



# HUNGER

## Food Insecurity In Algoma

In the sense that everyone knows what hunger is, we have all felt a part of what food insecurity is. Hunger, an unpleasant feeling that our body experiences, is definitely a part of food insecurity. Fortunately, most of us experience hunger for a brief period of time and then go to the fridge or order out or drive to a restaurant and relief of hunger comes quickly. Imagine that when you experience hunger that your fridge is empty and you have no access to money or credit cards for the next few days. You now have food insecurity and what if this situation of being hungry but lacking access to food was an ongoing reality in your life?

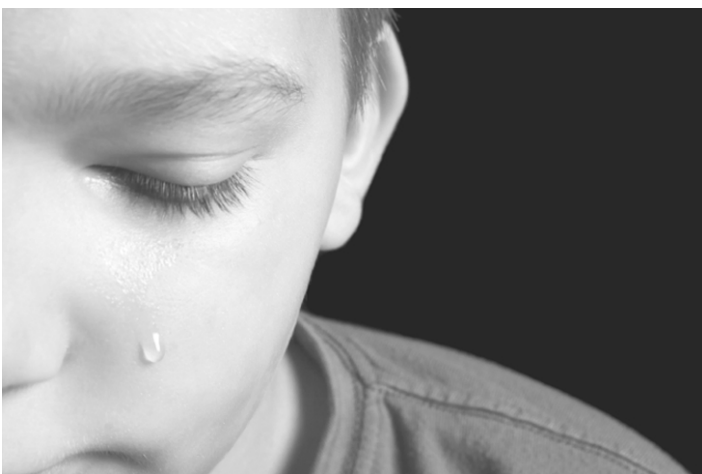
Too little food and insufficient nutritious food affects the health and wellbeing of people in Algoma. Hungry children do not learn well and hungry adults do not function as well as they could on the job or as parents.

Are food banks the solution to food insecurity? Food banks are prevalent in Canada and very much help to address hunger but food banks do not provide a good long term remedy to food insecurity.

Hunger and poverty go hand in hand. To move out of poverty people need decent and affordable housing, a sustainable income from paid work and a supportive social network. These are elements of the social determinants of health that need to be addressed.

Social policies need to be put in place by all levels of government to ensure a society in which everyone can participate fully in an environment where there is secure access to healthy food and housing.

**Dr. A.A. Northan**  
Medical Officer of Health  
Algoma Health Unit



## Thankful - One Mother's Food Bank Experience

Written by a mother who resides in Algoma and wishes to remain anonymous.

I sit looking outside my window at this beautiful day. Thankful that today exists. There was a time not so long ago that I never thought I would see or feel this way. Actually at that time I wished I could not feel. Life was really not pleasant for those years, nor what I had ever imagined it would be...

At the time I was a 27 year old single mom with two babies under 2 years and I had broken the ties to a very abusive relationship. Alone and out of work now since I was let go because I had to have emergency surgery and my employer did not want to wait the 8 weeks of recovery time. So there I was with stitches the width of my abdomen and two hungry babies.

My welfare cheque had just come in and I spent it on rent, some bills and diapers. I still had two weeks to go before the baby bonus came in and with that I had to pay the rest of the bills. I had not eaten anything in two days. I just drank water and tea. I breastfed and made my own baby food from whatever food I had in the fridge. I was tired, mostly from lack of food and my surgery; and I had only \$7.38 left. I was hungry and what I did have in the fridge and freezer would not last until the baby bonus.

So I would have to go to the food bank.. I was dreading doing this. I was so embarrassed. Imagine me, a college grad with three certificates and excellent references, going to the food bank. But I had no choice. I hated not having a choice. So on the bus I went with the two babies, as if we were going downtown shopping or to a park somewhere.

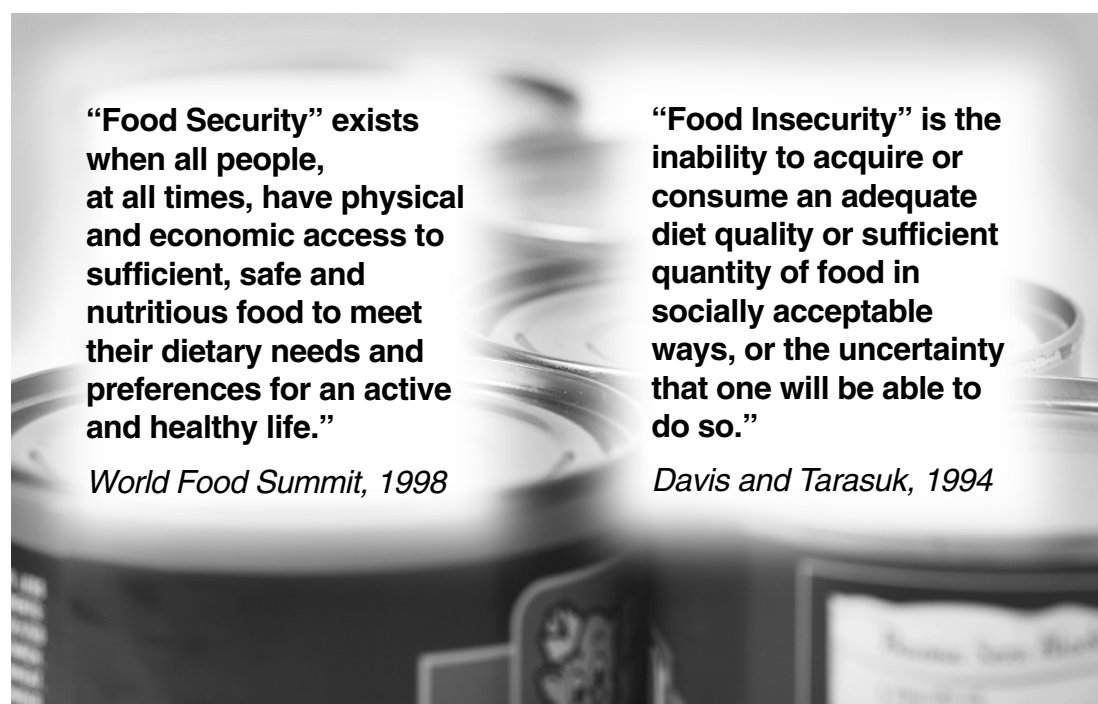
I wished so hard for that to be the case.

Since I had never been, I had to ask the bus driver to let me know where the stop was. I felt like everyone knew where I was going. Then I got off feeling very ashamed of myself and wondering how

I ever got to this point. I do not drink or do any kind of drugs. I wasn't even taking the medication the doctor had prescribed for me after my surgery. I do not gamble and I come from a professional family background.

I walked down the street towards the local food bank feeling on the verge of tears but I knew if I cried it would not change a thing. I probably wouldn't be able to stop once I started. I became more and more angry with my situation the closer I got to the door. I considered going back home, I felt disgusting inside. But I needed to eat, to live, my children were depending on me. To live, I opened the door, went to the counter where I was greeted by a lady who obviously had been doing this for a long time.

She was a little cold and abrupt. She asked me to provide ID and proof of income ...like I had to prove I was poor. I felt like saying just come to my home and check the darn fridge! Check my bills! I HAVE DONE EVERYTHING I COULD NOT TO BE HERE LADY!!! But I did not ...I needed food. I followed her directions and then waited for what seemed like forever. Then my name was called loudly. I was embarrassed now. Everyone knew who I was. I went to the counter and they handed me four grocery bags. I thanked them very much. I wanted to run. I put the grocery bags on the handles of the stroller and again picked up my son and began the walk to the bus



**"Food Security" exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and preferences for an active and healthy life."**

*World Food Summit, 1998*

**"Food Insecurity" is 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."**

*Davis and Tarasuk, 1994*

stop. I ripped a few stitches pushing my stroller or maybe it was from carrying my son. I was not supposed to do either for eight weeks. I was bleeding and in pain. After what seemed to be another eternity the bus arrived. I had a terrible time trying to get on and I felt the other riders' impatience.

Sitting there waiting for my bus stop, I felt like everyone knew what I had just done. How could they not, all the different tattered bags with canned goods inside. The expression on my face must have been like a neon sign. I felt sick to my stomach...finally my stop.

I got off the bus as fast as I could and went into my subsidized townhouse. I put away the groceries mainly carbs and cans full of sodium and sugar. This would not be beneficial for the medical conditions we have. No milk except for powder that was enough for half a day. But I was going to eat, that I was thankful for. I fed the kids and put them down for a nap. I made a cup of tea and sat on the couch and sobbed. I knew I would have to do this again. This was only the beginning of what needed to be done.

## Amber's Story

Amber's co-worker had to drive her to the hospital because she passed out at work this afternoon.

**But why did she pass out?**  
Because she has been skipping meals.

**But why does she skip meals?**  
Because she doesn't have much food in her house.

**But why doesn't she get more food to eat?**  
Because she only has \$30 left until her next paycheck and she doesn't have a way to get to the grocery store, which is pretty far from her house.

**But why is the grocery store so far away?**  
Because the grocery store that was a five minute walk from her house closed down when the big superstore opened a few miles away.

**But why doesn't she just drive to the new store?**  
Because her car broke down a few months ago and she can't afford to get it fixed.

**But why doesn't she have enough money for food and transportation?**  
Because she's a single parent and she only works part-time.

**But why doesn't she work more hours?**  
Because she can't find affordable childcare for the whole day.

**But why doesn't she have a family member or friend help her out with childcare?**  
Because she moved to the city away from her family and doesn't know many people yet.

**But why did she move to the city?**  
Because there aren't many jobs in her hometown since the mill closed down.

**But why did the mill close down?**  
Because there was no longer a demand for their product and the company was losing money.

**But why....?**

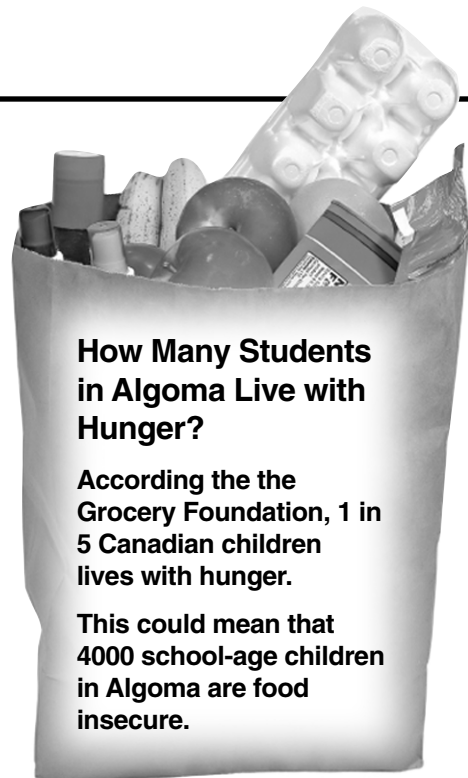
*Adapted from: The Food Security Projects of the Nova Scotia Nutrition Council and Atlantic Health Promotion Research Centre, Dalhousie University, 2006.*



## Algoma Student Nutrition Program

- 39 schools in the Algoma District (Hornepayne, Wawa, Sault Ste. Marie, Laird, Blind River, Elliot Lake, Spanish and Serpent River) are providing either breakfast, lunch or snack programs to students through the Algoma Family Services Student Nutrition Program funded by the Ministry of Child and Youth Services.
- Over \$90,000 was granted in 2005-2006, serving 138,484 meals to 4,207 students.

*Julie Torcaso, Student Nutrition Program Coordinator, Algoma Family Services*



**How Many Students in Algoma Live with Hunger?**

**According to the the Grocery Foundation, 1 in 5 Canadian children lives with hunger.**

**This could mean that 4000 school-age children in Algoma are food insecure.**

## Giving Back A Soup Kitchen Volunteer

Jean has been volunteering with the Soup Kitchen for a while now in order to "give back" to those who have helped her. At 57 years old, this proud grandmother has had



to turn to the Soup Kitchen to help meet her food needs because her limited income from the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) is often just enough to cover her living expenses. Jean reported having a monthly income of \$945, out of which she pays \$450 in rent, plus \$300 for utilities.

Along with the few other basic living expenses which include her regular monthly telephone and basic cable charges, these expenses quickly add up to an amount almost equal to the disability income she receives. On top of this, Jean has been taking care of her six year old grandson since his birth because his mother is unable to properly care for her son. Although Jean receives a monthly federal child tax benefit to supplement her disability income, Jean is still unable to meet their food needs without accessing the Soup Kitchen's food bank and daily hot meals. She receives a bag of groceries in return for her efforts each day that she volunteers at the centre. Jean stated, "without this food, I don't know what I would eat. Things are very hard on disability. People think that those of us on disability have so much money, but all the time expenses go up, and our cheques

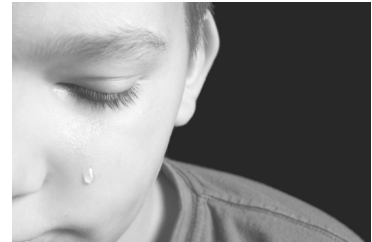
don't. I don't drink, I don't gamble, I don't waste my money, yet I still don't have enough money for food."

Beyond just helping with food needs, Jean reported that the Soup Kitchen has helped her feel less isolated. She revealed that often she feels that because she is older, she gets treated differently. "I worked all my life. I ran my own housekeeping business and employed people," she said. Speaking on behalf of others that she knows who experience the same difficulties she stated, "I feel like we don't get respect. We are pushed aside. We are poor." Jean disclosed that she appreciates deeply the respect and appreciation she gets from staff and other volunteers at the Soup Kitchen Community Centre. When asked why she is so enthusiastic about her volunteering, Jean commented, "When I am there, I feel like I am worth something and that I have something to give. I've never just wanted a handout."

*Written by: Miranda Mayhew, Community Economic and Social Development Program - Algoma University College*



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### Lisa's Story: Making Plans for a Better Future

Lisa is a 24 year old single mother with a three year old boy. They live with her mother. She has been involved with the Indian Friendship Centre (IFC) youth program since it began seven years ago. Lisa was working part time there in a 6 month position at the time of interview. She was also busy distributing resumes to secure employment before her contract position expired. Lisa's resume is riddled with part time jobs, employment that does not provide Lisa with the income she needs to pay for her son to attend a quality daycare centre. Lisa expressed relief that her mother provides childcare while she is working.

For many years Lisa has worked to help out her mother with the household bills and to keep the family's car on the road. Her first full time job was at a coffee shop, a position she held for eight months.

Most customers Lisa interacted with were friendly and courteous, however, Lisa encountered customers who behaved negatively towards her by making inappropriate racist comments against her aboriginal background and treating her with disrespect. Despite Lisa's frequent requests to the manager, these issues were not addressed. Although Lisa and her son really needed the \$600 she was bringing home every second week, she could not tolerate the degrading attitudes and treatment so she resigned just before the holiday season. Lisa was not able to find another job for six months and this is when Lisa and her family began experiencing problems not having enough money to buy food. "The hardest part was trying to make it through the holidays," said Lisa. "Being a single mom with no income and no support from the baby's father, I had to do something.

I did not want to become dependant on social assistance. That's like the expectation for people like me, a young native mom with no money - to be a welfare bum."

Lisa disclosed that recently she has had to "hit the local food bank every now and then for food." She commented that some encounters with certain emergency food services have been humiliating, but she "swallows her pride" so her son has enough to eat. She is in the process of toilet-training her son, and the diapers and disposable training pants are quite expensive. "There is a milk program at the Indian Friendship Centre every Friday, which is very helpful," she added.



Lisa is determined to find a job and provide for her son and assist her mother. "I was not too worried about myself, just my son. I hate

asking family for money. They are supportive, but it's an issue of pride." Lisa commented that her son "got really tired of eating pasta. He's a veggie baby; he would rather eat salad and chopped veggies than anything. I have often gone without eating to make sure my son eats, and sometimes even that is not enough to provide him with the fresh fruit and vegetables he loves."

Lisa's ambition for the future is to enroll in the Esthetician Program at Sault College. She says, "with the right skills and my own drive to make things work for my family, I will work to make sure my son has everything he needs to grow up to be healthy and happy."

*Written by: Miranda Mayhew, Community Economic and Social Development Program - Algoma University College*

### Nutrition and Food Security Facts

#### Food Didn't Last

• 11% of mothers in Algoma responded at least "sometimes" that in the last 12 months, "the food we bought just didn't last and we didn't have money to get more."

#### Eat Balanced Meals

• 9% of mothers in Algoma reported at least sometimes that, "in the last 12 months we couldn't afford to eat balanced meals."

#### Mothers Ate Less Food

• 7% of mothers in Algoma reported that they "ate less than they felt they should because there wasn't enough money to buy food."

#### Hungry Due to Lack of Food

• 4% of mothers in Algoma reported that in the last 12 months they "were hungry because they couldn't afford enough food."

#### Food Bank Usage

• 3% of mothers in Algoma reported that they "used a food bank in the last 12 months."

*Northern Ontario Perinatal and Child Health Survey, 2002*

#### Pregnant Women in Algoma Need Help to Eat Nutritiously

• 25% of all pregnant women in Sault Ste. Marie and 30 to 45% of pregnant women in the rest of Algoma access the Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program to get help with milk and food because they cannot afford to eat nutritiously.

#### Breastfeeding Helps Infants be Food Secure

• Formula feeding an infant for 6 months can cost up to \$2000. Breastfeeding for a year would help ensure that there was enough money for food for the whole family.

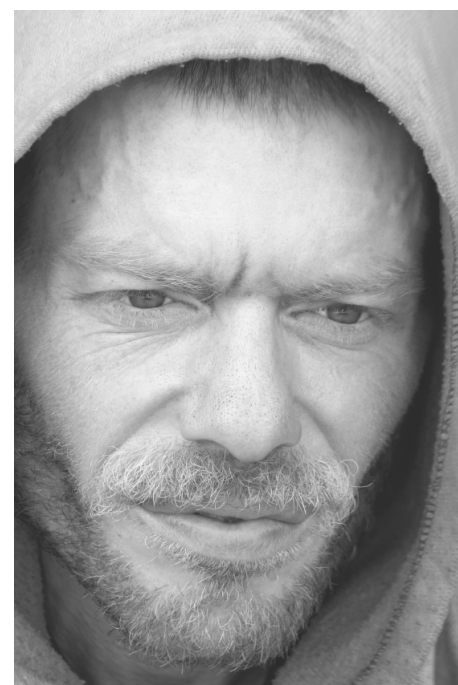
*INFACT Canada*

### Getting to Eat Every Day

Ben celebrated his 45th birthday at the Soup Kitchen Community Centre. The centre has been instrumental in Ben's life since 1982 when he became unemployed and began treatment for a medical condition that has left him collecting a disability pension. For the eight years before his condition was medically recognized, Ben had been forced to depend on social assistance for his income. When asked what he would have done had the centre not existed through those difficult years Ben remarked, "I would have starved."

Ben supplements the food he buys at the grocery store with canned and dry goods from the centre's food bank. He also attends the centre every weekday for the hot meal. Ben has been coming to the Soup Kitchen Community Centre since it opened. Some things have changed since then. "It was better when it was open at 8:30 in the morning. People need that especially in the winter. It's so cold outside. Sometimes I need this place,

otherwise I wouldn't eat," he commented. Currently the centre opens at 10:30 am. Ben also has the Good Food Box delivered to his house once a month. "The fruit and vegetables last about a week, just enough to make it until the first of the month," he said.



Ben receives \$745 per month through the Ontario Disability Support Program, out of which he pays \$250 for his living arrangements in a hotel room above a bar. There he has access to a shared bathroom, a television with basic cable, but no laundry facilities. Each month, the remainder of Ben's income goes to bills and to repaying the money he borrowed to get by the month before. "That's what it is like on disability. It's hard to catch up. If it weren't for the Soup Kitchen I wouldn't eat every day," he said.

*Written by: Miranda Mayhew, Community Social and Economic Development Student, Algoma University College*

### Tea and Toast Syndrome in the Elderly

Some seniors live on very little food. This is known as the Tea and Toast Syndrome.

#### Reasons Why Seniors Don't Eat Enough

- Fixed incomes.
- Loneliness and isolation, perhaps due to loss of spouse.
- Too much trouble to prepare meals.
- Medical conditions that make cooking difficult.
- Loss of appetite.
- Medications that affect taste and make food unappealing.
- Transportation difficulties in getting to grocery store.
- Don't like to ask for help or complain.

Not eating enough causes malnourishment that makes seniors frail, worsens medical conditions, increases disability, and extends hospital stays.



Having a social network of friends and family goes along way in promoting healthy eating and quality of life for seniors.

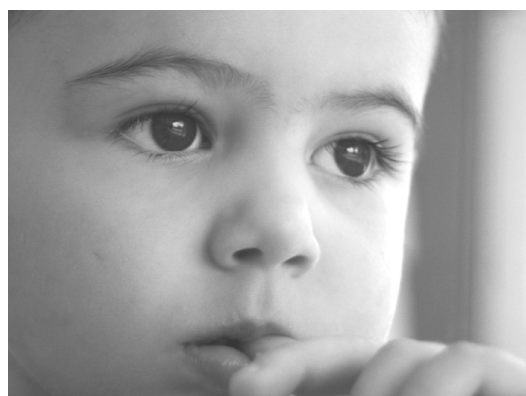
### Red Cross Community Kitchens Helping Families to Eat

- From January to December 2005, 258 adults and their children attended community kitchens.
- The number of meals prepared was 12,693.
- Mara DeFazio, Community Kitchen Coordinator, reports that "the largest influx of clients were from single income homes," where food shortages have forced people into situations such as "mom or dad not eating because kids need to eat first." She also reported that "the emphasis of the program is on empowering people through new skills."

*Canadian Red Cross, Sault Ste. Marie District Branch*



### Did you know that it costs \$558.83\* a month for a family of 4 to eat healthy foods?



- The Nutritious Food Basket is a standardized food costing tool done across Ontario that measures the cost of eating well.
- Algoma Health Unit's 2006 survey results indicate that a family of 4 needs \$558.83\* a month for food.
- After paying rent, utilities and other expenses, many families do not have enough left over to buy enough healthy food to last the month.

\* This does not include money for convenience foods, personal hygiene, or cleaning products.

### You Can Make a Difference

#### Short Term Help

- Donate food or money to your local food bank, soup kitchen or school meal or snack program.
- Volunteer at your local food bank or soup kitchen or neighbourhood school nutrition program.
- Plan a neighbourhood garage sale and donate the proceeds to an organization who deals with emergency food.
- Organize a food drive at your church, school, office or building.
- Sponsor a family for the Good Food Box program. Volunteer to help pack or deliver the boxes.

#### Build Skills and Support

- Make use of your cooking skills. Help run a community kitchen or cooking class.
- Plant a garden. Donate extra fruits and vegetables to your local food bank.
- Share your gardening talents. Help plant a local community garden.
- Teach the children in your life how to cook.
- Support and encourage breastfeeding.

#### Change the System

- Buy foods from your local farmers' market.
- Join a local community supported agriculture group.
- When shopping in your grocery store, check to see where food comes from and buy food produced in areas as close to home as possible.
- Tell the store manager that you are interested in buying more local foods.
- Join a community organization that supports hunger and agriculture issues.
- Support and advocate for breastfeeding policies in public places.
- Advocate with your municipal, provincial and federal government representatives about what they are doing towards making sure families have enough food to eat.



ALGOMA HEALTH UNIT



Offices located in:

**Blind River**

**Elliot Lake**

**Sault Ste. Marie**

**Wawa**

*for healthier communities*

visit our website at [www.ahu.on.ca](http://www.ahu.on.ca)

Email us at [comments@ahu.on.ca](mailto:comments@ahu.on.ca) or call at 705-541-7158