



INSTITUTE OF  
URBAN STUDIES

# AT HOME/CHEZ SOI FACT SHEETS

## #4 - FOOD SECURITY

The At Home/Chez Soi Fact Sheets comprises a series of brief reports highlighting key features and themes of the At Home/Chez Soi Housing First demonstration project in Winnipeg. As a collection, the fact sheets provide a broad overview of the project's structure, scope, methods, and outcomes to inform public understanding of the project. This Fact Sheet examines the food security of At Home/Chez Soi participants during the project to assess whether their food security status improved.

### WHAT IS FOOD SECURITY?

Health Canada adheres to a commonly used definition of food security: "when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life" (FAO, 1996).

### AT HOME/CHEZ SOI AND FOOD SECURITY

One of the central goals of the Housing First (HF) model is to stably house participants so they can begin to address other needs, including their food needs. This fact sheet examines whether Housing First, as delivered through At Home/Chez Soi, contributed to improving the food security of participants. Research has noted that people experiencing food insecurity are more likely to experience chronic health problems, such as diabetes and heart disease, and contribute to the challenges faced by the public health system.

### MEASURING FOOD SECURITY IN AT HOME/CHEZ SOI

Data about At Home/Chez Soi participants' food security status were collected using a **Food Security** instrument<sup>i</sup>. The Food Security instrument contains eight questions to determine if participants face uncertain, insufficient, or inadequate access to food. The Food Security survey was administered every six months over two years, for a total of 5 response periods. Each time the survey was administered, respondents were asked to answer questions about their food security over the past 30 days. These questions included asking participants if they worried that their food would run out before they could get more, or if they cut the size of their meals because they couldn't get enough food. Responses to the Food Security instrument provided unique insight into the food security of Winnipeg's homeless population and the efficacy of the Housing First model offered through the At Home/Chez Soi project to impact food security status.

### RESPONSES TO FOOD SECURITY QUESTIONS

In the final response period<sup>ii</sup>, 57% of INT and 48% of TAU participants had worried that in the previous 30 days they would run out of food and be unable to get more, and as many as half of the participants from each group indicated they had cut the size of their meals because they couldn't get more food (Table 1). Participants worried not only about the quantity of their food, but also about the quality—67% and 62% of INT and TAU participants, respectively, were not able to eat balanced meals. These responses describe an alarming reality for a large group of Winnipeg's population that is or has experienced homelessness. **On a regular basis the daily food needs of most At Home/Chez Soi participants were going unmet, and to cope they were eating fewer and smaller meals and continually worried about how they would get those meals.**

**FOOD SECURITY**

Table 1. Food Security instrument responses at end of study period by participant group

Food Security Instrument Questions	Percentage of Participants who Answered 'yes' to Question	
	INT Participants	TAU Participants
"I worried whether my food would run out before I could get more"	57%	48%
"The food that I got just didn't last, and I couldn't get more"	52%	44%
"I couldn't eat balanced meals"	68%	62%
"Did you ever cut the size of your meal or skip meals because you couldn't get enough food?"	51%	50%
"Did you ever eat less than you felt you should because you couldn't get enough food?"	75%	73%
"Were you ever hungry but didn't eat because you couldn't get enough food?"	77%	75%
"Did you lose weight because you couldn't get enough food?"	69%	73%
"Did you ever not eat for a whole day because you couldn't get enough food?"	31%	32%

**DID AT HOME/CHEZ SOI INCREASE FOOD SECURITY?**

To determine whether participants were food secure or food insecure, the number of questions a participant answered affirmatively was summated. An individual was considered;

- **Food Secure** if they answered 0-1 of the ten questions affirmatively
- **Food Insecure--Moderate** if they answered 2-5 questions affirmatively, and
- **Food Insecure--Severe** if they answered affirmatively to more than 6 questions.

To assess how food security differed between INT and TAU participants, each group was analyzed separately<sup>iii</sup>. For any given period where food security data were recorded, only

13-24% of INT respondents reported being food secure (Table 2). In other words, at each period throughout the study project at least 76% of INT participants indicated they were food insecure. For all five periods **there was no significant difference between the number of INT and TAU participants experiencing food security**. This suggests that the HF model, as delivered through At Home/ Chez Soi, did not improve the food security of participants.

It is also important to note that the individuals experiencing food security varied in each time period. Only six INT participants experienced food security in 3 of the 5 periods, three participants for 4 of the 5 periods, and only two participants receiving HF supports were food secure throughout the entire five periods of the study. Therefore, even after becoming food secure, INT and TAU participants were at risk of becoming food insecure once again.

**FOOD SECURITY**

Table 2. Food Security Status by Participant Group and Time Period

Participant Group	Food Security Status at Time Period									
	Baseline		6 Month		12 Month		18 Month		24 Month	
	FOOD SECURE	FOOD INSECURE	FOOD SECURE	FOOD INSECURE	FOOD SECURE	FOOD INSECURE	FOOD SECURE	FOOD INSECURE	FOOD SECURE	FOOD INSECURE
INT	24%	76%	23%	77%	23%	77%	17%	83%	13%	87%
TAU	22%	78%	27%	73%	22%	78%	15%	86%	16%	84%

**INCOME & FOOD SECURITY**

Income and food security are strongly linked, with high-income individuals more likely able to meet their dietary needs. During the project the incomes of participants were recorded every 3 months<sup>iv</sup>. On average, participants’ monthly incomes increased over the duration of the project; however, the majority of these gains derived from government sources, which support workers helped participants access. Research has indicated that individuals dependent on social assistance are more likely to experience food insecurity. Despite these increases,

**THERE WAS NO SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE NUMBER OF INT AND TAU PARTICIPANTS EXPERIENCING FOOD SECURITY**

the average monthly incomes for both the INT and TAU groups remained well below pace for meeting the annual the Low-Income Cut Off (LICO)<sup>v</sup> level of \$23,298 (Statistics Canada, 2015). On average, INT participant’s monthly income during the last recorded period was \$850; 44% of the monthly LICO amount (\$1,941.50). Considering the average monthly rent for a bachelor apartment in Winnipeg during the study period was \$578 (CMHC, 2004), housed participants were likely spending upwards of 68% of their monthly income on rent. This would leave participants very little money to spend on food, and they likely had to compromise the quality, size, and frequency of their meals.

**COPING WITH FOOD INSECURITY**

As a large percentage of At Home/Chez Soi participants experienced food insecurity, many coped by turning to other food sources, including food banks, drop-in centres, and illicit activities.

**FOOD BANKS**

Food banks are intended to be a supplementary source of food for individuals and families who need food assistance. Over the span of the project the number of INT participants using a food bank remained nearly constant. The use of food banks does not necessarily suggest that participants’ food security statuses remained unchanged as food banks require an individual has an address to receive a hamper. To use food hampers, participants would also require the amenities to properly store and prepare food. Because of this, food bank use may be a reflection of housing stability. However, at the end of the study period, 34% of INT and 32% of TAU participants had used a food bank in the last 90 days. Even though they may have been housed, these participants were unable to procure the food they required on their own, and they were forced to seek out supplementary sources. Since food banks are not solutions to sustainable food security, this finding demonstrates the need for future Housing First projects to target food security.

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## FOOD SECURITY

### DROP-IN CENTRES AND PREPARED MEALS

Many participants frequented drop in-centres that offer meals<sup>vi</sup>. During the last period of interviews, the majority of participants (71% of INT and 63% of TAU) indicated they had visited drop-in centres, and a large number of participants were using drop-in centres frequently. On average, INT participants went to a drop-in centre 162 times over a 90 days, and TAU participants 175 times over the same amount of time. This means that nearly twice a day participants were going to a drop-in centre. Even if only one of these visits was for the primary purpose of getting a meal, this represents a problematic dependence on support services to maintain a certain level of food security.

While providing meals is an important service, drop-in centres do not always offer healthy or suitable choices for all individuals. In interviews, participants noted that food from drop-in centres was often unpleasant. One participant even stated they “skipp[ed] meals at [a drop-in centre] because the meals were disgusting.” In other instances, drop-in centres were unable to meet the diverse dietary needs of participants who may have been diabetic, gluten-free, suffering from gastrointestinal issues, or had dental problems. Unable to be accommodated, individuals with health concerns and dietary restricts were further marginalized.

### THREE HOTS AND A COT

While some participants were able to find food through drop-in centres or food banks, others turned to illicit activities to meet their food needs. As one participant noted, **“I boost (steal) the food I need. I take the best stuff. If I didn’t steal it, I wouldn’t eat.”** This participant described how, when faced with a lack of housing and food in the winter, he would break into a vehicle with the intention of being sent to prison, where he would receive “three hots and a cot,” referring to three warm meals and a bed to sleep on. This coping mechanism is well-known among the community experiencing homelessness. These types of activities demonstrate how the inability to access food has a tremendous personal cost and impact for individuals experiencing homelessness.

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### CONCLUSION

While a few participants were food secure at some points during the demonstration project, food security was never sustainably achieved, and most participants remained vulnerable to hunger. Often unable to predict where their next meal would come from, participants were dependent on supplementary sources for their primary needs, frequenting drop-in centres at alarming rates and even resorting to illicit means to secure food. As many of these challenges were prevalent among participants, it is difficult to argue that At Home/Chez Soi participants achieved the physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food required to be food secure. While a more in-depth analysis is required to better understand what influences participants’ food security statuses, it is evident that the HF model of services, as provided through the At Home/Chez Soi project, were not alone sufficient to ensure food security.

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## FOOD SECURITY

<sup>i</sup>The Food Security instrument used in the At Home/ Chez Soi project is a modified version of the Household Food Security Survey Module (HFSSM), which is used to monitor household food security in Canada and the United States.

<sup>ii</sup>Some participants were administered the Food Security instrument at the 21 month period, while other were asked at the 24 month period. However, no participant was administered the Food Security instrument for both periods. For this reason, the last time the Food Security instrument was administered was considered a participants 'last' response period.

<sup>iii</sup>Chi-Square tests were run to examine the relationship between Food Security status (Food Secure and Food Insecure) and the Intervention group (INT and TAU). Significance was determined at  $p < 0.05$ .

<sup>iv</sup>Participant's monthly incomes are sums calculated from multiple sources, including unemployment insurance, disability income, welfare, public pension, pan-handling, busking, family support, or any other source of revenue over the past month.

<sup>v</sup>Low-Income Cut Off (LICO) is a government-calculated figure that determines if people can afford rent and other essential services. We use the 2009 post-revision market income LICO.

<sup>vi</sup>Some drop-in centres did not provide food, while the primary purpose of others, such as soup kitchens, was to provide meals. Given the difficulty of distinguishing between drop-in centres with and without food, all were included in the analysis.

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## REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

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