health and gender-based violence. Visit us at dcrs.ca.



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