When Working Is Not Enough: Food Insecurity in Canada’s Labour Force

Objectives:
National food insecurity surveys report that the majority of food insecure households are dependent on earnings. The objective of this study was to describe and analyze employment circumstances of working Canadians reporting household food insecurity.

Methods:
We used the Canadian Community Health Survey (Cycles 1.1, 2.1, 3.1 and 4.1), spanning 2000-2007. Respondents aged 18-65 years with “employment” as their primary source of earnings over the past year (and no welfare income) were examined in terms of labour market characteristics (hours, earnings, industry, etc.), stratified by reported household food insecurity. Logistic regression was used to estimate increased odds of food insecurity for sociodemographic and labour force characteristics.

Results:
Over the time period, up to 13% of working households reported food insecurity. Respondents working multiple jobs, more than 50 hours weekly, and irregular schedules were all more likely to report food insecurity than respondents in regular employment (i.e., 35 hour work week). Food insecure households were more likely to work irregular schedules to meet daily household expenses, and less likely to be saving for the future, than food secure households. Respondents who reported work stress were more likely to report food insecurity (OR=1.26, 95% CI=1.20–1.32). Food insecurity was associated with employment in occupations with low hourly pay, low unionization, and few fringe benefits.

Conclusions:
Many Canadian households work long, irregular, hours and are unable to meet their basic food security needs. In occupations where employers offer low wages, few benefits and precarious job security, labour and social protection policies may reduce food insecurity among workers.