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Systemic Deficiency:

Issues with Food Security in Northern Ontario

Northern Ontario Insights Series

By: Kerem Karabeyoğlu

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NPI would like to acknowledge the First Peoples on whose traditional territories we live and work. NPI is grateful for the opportunity to have our offices located on these lands and thank all the generations of people who have taken care of this land.

Our main offices:

- Thunder Bay on Robinson-Superior Treaty territory and the land is the traditional territory of the Anishnaabeg and Fort William First Nation.
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- Kirkland Lake is on the Robinson-Huron Treaty territory and the land is the traditional territory of Cree, Ojibway, and Algonquin Peoples, as well as Beaverhouse First Nation.
- Each community is home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples.

We recognize and appreciate the historic connection that Indigenous peoples have to these territories. We support their efforts to sustain and grow their nations. We also recognize the contributions that they have made in shaping and strengthening local communities, the province, and Canada.

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Born and raised in Istanbul, Turkey, Kerem graduated in 2021 from the University of Western Ontario with a B.A. in Political Science. During his studies, Kerem developed a keen interest in the areas of Canadian Arctic Sovereignty and Intergovernmental Cooperation. His academic focus was also directed towards International Peace-building and Transitional Justice studies. Immediately after graduating, kerem returned to Turkey to intern as a Junior Consultant in the Turkish Parliament. Now, back in Canada, he is pursuing his professional interests in promoting long-term sustainable development. An avid trail runner, soccer fan, and skier, kerem is also passionate about producing music in his free time.



Executive Summary

In the Spring of 2022, regional experts in Northern Ontario were interviewed to build a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities regarding the areas of food security, homelessness, mental health and addiction, immigration-migration, physician recruitment, and post-secondary education. The results of these key informant interviews led to unique insights into the state of these five subjects in Northern Ontario and highlighted the best avenues to address their challenges.

The insights received from experts are instrumental and shed light on the current conditions in the field. Learning from the individuals who have worked with and within local communities reveals opportunities to address these issues.

Findings primarily indicate a need for new policy strategies that effectively and holistically address some common issues:

1. Homelessness, mental health and addictions—alongside a lack of affordable housing, the transition between rehabilitation services or a correctional facility to life in society needs to be improved. Finally, a more collaborative approach with shared electronic records could yield a more effective and encompassing delivery of services;
2. Immigration—there is a lack of affordable housing for newcomers and a low retention rate in Northern Ontario. Additionally, the region needs to be better marketed to newcomers in order to address the existing labour shortages and high retirement rates;
3. Post-secondary institutions—in Northern Ontario suffer from a lack of funding generated by a freeze in tuition and funding levels. That is also true for Indigenous institutions, hampering their growth and stabilization. The attraction of international students has improved, but communities need to be welcoming to further attract and retain international students;
4. Food security—it has often been associated with food waste. However, insights suggest that income disparities are a more significant determinant of food insecurity. Moreover, having food that fits cultural preferences and nutritional needs is of the utmost importance. Furthermore, Indigenous land-based knowledge and self-determination present opportunities to address food security.
5. Physician recruitment—more funding and revised service agreements are needed to make health care jobs in Northern Ontario more attractive to newcomers, aligning financial incentives with position opportunities in smaller communities. As well, health professionals lack a better work-life balance, which hampers the attraction of more recent graduates to the region.

In sum, this series of insights highlighted some challenges that are perceived in Northern Ontario. However, these challenges also come with opportunities on which policymakers can act to improve the economy and quality of life in Northern Ontario.



Introduction

Good public policymaking does not happen in isolation. There are many individuals, organizations, and institutions that can – and do – provide valuable insight to decision-makers every day. As such, in the spring of 2022, Northern Policy Institute interviewed regional experts about the opportunities and challenges that exist for Northern Ontario in five different areas: food security; homelessness, mental health, and addiction; immigration-migration; physician recruitment; and postsecondary education. The results of these interviews can help inform new decision makers in the provincial and municipal governments.

Of course, policy advice does not stop there. Continuing to hear and learn from experts and other residents is important in ensuring that policies and programs are appropriate for Northern Ontario's regions and communities from Timmins to Sachigo Lake First Nation to Powassan and everywhere in between.



Food Security

In communities such as Sault Ste. Marie, public transportation continues to be a problem. Deron Barlow, community outreach and warehouse manager at United Way Sault Ste. Marie & Algoma District, highlighted the difficulties that transportation issues continue to cause within the urban area and how they affect food security in regions of Northern Ontario: "Alongside rising food costs, we have to realize that to even get to a supermarket downtown with public transportation takes around two hours." Given that the aging population of Sault Ste. Marie is more reliant on public transportation, the lack of access increases the threat of food insecurity among a higher proportion of the population.

Food insecurity does not correlate to the lack of food. Instead, Charles Levkoe, PhD, Canada Research Chair in Equitable and Sustainable Food Systems and Associate Professor at Lakehead University, indicated that "food insecurity is a problem of inequity and poverty." Alongside this root problem, Dr. Levkoe highlighted that the high food prices in Northern Ontario cause further strain on the economy especially for those already struggling to make ends meet. "There is some money in the North, but things like fresh vegetables are very expensive or are lacking in grocery stores." Food prices have recently been increasing and it is concerning to see that staple food prices, such as that of flour, have increased drastically. Dr. Levkoe also pointed to the fact that "food waste is not the main issue. Most people highlight food waste as a leading cause of food insecurity but this is not the case." More focus needs to be directed toward improving income disparities among the populations of Northern Ontario and Canada to combat food insecurity.

It is also important to note that food security is largely connected to having the right types of food for everyone in the population. For example, the lack of halal food options for Muslims within a community will undoubtedly increase the burden on these families to acquire those items from more expensive sources. Similarly, food security is also about having the right variety of foods for a community. In many cases, the lack of nutritional variety can be a cause of nutritional deficiencies, even if the overall caloric intake meets the required standards. This can be seen especially in First Nations communities. McGill University's Centre for Indigenous People's Nutrition and the Environment (CINE) noted that "Indigenous Peoples are among the most marginalized and disadvantaged populations in both developed and developing countries. With cultural homelands in the most rural areas of developing regions, they experience common problems in relation to their traditional food systems, food security and health" (CINE).

A key area of concern, especially for First Nations communities in Northern Ontario, is the lack of traditional knowledge practices and the loss of skills over time. "There are opportunities to address the rising food security concerns through a lot of the Indigenous land-based knowledge as well as support for self-determination," commented Dr. Levkoe. Carolyn Hepburn, the dean of Indigenous studies and upgrading at Sault College, noted that food security is a serious public health issue for Indigenous peoples in Northern Ontario communities such as Fort Albany that are only accessible by planes and winter roads. Additionally, she noted that "looking at the cost of food, I don't understand how people are surviving in many ways. Investing in vulnerable community members is the way forward." The revival of traditional food practices is a great opportunity to move toward higher levels of food security for Indigenous community members and the general population of Northern Ontario. "Coordination is key," said Hepburn. "Investment of time and key resources and staying in touch with the right players is important for progress on this issue. Non-profits are dependent on a lot, and within the current situation, unfortunately, the support they receive is not meeting overall demand."

Dr. Levkoe identified basic universal income as vital in addressing food insecurity among the community members of Northern Ontario. Rising food prices and a lack of transportation within communities have created a perfect storm that necessitates such a policy. A basic universal income could provide the support that the community members need during uncertain economic periods.



Reference

McGill. "CINE Indigenous Peoples' Food Systems for Health Promotion: Global Health." Centre for Indigenous People's Nutrition and Environment. Accessed April 20th <https://www.mcgill.ca/cine/research/global>.



About Northern Policy Institute

Northern Policy Institute is Northern Ontario's independent, evidence-driven think tank. We perform research, analyze data, and disseminate ideas. Our mission is to enhance Northern Ontario's capacity to take the lead position on socio-economic policy that impacts our communities, our province, our country, and our world.

We believe in partnership, collaboration, communication, and cooperation. Our team seeks to do inclusive research that involves broad engagement and delivers recommendations for specific, measurable action. Our success depends on our partnerships with other entities based in or passionate about Northern Ontario.

Our permanent offices are in Thunder Bay, Sudbury, and Kirkland Lake. During the summer months we have satellite offices in other regions of Northern Ontario staffed by teams of Experience North placements. These placements are university and college students working in your community on issues important to you and your neighbours.

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