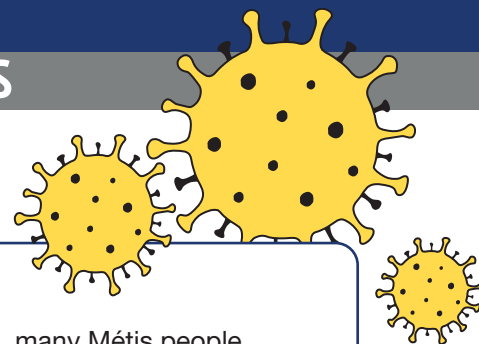


Métis Food (In)security and Food as Medicine

EXAMINING THE SOCIETAL CONSEQUENCES OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC



Key Findings

- Due to settler colonialism and other complex socio-economic factors, many Métis people experience food insecurity, which in some cases was made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic and associated response measures such as physical distancing and group size limitations.
- Métis people and communities developed diverse and creative ways to stay connected and provide access to food during the pandemic.
- As a result of multiple intersecting forms of oppression, food insecurity affects certain populations disproportionately, including Indigenous Peoples (First Nations, Métis, and Inuit), women, children, Elders, lone-parent families, 2SLGBTQQIA+ people, people with lower incomes, people with diverse abilities, and those living in rural, remote, isolated, and/or northern communities.
- Métis identity is a source of strength and resilience. Increased risk to Métis people's food security is deeply rooted in historic and ongoing legacies of racism and settler colonialism found across practices, policies, systems, institutions, and norms.
- Upholding Métis people's inherent rights to health and wellness, including food as medicine, must be a key component of any strategy to support Métis food security.

Introduction

This report explores how the COVID-19 pandemic and public health response measures to prevent transmission of the virus (e.g., stay-at-home guidelines, physical distancing, group size limitations) both illuminated and worsened pre-existing inequities in terms of food security for Métis people in BC.^a

This report is a joint initiative between Métis Nation British Columbia (MNBC), BC's Office of the Provincial Health Officer (OPHO), and the BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC). MNBC

is grateful for the support of these partners in presenting our key findings and recommendations to improve food security for Métis people in BC.

MNBC, BC's Office of the PHO, and the BCCDC affirm the inherent and treaty rights of BC First Nations, and their stewardship of the lands now known as British Columbia since time immemorial.

Please see Appendix A for more information about MNBC.

^a A report on food insecurity among the overall BC population (not Indigenous-focused) will also be available on the *Societal Consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic* website (<http://www.bccdc.ca/health-professionals/data-reports/societal-consequences-covid-19>).



Photo credit: L. Shaw, MNBC Ministry of Environmental Protection, Agriculture, and Food Sovereignty

Situation

As this report shows, a higher proportion of Métis people experience food insecurity than other British Columbians, due to a variety of complex historic, societal, and interconnected factors.

Ongoing and often increased food insecurity during the pandemic led to many innovative community responses and highlighted the vital role of food as medicine in addressing this issue. This discussion recognizes both the historic and ongoing impacts of colonialism and the critical links between food, culture, and health.

Background

Everyone needs access to healthy, nutritious foods to survive and be well. However, food can also have cultural and spiritual meanings, and this is most certainly the case for Métis people. For the Métis, food is a vital link to community, culture, identity, ancestors, and values (e.g., sharing, cooperation, reciprocity). Food is medicine, and it is connected to ceremony, the economy, language, and the ways knowledge is passed from one generation to the next.^{1,2} Food also brings families and communities together.

Understandings of food security and food insecurity vary, and have changed over time.^{3,4,5} The text box on this page presents definitions of these terms recently developed by the BCCDC and Indigenous and health sector organizations in BC.⁹ This report focuses on food security as a human right,¹⁰ considered in the context of Métis identity.

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“There is an old Metis saying: ‘Let food be your medicine and let medicine be your food.’”

- Lawrence J. Barkwell^{7(p.3)}

The cultural connection with food is sacred for many Indigenous Peoples in Canada. For the Métis, food as medicine is a way to practice culture, strengthen identity, and improve wellness.

Food security means that everyone has equitable access to food that is affordable, culturally preferable, nutritious, and safe; everyone has the agency to participate in and influence food systems; and that food systems are resilient, ecologically sustainable, socially just, and honour Indigenous food sovereignty.

Food insecurity exists when factors outside an individual’s control negatively impact their access to enough foods that promote well-being. Economic, social, environmental, and geographical factors influence this access. Food insecurity is most acutely felt by those who experience the negative impacts of *structural inequities*,^b such as discrimination and ongoing colonial practices.

For more information, see http://www.bccdc.ca/Documents/FoodSecurity_FoodInsecurity_Definitions_FINAL.pdf.

^b Structural inequities are unfair and unjust systemic biases present in institutional policies and day-to-day practices that disadvantage certain social identities over others based on race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and other domains.

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The rules of the buffalo hunt ... formed the basis of the Métis traditional governance system and served to bring together families and communities under a common purpose.”

— *Kaa-wiichihitoyaahk: Métis Perspectives on Cultural Wellness*^{11(p.19)}

Métis, among other Indigenous Nations and communities across Canada, have successfully managed local and regional food systems for generations.^{6,8} This has included developing deep relationships with the land, plants, and animals; understanding seasonal changes and travelling to specific resource locations at certain times of the year; knowing which plants and animals to harvest for food and medicines, and how to prepare and store them; stewarding the land to ensure the ongoing health and sustainability of their communities, and the plants and animals that they share the land with; and agricultural pursuits such as farming and gardening.^{2,12,13}

Many Indigenous communities continue to manage food systems in these ways, but in many cases, Indigenous relationships to local, wild, and traditional foods and landscapes have been profoundly damaged by the forces of colonialism, industrialization, and climate change.^{6,14,15} These forces have separated Indigenous communities from traditional territories and resources, including through the Métis **scrip** system (see text box).^{16,17}

As a result of deliberate settler colonial practices and policies, systemic racism and manufactured poverty have created and continue to sustain substantial inequities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations in Canada.^{20,21,22} These inequities are reflected in disparities in social, structural, and economic determinants of health and wellness, such as literacy, education, employment, income, housing, social status, access to culturally safe health services, safe drinking water, and food security.^{23,27} MNBC has heard from Métis Chartered Communities that food security is a major concern for Métis people and their families.²⁸ Food insecurity is also one of the biggest issues faced by Indigenous people accessing services from Aboriginal Friendship Centres in BC.²⁹

Métis Scrip and the “Road Allowance People”

Scrip refers to an unjust system of land vouchers implemented by the Government of Canada in the late 19th and early 20th centuries whereby Métis communities were dispossessed of their lands.^{16,24} Vouchers for small parcels of land, often hundreds of kilometres from the communities they lived in, were given to Métis individuals, many of whom were subsequently defrauded by unscrupulous land speculators. More than a century later, the unfairness of the scrip system was acknowledged in the Supreme Court’s 2013 *Manitoba Métis Federation Inc. v. Canada* decision.^{25(p.11)}

The ongoing displacement of Métis from their lands and territories in the Métis Homeland interrupted traditional food procurement and other economic activities and left many with nowhere to go. They settled where they could, in forested areas, parks, and on Crown land set aside for the creation of rural roads, known as “road allowances.” The visibility of Métis communities springing up along these road allowances led to the Métis being known as the “Road Allowance People.” The intersections of colonialism, systemic racism, and the disruption of traditional lifeways forced many Métis into low-paying jobs in the wage labour economy. Because those living on Crown land did not pay property taxes, many Métis children were not allowed to go to school. The resulting lack of formal education often prevented Métis people from getting better employment. This trapped some Métis families in a vicious cycle of poverty that has lasted for generations.^{18,26}

In the face of these profound injustices, Métis people (including those in “road allowance” communities) continued to demonstrate strength and resilience, maintaining family and community connections, speaking the Michif language, and passing on traditional Métis educations, cultural practices, and values to their children.¹⁸

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“The food that [Métis women traditionally ate during pregnancy] was very, very healthy. . . . [It] was clean, it was from the bush. All those animals ate medicines, so therefore they became medicines for us.”

— Participant, Métis maternal health consultation^{30(p.10)}

More affordable foods are often unhealthy, highly processed, and of low quality, and therefore do not meet peoples’ nutritional needs even when they do have access to food.³¹ Sex and gender inequality also lead to gendered experiences of food insecurity.¹⁹ For example, women are more likely than men to be lone parents, and lone parenthood is associated with both lower income and higher food insecurity.³² On average, working women make less money than working men, and women are more likely to have temporary and/or insecure employment. The same is true for 2SLGBTQQIA+ people, many of whom face additional barriers to financial security due to homophobia and transphobia; this was the case both before and during the pandemic.^{33,34} This creates a disproportionate burden of food insecurity for Métis people and families overall, and, in particular, for Métis women and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people and their children. Due to pervasive ableism, people with diverse abilities are also known to be disproportionately represented among those who experience low income and food insecurity in BC and across Canada.³⁵

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“As Indigenous peoples migrate to urban centres, the immediate access to traditional or cultural foods is lessened and reliance on expensive and unhealthy market foods is increased. . . . Growing, harvesting, preparing, and eating cultural food is an important part of Indigenous peoples’ connection to land. The disconnection from one’s food and culture contributes to poorer mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual health.”

— BCAAFC Urban Indigenous Wellness Report^{29(p.46)}



Photo credit: L. Shaw, MNBC Ministry of Environmental Protection, Agriculture, and Food Sovereignty

Geography also poses a challenge to Indigenous food security and access to food as medicine. People in many rural, remote, isolated, and/or northern communities have difficulty accessing fresh, nutritious foods because these must be imported from a great distance and/or because the transport costs make these foods unaffordable for many community members.^{14,19} In addition to reduced access to store-bought food, people in rural, remote, isolated, and/or northern communities often have reduced access to resources like food banks, meal programs, public transportation, the Internet, and the services offered by Métis Chartered Communities. People living away from their home communities may also have challenges accessing food because they are unable to participate in community food programs or to access other community-based supports and funding.

Together, the factors discussed above meant that widespread and often severe food insecurity was experienced by many Métis people long before the COVID-19 pandemic began. This experience was not unique to Métis, however. In 2017–18, 28.2% of off-reserve First Nations, Métis, and Inuit households in Canada reported food insecurity—more than double the 12.7% reported by Canadian households overall.³² In 2017, 31% of Métis people age 18 and up living in urban areas in Canada reported living in a food-insecure household. Urban-dwelling Métis women were more likely than urban-dwelling Métis men to report food insecurity.³⁶ Among respondents to the 2018 BC Adolescent Health Survey, 15% of Métis youth (compared to 10% of non-Métis

youth) reported going to bed hungry at least some of the time because there was not enough money for food at home. This included 2% of Métis youth who *often* or *always* went to bed hungry.³⁷

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“Research has shown that food insecurity can be reduced through public policies that improve the financial circumstances of low-income households.”

— PROOF Food Insecurity Policy Research³⁸

A Note on the Underrepresentation of Two-Spirit, Gender Diverse, and Rural/Remote Métis

Throughout this report, data are used to identify the specific strengths and challenges of Métis people and communities regarding food (in)security and food as medicine. There are, however, gaps in the data on the lived experience of Métis. For example, gender diverse populations and people living in rural and remote locations are often underrepresented in the data. Underrepresentation based on geography may be due to factors such as lack of access to the Internet, transportation, and generally lower incomes in more rural and remote areas. Underrepresentation based on gender identity can be linked to colonial trauma, lack of trust, and insufficient safety within Western systems for Métis people of diverse gender identities to engage and/or self-identify. A wholistic understanding of Métis experiences requires work to increase access, safety, participation, and engagement for Métis people in rural and remote areas and Métis who are Two-Spirit and/or have diverse gender identities. MNBC, the BCCDC, the OPHO, and other data reporting agencies will continue to work together to improve Métis data collection with “the goal of making this work as meaningful as possible to the Métis people of today and tomorrow, while honouring the memory of those who came before.”^{25(p.iii)}

Findings

The COVID-19 pandemic and related response measures revealed pre-existing food security inequities, challenges, and needs for many Métis people in BC, and in many cases made them worse. However, the pandemic has also highlighted some of the strengths of Métis communities and value systems, as discussed in this report.

Income and food insecurity both impacted Métis people during the pandemic.³⁹ According to the BC COVID-19 Survey on Population Experiences, Action, and Knowledge (SPEAK), 38.0% of Métis respondents reported increased difficulty meeting their household financial needs in 2020, compared to 32.3% of the BC population overall.^{c,40} By 2021, this proportion had increased to 41.6% for Métis respondents, while it had decreased to 28.8% for BC overall. In addition, the proportion of Métis respondents who reported accessing financial relief or support services increased from 38.3% in 2020 to 54.5% in 2021. The use of financial services was particularly high among Métis youth and young adults age 18–29 (76.1%).⁴⁰

In 2021, higher proportions of Métis respondents in the following population groups reported difficulty meeting their financial needs:

- Métis people age 18–29 (50.5%), 30–39 (46.5%), and 40–49 (47.0%);
- Métis people who self-identified as non-binary (52.3%*) or outside the listed gender options (86.4%*); and
- Métis living in remote areas (47.0%,* down from 55.3%* in 2020).⁴⁰

* Data marked with an asterisk (*) should be interpreted with caution due to wide confidence intervals. Although the SPEAK data for Two-Spirit, non-binary, and gender diverse people have wide confidence intervals, we include these statistics with the intention of reversing the historical/colonial erasure of gender diverse Métis. We honour their spirit and experiences here.

c The SPEAK data in this report are from the first two rounds of the survey: Round 1 (May 12–31, 2020) had 6,384 self-identified Métis respondents, and Round 2 (April 8–May 9, 2021) had 3,065 self-identified Métis respondents. Incomplete responses could not be analyzed, so data reported here reflect a smaller fraction of these voices. For more information, please see Appendix B.

Similarly, in 2020, 22.6% of Métis people worried that, due to the pandemic, food would run out before they had money to buy more. This was substantially higher than the rate of 15.6% reported by the BC population overall.^{39,41} As with financial difficulties, the proportion of the overall BC population reporting this concern decreased between 2020 and 2021 (from 15.6% to 12.3%), while the proportion of Métis reporting this concern increased slightly to 23.2%. In 2021, even higher proportions of Métis people in the following population groups reported being concerned that food would run out before they had money to buy more:

- Métis people age 30–39 (29.8%, up from 23.7% in 2020); and
- Métis people who self-identified as Two-Spirit (33.2%*), non-binary (46.1%*), or outside the listed gender options (74.4%*).⁴⁰

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“[The relation between food and Métis identity] is an important part of our culture. The dining room was where planning and business took place usually over dinner. Métis people are rooted in sharing their resources with each other during winter months, providing for one another. Food is a central pillar to Métis culture and identity.”

- Anonymous survey participant, MNBC Climate Change & Food Access Survey, 2022

Beginning early in the pandemic, many Métis leaders took immediate action to care for their communities and ensure no families were without food and other necessities. MNBC distributed information, food, and funding support through Métis Chartered Communities across BC. However, despite many such examples of community cohesion and resilience, some

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government-issued COVID-19 policies and response measures led to inequitable outcomes for Indigenous people already experiencing food insecurity. The BC Government identified supporting First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people and communities in BC to respond to COVID-19 as a high priority.⁴³ In addition, the provincial government has committed to reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples^{44,45} and passed the *BC Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act* in 2019.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, provincial government responses and public health and other measures did not always honour or align with Indigenous self-determination. Some of the restrictions put in place to mitigate the harms of COVID-19 infections had the unintended outcome of increasing food insecurity.

For example, group size restrictions limited the ability to hold communal meals. In-class learning and in-person community programming (e.g., Healthy Babies programs, support groups)—environments where food is often provided—were temporarily suspended. Virtual get-togethers may have helped provide a sense of connection for some, but online events excluded people without access to a computer or the Internet, and could not fulfill the food redistribution and sharing aspects of in-person events. For children and others from food-insecure households, school meal programs and community kitchens may be among the only places they have consistent access to healthy and nutritious foods. Physical distancing guidelines meant that those delivering food hampers to Elders and other community members in need could not help recipients prepare food or stay to keep them company. Volunteer burnout has been another issue for Métis Chartered Communities, which had no funding to hire helpers despite the extra demand for services created by the pandemic and associated response measures.

Many people began “panic buying” and stockpiling seeds and gardening supplies early on in the pandemic. This led to reduced availability, so that individuals and communities who rely on growing their own food could not access supplies. Half of the respondents to an MNBC COVID-19 needs assessment survey in 2020 indicated that they struggled to afford groceries.⁴⁷ The increasing



Photo credit: L. Shaw, MNBC Ministry of Environmental Protection, Agriculture, and Food Sovereignty

costs of lumber and building materials also made it more difficult to construct greenhouses, garden beds, smokehouses, and other food production and processing infrastructure. The situation was made worse by racism (including “food racism”)—a known contributor to food insecurity experienced by Indigenous Peoples and racialized populations.^{29,48} Food racism ranges from limiting the availability and/or increasing the prices of “specialty” cultural food items in grocery stores to the environmental degradation of sacred lands (e.g., for large-scale food production or resource extraction).⁴⁸

In some cases, people in rural, remote, isolated, and/or northern communities had difficulty accessing food while self-isolating. Challenges included lack of access to online grocery ordering and delivery and, for those who had to self-isolate in hotels or motels, lack of access to food services and cooking facilities. However, these communities also demonstrated self-determination and resilience. Some Métis communities requested access to Conservation Outdoor Recreation Education (CORE) training.

Though funding may have been available to support communities during the pandemic, some government funding programs had the unintended outcome of pitting Indigenous communities and organizations against one another for limited funds. MNBC has also found that funding is frequently project-based, administratively burdensome in terms of application and reporting requirements, and not designed with continuity or sustainability in mind. Funding may

not reach people in crisis, who cannot always wait for the next government funding cycle.

The pandemic increased awareness of and interest in the local food supply, including people’s desire to participate in local food-growing opportunities and have control over their own food. Families increasingly shared in traditional food practices (with appropriate licensing for hunting, fishing, gathering, smoking, canning), and included children in these practices while they were home from school. The movement toward growing and sustainably harvesting locally available foods and medicines led to increased family and cultural connectedness for many people.^{22,49}

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“I was so happy to hear the grocery cards were still being given to us members and it’s a life saver as the money I was supposed to spend on groceries had to be spent on a dental emergency and I was sick with worry. I feared I would have to choose between fixing my teeth that were very bad or getting food for me. I called [Métis Nation of Greater Victoria] and explained and was gifted a grocery card immediately and I couldn’t be more thankful. . . . I was able to get my tooth fix[ed] and get groceries.”

— Community member talking about MNBC COVID supports⁵⁰

During the pandemic, many communities provided access to groceries through shared food purchasing and distribution to community members. MNBC gave grocery cards to Métis Citizens who requested assistance. Fraser Valley Métis Association used a food truck to provide hot meals. Waceya Métis Society in Langley supplied grocery gift cards, gas cards, transportation passes, sanitation products, and personal protective equipment to low-income seniors who had lost supplementary income, low-income families where one or both parents had reduced income due to loss of jobs or reduced working hours, people with diverse abilities, vulnerable members who were undergoing medical treatment for disease or addiction, and

families who were under quarantine orders and did not have the means to purchase food.

Responses also included seed-starting groups, community gardens, and other localized food production efforts, helping to promote self-sufficiency and food as medicine. These and other community responses and stories reflect resilience, resistance, self-determination, and the diverse needs and priorities of different Métis communities. These initiatives capitalize on cultural strengths and values such as creativity, adaptability, food sharing, and looking out for one another.



Photo credit: L. Shaw, MNBC Ministry of Environmental Protection, Agriculture, and Food Sovereignty

COVID-19, Food (In)security, and Mental Health

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“Seniors were lowering the quality and volume of their diets in order to save money for other needs such as medicine, household items and transportation. When we were able to step-in with grocery gift cards this allowed seniors to allocate limited incomes to these items. Seniors were very appreciative and admitted that the ability to purchase good food in adequate quantities was enormous. The benefit was both in better physical health, but definitely expressed to us in improved mental well-being.”

— Waceya Métis Society (Langley), reporting on MNBC COVID supports⁵¹

Food security is associated with positive mental health, spiritual well-being, and self-determination. Conversely, food insecurity creates stress and can be associated with depression, mood and anxiety disorders, and suicidal thoughts.³⁸ Among children, food insecurity is associated with hyperactivity and inattention.³⁸ Given the history of colonial oppression in BC and Canada, a lack of control over one’s own food supply can also be psychologically triggering for many Métis people.

During the pandemic, mental health-related impacts disproportionately affected Métis and other Indigenous people. Higher proportions of Métis people in BC reported experiencing stress related to the COVID-19 pandemic, with 25.0% of Métis rating the amount of stress in their lives as quite or extremely significant, compared to 18.3% for BC overall.^{39,40} Métis people also more frequently reported concern about vulnerable family members and their access to the resources they needed. In May 2020, more than half of Métis SPEAK respondents (52.1%) rated their mental health as slightly or much worse than before the pandemic, compared to 46.4% of the BC population overall.^{39,40} By 2021, those who rated their mental health as worse than it was before the pandemic had increased to

59.6% for Métis respondents, compared to 57.1% for BC overall. In both years, a higher proportion of Métis respondents in more remote locations reported worsened mental health (57.6%* in 2020 and 81.0%* in 2021).⁴⁰

A sense of family and community belonging also promotes mental and emotional health and is a critical determinant of health for Métis people.⁵² Such belonging and connectedness is also linked to food security. The concepts of *kiyokewin* (or *keeoukaywin*, a Cree word for ways of visiting) and *wahkotowin* (a Cree word for kinship) are important for building and maintaining relationships within Métis communities.⁵³ Food-sharing practices help to build these connections and strengthen Métis identity, health, and wellness.⁵²

According to BC COVID-19 SPEAK data, during the first year of the pandemic, 59.5% of Métis survey respondents reported a strong sense of community belonging (compared to 64.5% for BC overall).⁴⁰ In 2020, a higher proportion of Métis people in remote locations reported strong feelings of community belonging (89.9%*) than Métis in rural, semi-urban, and urban locations.^d By the following year, however, strong community belonging had decreased to 44.7% for Métis respondents overall, and more than half of Métis respondents reported feeling a weak sense of community belonging.⁴⁰ Of Métis people in all age groups, those age 30–39 (61.7%) and 40–49 (61.3%) most often reported a weak sense of community belonging in 2021.⁴⁰

A weak sense of community belonging and feeling less connected to family and friends could be linked to concerns related to COVID-19 itself, as well as to public health response measures such as social/physical distancing and restrictions on gathering sizes. The inability to gather with friends and family over a prolonged period may have weakened connections to community and loved ones while also limiting opportunities to engage in the food-sharing practices that are so important to Métis culture.

* Data marked with an asterisk (*) should be interpreted with caution due to wide confidence intervals.

d The difference between remote, rural, semi-urban, and urban locations is based on one's postal code and Community Health Service Area.

Métis Nation British Columbia Climate Change & Food Access Survey

In 2022, MNBC's Ministry of Environmental Protection, Agriculture, and Food Sovereignty administered a Climate Change and Food Access Survey among Métis.⁵⁴ The purpose of the survey was to understand how access to food is affecting Métis in British Columbia, especially in relation to climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Historically, due to colonial/assimilative policies, Métis were discouraged from practicing or passing down traditional knowledge to their children and grandchildren. This included food and traditional subsistence behaviours and protocols (e.g., hunting, fishing, gathering). Métis today are attempting to reclaim and (re)learn these traditional ways of knowing, and they understand the importance of food in Métis culture. Approximately 66% of Métis in BC who responded to the Climate Change and Food Access Survey reported consuming traditional foods in the last year, but this relationship is vulnerable. According to survey respondents, their most urgent concern in accessing food was cost. When asked to estimate the percentage of their income spent on food, Métis responded with an average of 35%. This is extremely high, especially considering the average Métis income in BC is less than that of non-Indigenous BC residents.²⁵



Photo credit: L. Shaw, MNBC Ministry of Environmental Protection, Agriculture, and Food Sovereignty

The comments below (and elsewhere in this report) from anonymous survey respondents express the important connection that exists between food and Métis culture, and the barriers Métis people face in nurturing that relationship:

"I believe it can be very difficult for people to focus on culture and identity when they are focused on surviving by finding food—of course there are traditional foods and food which can be obtained through hunting and gathering, but that is not accessible for many people. Many people must go to the grocery store[s], which have very high prices, or the food banks, which often lack nutritious foods. Those who are focused on finding cheap, nutritious food may not be as focused on connecting with their culture or how food plays into culture."

"It's all about respect for all relations...I would say that food is integral to our culture because it is a way in which we come together for a hot meal, provide for each other, and continue showing our respect to the land."

"I think food is an important connection to all cultures, including Métis. It brings people together in community. It brings us out on the land. It makes us feel gratitude. It is extremely important to our identity as Métis people. The lack of connection to the land and our food attributes to health problems, including physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional."⁵⁴

In addition, Métis must consider the cost of fuel when obtaining or accessing food. About 82% of Métis rely on a personal vehicle for transportation. As gas prices in BC remain high compared to other provinces in Canada, Métis must consider all costs that go into buying and accessing food. This is especially important for the almost 30% of Métis who must travel over 30 minutes or over 50 kilometres to access nutritious food. The costs of obtaining a Possession and Acquisition License (PAL), CORE training, and hunting and fishing licenses may create additional financial barriers for Métis people.

Canning and the preservation of foods are practices that support longer-term food sustainability. These practices are helpful when preparing for natural disasters, pandemics, or food emergencies, but are impacted by food

costs and lack of knowledge transference. According to MNBC's Climate Change and Food Access Survey, the two biggest barriers to canning and preserving food among Métis people in BC are lack of knowledge (28%) and the cost of supplies (18%).

The cost and availability of food, as well as the way Métis practice subsistence behaviours, are impacted by climate change. For almost 80% of survey respondents, climate change is very to extremely important. In most cases, these respondents have seen the impacts of climate change on their environment, including in their gardens and food availability in grocery stores.



Photo credit: L. Shaw, MNBC Ministry of Environmental Protection, Agriculture, and Food Sovereignty

Looking toward the future, one-quarter of Métis (25%) were confident that their communities did *not* have plans to monitor climate-related outcomes such as chronic illness, food insecurity, and climate anxiety. An additional 42% were unsure if their community had made any plans.

As food insecurity, climate change, and COVID-19 persist, government and community leaders are served well to listen to the lived experience of Métis to help combat these issues. Following are several suggestions for improving food security from anonymous Métis respondents to the MNBC Climate Change and Food Access Survey:

“Go into specific communities and find out their specific needs. Every community is different and there isn’t an approach that will work for all. Work with Chartered Community presidents to find the best solutions. I would also like to see... modern gardening ideas such as food forests in communities.”

“I think it’s a great idea to teach people how to garden and preserve food. However, I think it’s important to recognize this will not be accessible for all people, so ensuring there is a food system in place which can help people in urban, rural, or remote communities access nutritious foods would be beneficial. Perhaps partnering with grocery stores (similar to Loop program) to make food hampers full of nutritious food that is otherwise going to be thrown away—possibly having these food hampers handed out at Chartered Communities or shipped to people.”

“Métis Community kitchens & cupboards for low-income families & Elders. Teaching families & Elders how to make healthy meals on fixed incomes.”

“Work together with First Nation people to gain a better understanding of what Métis people can do to be good guests on the lands our people lodge on. Work with knowledge keepers to record knowledge that can then be distributed. Develop programming to teach traditional practices, with priority for youth in/from care or who do not otherwise have opportunities to learn from family. Create capacity within chartered communities to run programming, and preserve and store food. Continue to advocate for equity for Métis people in all areas of society. Invest in wide-spread good food boxes. Develop programming to provide grocery hampers, or partner with a chain store to provide gift cards for Métis people struggling with groceries.”⁵⁴

Métis Nation British Columbia K–12 School Food Survey

In fall 2022, MNBC’s Ministry of Education surveyed Métis Citizens and self-identifying Métis in BC on the school food needs and nutritional literacy of K–12 families.^e

Echoing the Métis food needs highlighted throughout this report, the survey revealed that the number one barrier to food access for Métis K–12 families in the previous 12 months was the high cost of food (92%). In addition, most respondents access foods at “big box” stores such as Superstore and Walmart (89%), as well as grocery stores (64%). Traditional Métis subsistence activities, such as harvesting (16.8%), were practiced at lesser rates.⁵⁵ This reliance on stores to access foods places Métis families in difficult food environments where healthy, traditional foods are less accessible.

Overall, Métis families would prefer to use local resources in BC (e.g., local food producers, community gardens) and move away from processed foods. There is also a desire for more opportunities to discuss traditional foods with Elders, in community, and in schools.⁵⁵ The food experiences of Métis K–12 families in BC speak to the larger picture of Métis food (in)security and food as medicine in the province.

^e “K–12 families” refers to Métis families with at least one child attending school between Kindergarten and Grade 12. MNBC plans to publish a report on the K–12 School Food Survey in 2023/2024, at which point survey findings will be accessible to the public.



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Equity Considerations

“In addition to [providing support for other community members, including] a young family and a cancer patient, we have been proud to have been able to provide assistance to our Elders. When we did our telephone wellness calls in the early stages of the pandemic we were under the impression that our seniors had good food security and their prescription medicine requirements well in hand. That optimism, as conveyed to us, may have been due to seniors having too much pride to admit they needed assistance. Seniors did have side jobs that they used to augment their incomes. Seniors were also dependent on family members to provide a little extra every month. As the pandemic continued these sources of help became less dependable and the actual need became apparent.”

— Waceya Métis Society (Langley), reporting on MNBC COVID supports⁵¹

As discussed in this report, inequities related to food security and food as medicine may affect certain populations disproportionately, including women, children, Elders, lone-parent families, 2SLGBTQQIA+ people, people with lower incomes, people with diverse abilities, and people in urban centres, as well as those living in rural, remote, isolated, and/or northern communities. These inequities are the result of settler colonialism, sex and gender discrimination, ableism, and other complex socio-economic factors.

What Métis Nation British Columbia is Doing to Address Food (In)Security

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“The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light the real and long-standing issue of food security in our society. The ability to create new initiatives that help make communities more self-sufficient, like the launch of Métis Nation British Columbia’s new Home Gardening Pilot Project, is the first step in addressing some of the gaps that exist. As we slowly emerge from the pandemic, we must not lose sight of the importance of these investments, and how critical they are for creating healthy and self-sufficient communities.”

— Lissa Dawn Smith, President,
Métis Nation British Columbia⁵⁶

For Métis in British Columbia, food insecurity has been increasing in recent years and has been further exacerbated by COVID-19. The MNBC Board of Directors and community members have identified food security as a key priority to focus future initiatives. MNBC developed and launched the Home Garden Pilot Project (HGPP) in response to requests for Métis people to be more self-sufficient in food security. The project was supported through the Indigenous Services Canada (ISC) COVID-19 needs-based funding and included 100 Métis households throughout the province. Participants received seed kits and a small grant to purchase soil and tools. In a post-program survey, 82% of respondents felt that their garden contributed to food security in their household. Some other benefits listed included quality time spent with family, stress relief and benefits to mental health, less money spent on produce, food for the winter, and learning culture.

Due to the success of the HGPP, it has continued as the Home Garden Program, supporting 150 households with more seeds and a gardening manual in 2022 (the gardening manual is available online: <https://www.mnbc.ca/home-garden-program-manual>). The Home Garden Program launched a monthly gardening resource newsletter in February 2022, and has grown to support 300 Métis households in 2023. MNBC aims to keep building its gardening network.

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“Unable to access the rivers much this year due to covid restrictions. In need of new fishing rod \$250-\$400. Also in need of dehydrator for future chanterelle harvest season \$250.”

— Community member talking about MNBC COVID supports⁴²

Through other ISC COVID funds, MNBC also launched a harvester relief fund. Métis harvesters and land users who were not able to harvest, access the land, or purchase required gear or licenses due to COVID-19, either directly or through the unintended consequences of COVID-19 (such as loss of employment, increased costs of fuel, taking care of family members who were sick or immunocompromised, etc.), were able to access a small grant to assist with the purchase of harvesting supplies or food. Items included, but were not limited to, butchering of wild game, fishing rods, fishing tackles, fishing lures and bait, ammunition, freezer costs, seeds, gardening tools, and soils. For more information, see www.mnbc.ca/work-programs/programs-services/harvesting-and-id-cards. In December 2021, 1,300 pounds of food were distributed to one of MNBC’s Métis Chartered Communities as part of a Christmas Food Hamper pilot initiative.

Considerations for Further Action

This section provides considerations for action based on the findings of this report. These are not formal recommendations, but rather ideas to consider when shaping recommendations and actions related to this topic.

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“One very interesting response that we heard and particularly from elders and larger families is how much they appreciated receiving the gift certificates from the butcher shop because they said they rarely purchased meat because it is so expensive.”

— MIKI'SIW Métis Association (Comox Valley), reporting on MNBC COVID supports⁵⁷

- Develop a combination of immediate, mid-range, and longer-term strategies to address severe food shortages and emergency situations (immediate need) in Métis communities while also promoting intermediate and longer-term sustainability.
- Provide funding and support for Métis-led food security/food as medicine work. Funding programs should follow distinctions-based principles, including Métis-specific funding to support the challenges of food insecurity.
- Establish mechanisms for governments to work with Métis people and communities to find real, sustainable, culturally appropriate solutions that address the root causes of food insecurity and promote food as medicine.
- Establish strategies to increase food security and access to food as medicine that build on community strengths and values (e.g., looking out for one another, kinship networks, the cultural importance of food-sharing), promote self-determination, and reflect the diverse priorities and needs of distinct communities.
- Develop long-term solutions that address root causes and do not rely on short-term funding—*sustainable* solutions.

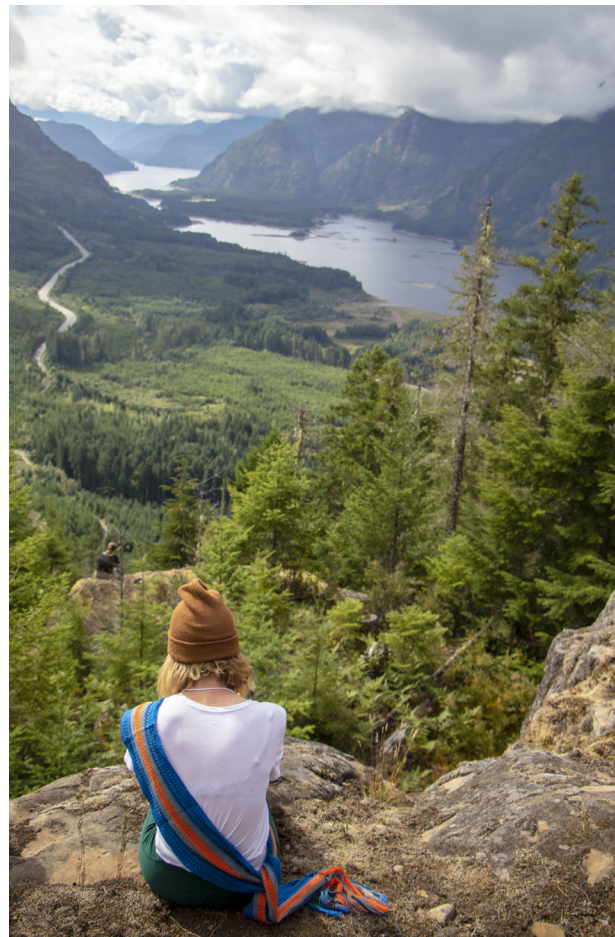


Photo credit: L. Shaw, MNBC Ministry of Environmental Protection, Agriculture, and Food Sovereignty

- Incorporate a focus on climate change into food security and food as medicine initiatives and planning.
- Support internal capacity-building within the Métis Nation to better determine, and then meet, the unique needs of each Métis community.
- BC is a large and geographically diverse province, with varying access to foods and resources, as well as diverse growing conditions and subsequent access to fresh food. Food security policies, programs, and services should be community/regionally specific. Additionally, Métis people have unique food security needs that need to be addressed distinctly from those of First Nations and Inuit.



Appendix A: Métis Nation British Columbia and Governance of Métis Data

Métis Nation British Columbia (MNBC) represents the Section 35 Rights^f of over 25,000 Métis Citizens registered with MNBC and advocates on behalf of the over 98,000 self-identified Métis in the province.

The Province supports the work of MNBC as a Governing Member of the Métis National Council, towards self-determination as part of the broader collective work of expressing the rights and interests of Métis people in Canada. MNBC is democratically mandated by its over 25,000 Métis citizens to hold the Citizenship Registry and related data for Métis in the province.

As the Métis Government in BC, MNBC has a mandate to create opportunities for Métis people, communities, and children to flourish. MNBC works to ensure access to a range of programs and services to bridge socio-economic gaps and increase overall well-being for Métis in BC. This mandate is driven and upheld via a democratic process overseeing the election of the MNBC Board, which is comprised of seven (7) Elected Regional Directors, the elected representative for the Métis Women of British Columbia, the elected representative of the Métis Youth of British Columbia, the President, and the Vice President for a total of eleven (11) Members.

Métis Nation British Columbia Provincial Agreements

MNBC and the Province of BC signed a Métis Nation Relationship Accord in 2006 and renewed the agreement in 2016, which set out objectives to address health, housing, education, economic opportunities, children and families, information sharing, justice, wildlife stewardship, Métis identification and data collection, as well as any opportunities for engaging in a tripartite relationship with the federal government. A new Letter of Intent, signed in 2021, proposes a whole of government approach to Métis relations as a partnership between MNBC and British Columbia that respects Métis self-determination and moving to a Reconciliation Agreement.

Canada's Métis Nation Accord

On April 13, 2017, Prime Minister Trudeau, the MNC President, and the Presidents of the MNC Governing Members signed the Canada-Métis Nation Accord during the first Métis Nation-Crown Summit in Ottawa. The Accord marks a significant step towards a renewed government-to-government relationship based on recognition of rights, respect, cooperation, and partnership. It outlines the ways in which the Government of Canada and the MNC and its Governing Members will work together to set priorities and develop policy in areas of shared interest.

^f Section 35 of Canada's *Constitution Act, 1982*, recognizes and affirms the Aboriginal and Treaty Rights of Indigenous Peoples (First Nations, Métis, and Inuit) in Canada.

Appendix B: Data and Methodology Notes

BC COVID-19 Survey on Population Experiences, Action, and Knowledge (SPEAK) Data

The BC COVID-19 SPEAK was funded by the BCCDC Foundation for Public Health. Data from self-identified Métis respondents were provided to Métis Nation British Columbia for this report. The SPEAK data in this report are from the first two rounds of the survey: Round 1 was conducted from May 12–31, 2020, early on in the pandemic, and Round 2 was conducted from April 8 to May 9, 2021, just over a year from when the public health response measures began in March 2020. The total of Métis respondents for SPEAK Round 1 was 6,384 and for Round 2 it was 3,065. However, in the analysis of the data, incomplete responses could not be analyzed, so each reported question reflects a smaller fraction of these voices.

Public SPEAK data and methodology notes are accessible here: <http://www.bccdc.ca/health-professionals/data-reports/bc-covid-19-speak-dashboard>. Further notes regarding SPEAK methodology are available here: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.17269/s41997-022-00708-7>.⁵⁸



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