

Research Idea

Comparative Analysis of Food Assistance Policy in Canada and the United States

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Abstract: Food insecurity affects millions of people in Canada and the United States, despite those countries' status as wealthy, developed countries. To help improve access to adequate food, Canada and the United States have implemented various food assistance policies and programs. This research addresses the questions: (1) how do the food assistance policies of Canada and the United States differ? and (2) why are these policies different? The article compares the structure of the food assistance programs, the national cultures, and economic conditions and social policy affecting food insecurity. The starkest contrast is that the United States offers food stamps and Canada does not. In general, the United States government offers more food assistance programs while in Canada, food assistance is largely provided by charitable organizations.

Introduction

Access to food is often taken for granted in developed countries, but many people in Canada and the United States cannot always access adequate food. Food insecurity is “the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways” (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2020). Millions of Canadians and Americans are food insecure. This may be surprising, considering that Canada and the United States are relatively large, prosperous countries. Food insecurity is closely associated with individual and national economic conditions, though there are other factors that affect food insecurity. To help those struggling, both countries have networks of charitable food assistance programs, but only the United States government has multiple programs to directly provide food assistance. Especially since the COVID-19 pandemic, people question if the current food assistance systems are sufficient. This analysis compares the food assistance systems of Canada and the United States—how they help get food to people who are struggling to get food on their own. It compares the current food assistance programs before examining the national cultures and economic conditions which can help understand the two countries' food assistance policies. The most distinct difference in the food assistance policies is that the United States provides more direct assistance. Direct food assistance may not be needed or desired in systems with more economic social policy.

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Analytic Summary

This comparative policy analysis aims to answer the general research questions how policies differ across contexts, and why they are different (Gupta, 2012). This research will explain the nuances that distinguish Canadian and American food assistance policies from each other. This comparative analysis employs a most similar system design (MSSD) to isolate what are the most relevant variables affecting food assistance policy. In communicating the comparisons, the analysis uses a head-to-head approach.

The United States and Canada are two of the most similar countries globally, so comparing their policy outputs should elicit informative findings. The United States and Canada are large, neighboring countries in North America that share similar histories. The government models and political systems of the United States and Canada are similar in many ways, which is one key reason they are suitable for comparing their respective food assistance policies.

Defining Food Insecurity

Although food insecurity is undoubtedly a global problem, experts disagree on how exactly to define it. The United States Department of Agriculture defines food insecurity as “the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways” (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2020). The Canadian government has a similar definition: “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” (Health Canada, 2020). Even though these definitions are similar, there is disagreement when it comes to measuring food insecurity because “adequate diet” is up to interpretation (Wilde, 2018). There is an ongoing debate on how to conceptualize food insecurity. Most recently, American health experts have proposed “nutrition security” as a more useful term, because it emphasizes the nutritional quality of food, not just the quantity (Reinhardt, 2021; Rosenbloom, 2021).

Canada and the United States are wealthy, developed countries, yet millions of their residents are food insecure. Their gross domestic product values are among the highest in the world. According to the most recent data available, 8.8% (1.2 million) of households in Canada experienced food insecurity in 2017/2018 (Polsky & Gilmour, 2020). In the United States, 10.5% (13.7 million) of households were food insecure at some time in 2019 (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2020) (Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1: Prevalence of Food Insecurity and Very Low Food Security, 2001-2019

(Coleman-Jensen, A., Gregory, C.A., & Rabbitt, M. P. (2020, October 16).)

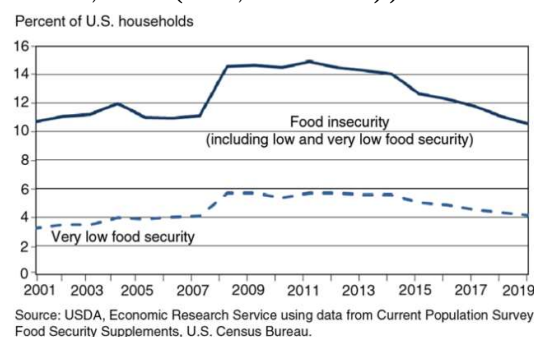
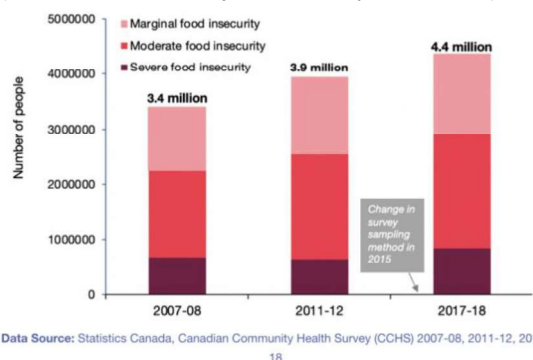


Figure 2: Number of People Living in Food-insecure Households in Canada, 2008-2018
(PROOF. *Household food insecurity in Canada.*)



The dominant discourse of food insecurity has focused on how best to provide poor, hungry people food. Increasingly, people are exploring the underlying causes of food insecurity and proposing solutions to treat the causes rather than the symptoms, per se. American society accepts a market-driven economic system that results in inequalities, while at the same time American political and social institutions try to promote and protect political rights and equality for citizens (Gordon, 1975 in Bosso, 2019). These conflicting motives may result in food insecurity.

Practitioners and academics debate the extent to which government is responsible for helping provide food to citizens. Many developed countries have recognized the right to adequate food by ratifying the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). Canada ratified ICESCR in 1976. The United States has never ratified it (Pollard & Booth, 2019). The right to adequate food is also enshrined in the United Nations

Declaration of Human Rights (1948), as part of the right to an adequate standard of living. The right to adequate food includes the right to be fed and “a right to feed oneself and to have access to food” (Raponi, 2016, p. 13). Some observers argue that the developed countries, including Canada and the United States, are not fulfilling this right.

Comparison Point 1: Structure of Food Assistance Programs

Food Stamps and Other Government Programs

The most striking difference between Canadian and American food assistance programs is that the United States government provides people with food stamps, money which can only be spent on groceries, and the Canadian government does not. In the United States, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as the Food Stamp Program, is the federal government’s largest food assistance program (Wilde, 2018). The government spends about \$65 billion on SNAP each year (Fernald & Gosliner, 2019). Spending increased to nearly \$90 billion in 2020 (Bottemiller Evich, 2021). Food stamps were first provided in the 1930s to distribute surplus agricultural commodities while addressing hunger in the Great Depression era (Bosso, 2019). Congress revived the Food Stamp Program in 1964. The government is required to provide SNAP benefits to all eligible Americans because it is a mandatory entitlement program (Wilde, 2018).

In addition to SNAP, the United States federal government has other food assistance programs. The federal government allocates

money to subsidize school lunches through the National School Lunch Program. The Women, Infant, and Children (WIC) program provides coupons to eligible families so they can obtain specific, nutritious commodities. Lastly, the Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) provides surplus commodities to food banks. These programs are administered by the Department of Agriculture (Bosso, 2019). These are the largest and most significant programs, but there are many other smaller means-tested programs including the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR), the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP) in select low-income elementary schools, and the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), which provides meals to low-income children when school is not in session (U.S. Department of Agriculture, n.d.).

In Canada, there is no food stamp program (Power et al., 2015). In fact, “there is no federal program to augment the supplies of food charities through commodity surplus redistribution; nor are there publicly funded, government-run food assistance programs” (Tarasuk et al., 2014, p. 1405). While there is not specific programming, some laws have indirectly supported the food bank system. Also, the Canadian government developed *Food Policy for Canada*, a roadmap for helping the country build “a healthier and more sustainable food system” (Beyranevand & Leib, 2021). This was intended to be a holistic strategy that crossed sectors. The United States does not have an equivalent policy.

Food Banks

Both Canada and the United States have networks of food banks and food pantries that provide food to people in need. In the United States, the national food bank network, Feeding America, estimates that its 200 food banks and 60,000 food pantries fed more than 40 million people in 2020 (Feeding America, 2020). Food banks received donations from wholesalers, government through TEFAP, and individual donations. The importance of food banks in the United States became very evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, as more and more people turned to them for help. Food banks and food pantries struggled to meet the demand, which is why some scholars suggest the food system is broken (Beyranevand & Leib, 2021; Bublitz et al., 2021; Chan & Taylor, 2020). Food banks are a critical part of food assistance in the United States, but government programs also help specific populations.

Community food programs, the emergency food system, are the main response to food insecurity in Canada (PROOF, n.d.-a). Food banks and other community food programs rely on charitable donations from individuals and corporations. In 2020, there were “1.1 million visits” to 3,000 food banks and community agencies. Tarasuk et al. (2020) found that only a small proportion of food-insecure households use food banks; in the study, “21.1% of food-insecure households reported using food banks” (p. 14). While the government does not directly support food programs, it facilitates them by allocating infrastructure funding, grants for specific programs, and legislation to incentivize donations. For example, some provinces created tax credits for producers that donate

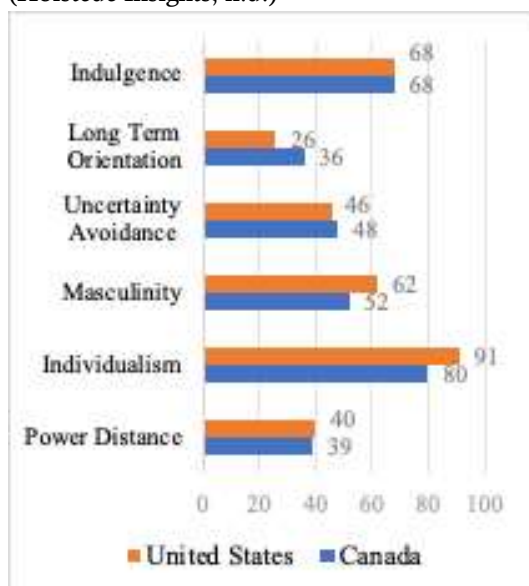
surplus food to food banks (Tarasuk et al., 2020).

Comparison Point 2: National Culture

As neighbouring countries, Canada and the United States have similar cultures, but some attributes set them apart, which could affect how the public perceives how food assistance should be handled. Hofstede Insights provides the 6-D Model to compare national cultures of different states (See Figure 3).

Figure 3: Hofstede Insights 6-D Model Comparison

(Hofstede Insights, n.d.)



American culture is defined by certain values, including egalitarianism, individualism, equality of opportunity, and political rights. In the 6-D Model, The United States received a low *power distance* score and one of the highest *individualism* scores—notably higher than that

of Canada. The first dimension is *power distance*, defined as “the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally” (Hofstede Insights, n.d.). Together, they suggest American society is loosely knit and Americans believe people should look after themselves and not rely on the government, while they believe in “equality and justice for all.” The United States ranks low in *long-term* orientation, meaning that society is practical, has strong opinions of “good” and “bad,” and values traditions and norms. This might explain why society prefers to have the government provide direct food assistance, because it is sceptical of how economic assistance would be spent.

The political culture and national culture of Canada are multidimensional. Canadians generally believe in majority rule and parliamentary democracy. While Canadians are dedicated voters, they are not active throughout the political process. Canadians also rely on government for services, rather than the private sector, though that does not mean they trust the government. In fact, some regions have a long-standing sense alienation from the federal government. This tension may make it difficult for legislators to agree on national food policy. Political culture is further complicated by the legacies of Canada’s founding cultural groups, the French and the British (Zussman, 2013). Canada received a low power distance score, indicating that Canadians value egalitarianism and interdependence among residents. Canadian society does not have strong status or class distinctions. Canada has a high individualism

score of 80, so it has an individualist culture in which people are meant to only look after themselves and their families. Canada received a low long-term orientation score, so it is a normative society. This means Canadians value long-term traditions and norms, care about the truth, and are suspicious of societal change (Hofstede Insights, n.d.). Canadian society is less individualistic than the United States and embraces more socialist policies, such as public healthcare and extensive social safety nets.

Comparison Point 3: Economic Conditions and Social Policy

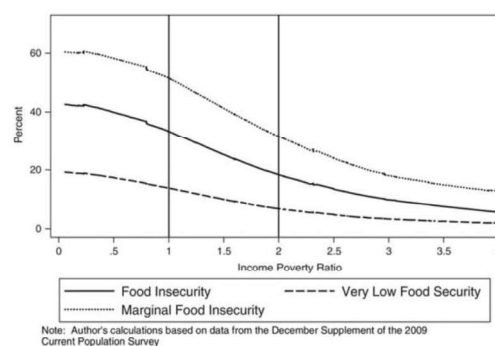
Food insecurity is linked to economic indicators, including poverty and unemployment. Food is the most basic good people need, and they need money to get it. As Figure 4 illustrates, there is an inverse relationship between food insecurity and income (normalized by the poverty line); as household income increases, the probability of food insecurity decreases, at least in the United States (Gundersen et al., 2011). The latest official poverty rate in Canada is 10.1% (3.7 million people) and the latest official poverty rate in the United States is 10.5% (34.0 million people) (Semega et al., 2020; Statistics Canada, 2021). In 2019, the unemployment rate was 5.7% in Canada and 3.68% in the United States (World Bank, 2020; StatCan, 2021). In both countries, poverty and unemployment rates decreased between 2010 and 2019 before drastically increasing during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the same time period, food insecurity decreased in the United States while food insecurity increased in Canada (Figures 1

and 2) (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2020; PROOF, n.d.-b).

Food insecurity has been exacerbated by the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to surveys, approximately 20% of American households were food insecure and a third of households with children were food insecure. Food insecurity rates peaked around December 2020 and have since decreased but are still higher than pre-COVID-19 rates. In early May 2021, approximately 16.6% of households were food insecure (*The Future of SNAP*, 2021). In Canada, approximately 14.6% of people lived in food insecure households in 2020 (Polsky & Gilmour, 2020). These figures are likely to decrease as more people are vaccinated and as the economies improve.

Figure 4: Relationship Between Food Insecurity and Income, 2009

(Gundersen et al., 2011, p. 288)



According to Gundersen et al. (2020), the price of food is a determinant of food insecurity. In the United States, unhealthy food is often cheaper than healthy, nutritious food. Known as “Big Ag,” large agricultural corporations have sizeable economic and political power. In combination with “Big Food,” large food

corporations, they guide the food system in ways that increase their profit, even if it is less healthy food. The United States government subsidizes agriculture in many ways. During COVID-19, the agriculture sector generally maintained its supply chains, so prices did not increase significantly, which is why the predicted level of food insecurity by Gundersen et al. (2020) was not higher. It is worth pointing out that in exchange for creating subsidies and supports for agriculture (which benefits rural communities), Congress allocates money for SNAP (which benefits urban communities). This mutually beneficial relationship plays out in the Farm Bill, a large piece of legislation covering agriculture and food programs roughly every five years (*What Is the Farm Bill*, 2018). In Canada, food prices are expected to increase. Canadian families were expected to pay an extra \$560 for groceries in 2021 (Bundale, 2020). This will undoubtedly affect food insecurity rates. Food prices and access to food are also exacerbated by climate change. For example, remote indigenous people in Canada are having a more difficult time accessing traditional foods since the natural environment is changing with the climate. Other foods, including staples like sugar and flour, are relatively expensive, since they often must be flown in (Flanagan, 2020). How much government can control the food systems and food prices affects food insecurity.

Individual or household financial conditions are not the only factors restricting people's adequate access to food. One cause is that there are not enough affordable and healthy grocery stores (which provide a variety of nutritious produce and other food, compared to junk food) in some neighborhoods. These

areas are known as *food deserts*, and they exist in Canada and the United States (Raponi, 2016; Slater et al., 2017). A related cause is that many places lack adequate public transportation for people to access affordable and healthy grocery stores. This particularly affects poorer people since they are less likely to own a personal vehicle. A lack of transportation affects people with disabilities or chronic diseases, residents in rural areas, and some minority groups (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2020). Decisions about where to locate grocery stores are guided by the free-market capitalism in Canada and the United States. Regarding transportation, Canada recently announced one of its largest ever investments in transportation and the United States Congress is debating an infrastructure bill presently (Infrastructure Canada, 2021). There are a variety of structural barriers to food security, though economic conditions are the leading factors.

While the Canadian government does relatively little in terms of direct food assistance, it offers several economic social policies to reduce poverty amongst its citizens. Provincial governments run income support program, and they go by different names depending on the province: Social Assistance, Employment and Income Assistance, Income Assistance, and Income Support. These programs provide direct payments to people as they are looking for work. They also provide employment assistance, like job training. Another economic support is the Goods and Services Tax/Harmonized Sales Tax (GST/HST) Credit, which is a quarterly payment to low- and moderate-income

Canadians. It offsets the tax they pay each year (Raymond, 2020). Canada also has a publicly-funded health care system that provides all Canadians access to hospitals and physicians (Raymond, 2020).

The United States has several anti-poverty programs that have reduced the rate of poverty. However, the effective benefits have shifted focus to the disabled and elderly, rather than the unemployed and people with lowest income, according to research by the National Bureau of Economic Research (Ben-Shalom et al., 2011). The main means-tested programs are Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Medicaid, and the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). The main social insurance programs include Social Security, Unemployment Insurance, Worker's Compensation, and Medicare (Ben-Shalom et al., 2011).

Conclusion

Even in Canada's wealthy, developed countries and the United States, food insecurity is a problem. Canada is commonly perceived to have a more socialist society than the United States, as it provides stronger social policy. One would expect that Canada would have more food assistance than the United States, but as this analysis has shown, the United States government has more programs to address food insecurity. The responsibility for addressing food insecurity in Canada is largely left up to charitable food banks and food pantries. Even to experts, why Canada does not have food stamps is a bit of a mystery (Ralph, 2014). Perhaps the lack of citizens' political involvement or the strong sense of

individualism overrides their sense of interdependence. Economic conditions are a driving factor of food insecurity and have shaped food assistance policy. Canada has stronger economic social policies, such as Income Assistance, that provide direct cash support while the United States prefers food stamps or direct food support. Through deals with the agricultural sector, American food assistance policies have also been formed in legislation. As scholars have noted, and as was made clear by COVID-19, food assistance, whether through food banks or food stamps, is treated the symptoms without treating the cause. Problems of poverty and food access underly food insecurity and warrant further consideration to truly address food insecurity.

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