

**Food Insecurity and the Loss of Traditional Food Systems Among
Indigenous Families in Edmonton**

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Food insecurity is a significant issue affecting Indigenous families with young children in Edmonton, particularly as the ongoing colonial structures continue to shape patterns of economic inequality, cultural disruption, and marginalization. While food insecurity is often presented as a universal problem impacting low income families, its effects on Indigenous families must be understood through the historical loss of land, disruption of traditional food systems, and the breaking of cultural continuity. Traditional food gatherings such as hunting, fishing, berry harvesting, medicine gathering, and food sharing have always played a central role in Indigenous wellness. The breakdown of these systems have consequences not only for physical nutrition but also for identity, relationships, and community connection. For Indigenous families raising young children, food insecurity intersects with broader issues of trust, well being, and access to culturally safe early learning environments. This cross over influences not only children's development but also how families engage with early childhood educators and community programs. This paper I focus on the Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society as a local organization that addresses this issue, as well as examining the critical roles early childhood educators play in social justice advocacy and in creating cultures of belonging that support Indigenous children and families.

1. Identifying and Researching Community Experiences and Issues:

Food insecurity in Indigenous communities cannot be understood without recognizing the deep connections between land, culture, and food sovereignty. Traditional food systems provided more than nourishment for Indigenous communities, they supported relational, spiritual, emotional, and physical well being. Rountree and Smith (2016) describe Indigenous wellness using a relational worldview in which balance and interconnectedness are central. When

traditional food systems are disrupted, families lose access to not only to culturally grounded foods but also to the knowledge, identity, and intergenerational relationships that sustain well being. In Edmonton, many Indigenous families experience food insecurity at significantly higher rates than non-Indigenous families due to structural and socioeconomic inequities, with national estimates suggesting rates two to three times higher. Urban Indigenous families often face barriers such as low income, high food costs, transportation challenges, and limited access to culturally relevant foods. In Edmonton, current evidence shows that food insecurity is both widespread and increasing, particularly among families with young children. Edmonton's food Bank reported serving more than 75,000 individuals in 2023, with monthly demand reaching record highs, in early 2024, some months saw nearly 40,000 people receiving support.

(Edmonton's Food Bank, 2024). Provincial data reflect similar trends, recent surveys estimate that approximately 'one in five Alberta households experiences food insecurity (PROOF, 2023).

Indigenous families remain disproportionately affected, with national data consistently showing significantly higher rates of food insecurity among First Nations, Métis, and Inuit households compared to non-Indigenous households. (Statistics Canada, 2022). These conditions are compounded by the ongoing impacts of colonialism, which continue to influence Indigenous families ability to access land, participate in traditional food practices, and experience cultural continuity. The frequency of food insecurity among Indigenous families is also influenced by systemic discrimination and racial inequities. Escayg et al., (2017) argue that early childhood environments are not neutral spaces but are shaped by racialized social structures that privilege certain identities while marginalizing others. These inequalities extend into economic structures, housing, food access, and institutional relationships. Many Indigenous families experience intergenerational trauma rooted in residential schools, the Sixties Scoop, and ongoing child

welfare involvement, all of which have influenced traditional parenting, access to cultural knowledge, and relationships with institutions. For families with young children, food insecurity adds another layer of stress, affecting emotional well being, family relationships, and early learning participation. Food insecurity also affects how Indigenous families interact with early childhood educators. Huber et al., (2018) emphasize that Indigenous families' relationships with urban schools are shaped by historical mistrust, experiences of exclusion, and a desire for respectful, collaborative relationships. When families experience persistent food insecurity, this stress may influence attendance, engagement, and the ability to participate fully in early learning settings. Milne (2016) highlights that many Indigenous families enter school systems with fear and apprehension due to the past negative experiences with teachers. This fear may be intensified when families also navigate the daily stressors of meeting basic needs. Understanding these experiences is essential for educators seeking to build trust and support children effectively. Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society (2023) offers culturally grounded responses to the issue of food insecurity by centering Indigenous knowledge, community connection, and holistic support. Founded in 1994, Bent Arrow is an Indigenous governed organization in Edmonton that provides programs rooted in cultural sovereignty, ceremony, and Indigenous ways of knowing. The organization supports food security through cultural food programs, access to food hampers, community kitchens, youth cultural camps, and family support services that address the structural causes of food insecurity. By involving Elder, Knowledge Keepers, and land-based teachings, Bent Arrow addresses food insecurity not only as a nutritional issue but as a cultural and relational one. The organization's partnerships with local schools, food networks, and community programs strengthen its capacity to support Indigenous families while promoting long term healing and restoration of traditional food knowledge. Food insecurity has both short

and long term consequences from young Indigenous children. In the short term, it can affect cognitive development, emotional regulation, and the ability to engage in early learning environments. In the long term, persistent food insecurity contributes to poorer health outcomes, reduced academic achievement, and ongoing cycles of marginalization. These consequences highlight the importance of recognizing food insecurity as a critical issue that affects early childhood development and family well being. Understanding this issue through a culturally grounded lens is essential for educators, policymakers, and community organizations working to support Indigenous families in Edmonton.

2. The Role of the Educator: Social Justice, Policy, and Advocacy:

Early childhood educators play a central role in addressing food insecurity and supporting Indigenous families by engaging in social justice oriented practice. Since food insecurity among Indigenous families is rooted in systemic colonial inequities, educators must approach the issue not as an individual or family issue but as a reflection of structural injustice. This approach aligns with Escayg et al.,’s (2017) call for educators to adopt a anti-racist and anti-oppressive frameworks that critically examine how systems privilege some and marginalize others. Educators must understand the broader historical contexts shaping Indigenous families’ lives, including dispossession, forced assimilation, and ongoing racism, and recognize that these factors continue to influence families’ access to food, housing, income, and education. In advocating for policy and systemic change, educators can influence decisions at municipal, provincial, and national levels. This can involve participating in consultations on childcare and food access programs, advocating for culturally meaningful foods in early childhood learning settings, and supporting Indigenous-led policy recommendations. Educators can also build partnerships with community organizations like the Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society to

bring culturally grounded food education, land based learning, and community knowledge into childhood programs. By integrating these experiences into their advocacy, educators amplify Indigenous voices and contribute to shifting systems toward equity and reconciliation. Several educator led and educator partnered initiatives in Edmonton demonstrate how advocacy efforts can improve children's daily experiences and long term outcomes. One example is e4c's School Nutrition Program, which was developed in collaboration with educators to ensure consistent access to meals for students in high need neighborhoods. School personnel have reported measurable improvements in children's attention, emotional regulation, and readiness to learn following the implementation of daily breakfast and lunch programs (e4c, 2024). Additionally, collaborative projects such as the Indigenous School Food Circle brings together educators, Indigenous organizations, Elders, and public health professionals to advocate for school food systems that reflect Indigenous food and values. These partnerships have started shifting school meal planning toward greater cultural relevance and community involvement. Another essential aspect of advocacy involves supporting families directly. Hare and Anderson (2010) emphasize that Indigenous families' transitions into early childhood programs are shaped by historical experiences, cultural contexts, and the need for relational safety. When educators understand these dynamics, they can better support families navigating food insecurity, provide information about community resources, and ensure that children's basic needs are met in culturally respectful ways. Advocacy may also include supporting breakfast and snack programs within early learning centres, ensuring that food is accessible, nutritionally adequate, and reflective of cultural diversity. Milne (2016) also focuses on another important layer of educator responsibility as Indigenous families often arrive in schools with hesitancy or fear due to previous experiences of exclusion. Educators must actively dismantle these barriers by creating

environments in which Indigenous families feel respected, included, and safe to share their needs, including needs related to food insecurity. This work requires self reflection, cultural humility and a willingness to challenge institutional norms that may unintentionally reproduce harm. By practicing relational advocacy, educators can contribute to restoring trust and supporting families' engagement. Effective examples of early childhood educators advocacy include supporting Indigenous land based food programming, collaborating with Elders to teach traditional foods practices, and advocating for funding that supports access to culturally relevant foods. Educators can also participate in professional organizations, engage in policy discussions, and support the implementation of the Indigenous Early Learning and Childcare (IELCC) Framework (2018). Through these forms of advocacy, educators demonstrate commitment to equity and work toward systemic changes that support Indigenous children and families experiencing food insecurity.

3. The Role of the Educator: Creating a Culture of Belonging:

Creating a culture of belonging is foundational to early childhood practice, particularly for Indigenous children who may experience food insecurity and other systemic inequities. A culture of belonging is grounded in relationality, respect, cultural responsiveness, and strength based approaches. Huber et al., (2018) emphasizes that for Indigenous families, belonging in school environments is shaped by mutual respect, trust, and recognition of cultural identities. Educators must therefore build strong relationships with families by practicing cultural humility, listening deeply, and honouring the knowledge and experiences that families bring to the early learning environment. As discussed by Milne (2016), many Indigenous parents fear judgement or exclusion from educators due to negative historical and contemporary experiences in schools.

Building belonging requires educators to acknowledge these histories and intentionally work to create welcoming, safe, and inclusive environments in which families feel valued and seen. This relational approach helps families feel more comfortable participating in classroom activities, sharing cultural knowledge, and communicating openly about challenges such as food insecurity. When relationships are built on trust, educators are better able to support children's holistic well being and development. Culturally responsive teaching practices also play a central role in fostering belonging. These practices can include integrating Indigenous stories, songs, languages, and teachings into the curriculum, such as inviting Elders and Knowledge Keepers into the centre and incorporating land based learning opportunities that connect children to nature and cultural teachings. Educators can also support traditional food knowledge by including cultural foods in classroom experiences whenever possible, facilitating conversations about food traditions, and creating sensory experiences related to Indigenous food practices. These practices help children build positive cultural identity, strengthen community connections, and experience joy and belonging in learning environments. Strength based approaches are also essential in building a culture of belonging for Indigenous children and families. Rountree and Smith (2016) encourage educators to focus on Indigenous strengths such as resilience, cultural continuity, relationality, and spirituality. These strengths can guide educators in creating curriculum and learning experiences that affirm children's identities and support their well being. The Flight Framework further emphasizes holistic, identity rich learning experiences that support children as "mighty learners and citizens" (Makovichuk et al., 2014). Integrating these frameworks encourages educators to focus on children's competencies, cultural identities, and relationships, which directly contributes to feelings of belonging. A strong culture of belonging positively influences relationships with families, children's development, and overall well being. When

children feel valued, respected, and connected, they are more likely to engage in learning, regulate their emotions, and build meaningful relationships with peers and educators. For families experiencing food insecurity, belonging may also provide emotional support, reduce stigma, and help families feel more connected to their child's learning environment. In this way, creating a culture of belonging becomes a form of advocacy in itself, supporting both immediate needs and long term holistic development.

Food insecurity among Indigenous families in Edmonton is deeply connected to the historical and ongoing disruption of traditional food systems, structural inequalities, and the lasting impacts of colonialism. This issue significantly affects the well being and development of young children and shapes families' relationships with early childhood programs. Community organizations such as the Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society play an essential role in supporting Indigenous families by restoring cultural knowledge, strengthening community connections, and addressing food insecurity through culturally grounded practices. Early childhood educators also have a critical role in addressing this issue through advocacy, relational practice, and the creation of inclusive, culturally responsive learning environments. By understanding food insecurity as a structural issue rooted in colonial history, educators can work toward meaningful systemic change while building cultures of belonging that support Indigenous children's holistic development. Addressing food insecurity requires collaborative, community driven, and culturally grounded approaches that honour Indigenous knowledge and promote equity, well being, and reconciliation.

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