

# Getting Back to Normal? Not if “Normal” means Indigenous Food and Health Insecurity

By Elisa Levi and Hayley Lapalme

**WITH THE SUMMER SOLSTICE** behind us and the prospect of a post-COVID “two dose” summer ahead, many are anticipating a return to normal. But the COVID era has revealed health inequities and structural realities that make return to “normal” untenable.

Incidents in the last twenty months, including the death of Joyce Echequan in a Quebec hospital, a higher death toll from **overdoses than from COVID in Indigenous communities**, and the continued-unearthing of mass graves of children at Indian Residential Schools, highlight that systemic racism has flourished in our collective silence and inaction.

This is not a baseline to which we can return.

## THE CRISIS OF FOOD INSECURITY

Zeroing in on what we already knew about food inequities in Canada, it's not surprising that there was concern about food access in early days of the pandemic for Indigenous communities. Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami had documented<sup>1</sup> that food insecurity was at crisis levels in all four Inuit regions with upwards of 70% of Inuk adults and one Inuit region were found to be living in food insecure households prior to the pandemic. The First Nations Information Governance Centre longitudinal research with First Nations communities provides us with another disproportionate baseline, pre-pandemic, whereby 1 in every 2 First Nations households experience food insecurity.<sup>2</sup> Again, this is not a baseline to which we can return.

**Indigenous peoples and allies working in food (in)security have challenged all to look beyond short-term emergency driven solutions to address these issues with and for Indigenous peoples in Canada and for the long-term, as discussed in the April 2020 Yellowhead brief “COVID-19 Did Not Cause Food Insecurity in Indigenous Communities but It Will Make It Worse.”**

This includes addressing chronic infrastructure gaps. But more so, Indigenous food systems and ways of life continue to be threatened by climate change, degradation of plant and animal habitats, widespread environmental contamination, threats from oil pipelines, wildfires and, of course, failed government policies, including colonial food safety policies.

## SUPPORTING INDIGENOUS FOOD SECURITY

For the Délı̄ne, a community in Northwest Territories, the first response to the declaration of a global state of emergency was to go back to the Land. It was instinct. The traditional way of life provides the ability to both survive and thrive on the land.<sup>3</sup> So people went to their cabins, they harvested food and water from the land, and they kept their families safe.

Remembering the legacy of past diseases like smallpox and tuberculosis, even H1N1, many other communities, from Haida Gwaii to Eskasoni, took governance into their own hands and closed their borders to outsiders, practicing sovereignty to keep the pandemic at bay. Initially this did serve to keep the **incidence rates of COVID low**, at least during first and second waves.

Hearing the call for more Indigenous-led responses to food insecurity among its health care constituents, **Nourish**, a national non-profit working to harness the power of food to tackle health inequity and the climate crisis, offered grants to encourage health care organizations to partner with Indigenous community members to respond to the realities of the pandemic: increased pressure on communities' food systems, reduced ability to travel and harvest, and fewer occasions to celebrate, do ceremony, and share food together.

Provincial and regional health authorities like Interior Health BC and the Saskatchewan Health Authority used the funds to pilot programs aimed at decolonizing institutional food service and integrating Indigenous ways of knowing and doing into operational policies and programs.

**Community-based projects, like the one at the Waasegiizhig Nanaandawe'yewigamig Health Access Centre (WNHAC) that delivered ice fishing, snaring and wild rice kits to community members, focused on projects that returned to Indigenous knowledge and built Indigenous food sovereignty.**

The short documentary **Why Hospital Food Matters to Reconciliation**, which highlights these projects, explores the power of Indigenous foodways and leadership to confront how we deliver health care in Canada, unlearn the mindsets that allow systemic racism to flourish, and to be part of a transition to a future that honours the knowledge in Indigenous communities.

## MAKING SPACE FOR THE FUTURE

INNOVATIVE Research Group released **new findings** that general awareness of Indigenous issues among Canadians has jumped from 42% to 75% with 68% currently believing we have a duty to work towards resolving the inequalities faced by Indigenous people in Canada . Anchoring and centering action around food holds promise in the change we need to see.

Indigenous elders, knowledge keepers, and allies working with Nourish conceived of the **Food is Our Medicine action learning journey** for health care professionals to take, to support the unlearning and relearning required to support this transition. The free, self-paced course is open to anyone, but offers a deep dive into ways health care providers can reflect on their own practice and practice allyship, learning through the lens of food.

Ultimately, as individuals and institutions, we must all confront a question that stands between a return to normal and advancing toward a future that affirms the self determination of Indigenous peoples: what are we willing to let go of in order to make space for a new future to emerge?

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami. Source: <https://www.itk.ca/nuluaq-mapping-project/inuit-food-insecurity-canada-background/>

<sup>2</sup>First Nations Information Governance Centre. source: <https://fnigc.ca/news/final-volume-of-landmark-report-explores-health-care-language-culture-food-security-in-first-nations-communities/>

<sup>3</sup>Spring, A. & Bayha, M. (May 2020). Response to COVID in Délįnę, NT: reconnecting with our community, our culture and our past after the pandemic. *Agriculture and Human Values*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-020-10059-z>