

The Subsistence Practices and Food Insecurity in the Arctic Circle

- A Focus on the Inuit and Sámi Communities

Marium Sheikh, Department of Anthropology, Economics, and Political Science,
MacEwan University

Introduction

The Arctic region's growing concern regarding climate change is mainly due to its important in the global climate system (Bodansky D. & Hunt H. 2020). The rising temperatures have melted the sea ice which has caused loss of many babies which threatens species of the Arctic (Bodansky D. & Hunt H. 2020). The rising chemicals and acid levels in sea water have affected the marine Arctic life and the stability of their eco system (Bodansky D. & Hunt H. 2020). Fishing and hunting practices are affected by modernization (Bodansky D. & Hunt H. 2020). Fewer animals meant less successful hunting trips and insufficient food resources for arctic communities (Bodansky D. & Hunt H. 2020).

Who are the Inuit people of Canada?

Inuit people make up approximately 50,486 of the population in the northern regions of Canada (Gionet, 2008). Inuit people live in small close-knit communities where they help one another and look after everyone's needs (Brooker, 2015). Their culture revolves around helping others and have special family systems established where elders are seen as the knowledge keepers (Brooker, 2015). Inuit have passed down their generational knowledge regarding language, weather, land, sea, and their family values (Hund, 2004). Due to extreme weather conditions of the north, their diet and lifestyle allows better survival through unique ways of subsistence (Hund, 2004). Subsistence helps Inuit to add structure to various aspects of their lives that include games, art, clothing, medicine, food, and survival (Hund, 2004). Inuit subsistence uses precise methods of "utilizing and accumulating" their food that is shared with their extended families without any financial interests or conflict despite a rise in food insecurity (Hund, 2004). Food insecurity has been a growing concern due to climate change and limited economic prosperity within the Inuit community (Hund, 2004).



Figure 1. Arctic Circle. From *1st Alaska*, 2021, retrieved from <https://1stalaskatours.com/arctic-circle/>. CC0.

Who are the Sámi people of Scandinavia?

Sámi people are the indigenous inhabitants of Scandinavia who make up about 80,000 of the population (Odyssey Traveller, 2021). They live across four countries that include Norway, Faroe Islands, Sweden, Finland, and Russia (Odyssey Traveller, 2021). Sámi are mostly bilingual and historically nomadic (Odyssey Traveller, 2021). Reindeer husbandry and reindeer herding is an essential part of their culture that Sámi have been practicing for centuries (Odyssey Traveller, 2021). Hunting and fishing are a part of their subsistence that where they consume the meat and use the reindeer skin to craft products for trade (Odyssey Traveller, 2021). As a part of Sámi tradition, they carve tools and make art out of the reindeer skin (Odyssey Traveller, 2021). Fishing, farming, mining, and forestry are the most common occupations that Sámi adopt (Odyssey Traveller, 2021).



Figure 2. The Sámi People. From *Norwegian Travel*, 2022, retrieved from <https://www.norwegian.travel/inspiration/the-sami-people>. CC0.

How has food insecurity affected the Inuit peoples of Canada?

Food insecurity has contributed to poor health and increase in stress within the Inuit community (Ford & Beaumier, 2010). High stress levels have contributed to issues such as substance abuse and family violence (Brooker, 2015). Individuals have reported of physical, sexual and emotional abuse that has become common due to psychological distress due to food insecurity (Brooker, 2015). 41% of Inuit in Nunavut experience sexual abuse that has caused further trauma within the society (Brooker, 2015). The modernization and colonization of northern Canada have contributed to generational trauma and lost cultural practices which has made coping difficult for Inuit (Brooker, 2015). The prevalence of food insecurity has created conflict within the Inuit community that has changed the structure of families and kinship that was initially practiced (Ford & Beaumier, 2010).

Why is hunting a prominent aspect of the Inuit Identity?

Arctic char, walrus, beluga whale, narwhal and an extensive range of berries contribute to the diet of Inuit (Ford & Beaumier, 2010). The hunting of seal and walrus is commonly practiced by the Inuit, but requires extensive knowledge and experience to successfully hunt (Ford & Beaumier, 2010). Meat is often consumed by hunters to provide them energy for their hunting journeys (Ford & Beaumier, 2010). Polar bear skin and ivory is used for hunters to give them efficient tools and protection from the extreme northern temperatures (Ford & Beaumier, 2010). Inuit women are taught how to prepare traditional foods which they transmit onto the next generation (Ford & Beaumier, 2010).



Figure 3. Inuit Hunter. From *Discover Magazine*, 2004, retrieved from <https://www.discovermagazine.com/health/the-inuit-paradox>. CC0.

How has climate change and globalization affected these subsistence practices?

Hunting has declined over the years and Inuit people believe its due to lack of tools and resources rather than a loss of interest in hunting (Ford & Beaumier, 2010). The rise is equipment prices has restricted Inuit from hunting and this threatens the Inuit culture (Ford & Beaumier, 2010). The rising cost of goods in Northern Canada resulted in unemployment which affects the growth and livelihood of the Inuit community (Ford & Beaumier, 2010). Fewer Inuit hunters are also a result of changing climate conditions which creates dangerous hunting environments when appropriate equipment is not used (Ford & Beaumier, 2010). Due to colonization, and introduction of store food, Inuit diets have changed, and they are experiencing food insecurity (Ford & Beaumier, 2010).

Similarly, the changing climate has resulted in floods in Scandinavian lands which has subsequently affected mental health and financial security of Sámi peoples (Alaszewski & Coxon, 2008). Floods resulted in fewer hunting and herding activities which made communities depend on local food instead of their traditional subsistence practices (Alaszewski & Coxon, 2008).

How does subsistence practices shape the Sámi Identity?

Sámi peoples' subsistence methods allow them to be self-sufficient and independent (Anderson, 2016). Archeological records found on Scandinavian lands suggest that nomadic reindeer herding has been around for centuries within the Sámi community (Anderson, 2016). Women often take over the responsibility of food preparation that they have learned from their mothers and women around them (Anderson, 2016). While men are responsible for hunting and herding, and women dictate the decisions regarding food and diet of the family (Anderson, 2016). Colonization resulted in extensive tribal area that cannot survive from hunting as the population is greatly dispersed (Jackson, 1952). Hunting and herding cannot satisfy the survival needs of Sámi communities (Jackson, 1952).

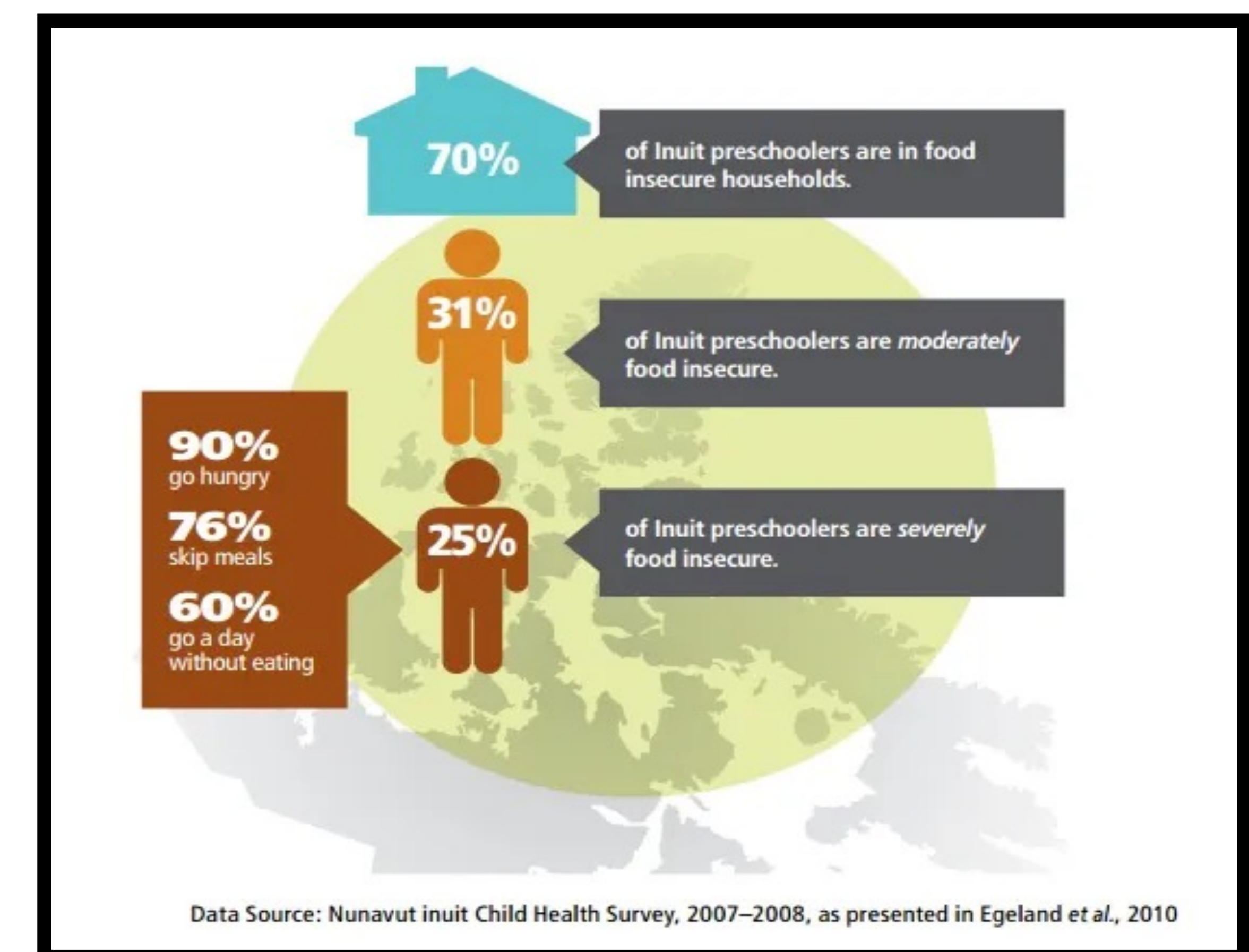


Figure 4. Inuit Go Hungry More Than Any Other Indigenous Group. From *CBC News*, 2014, retrieved from <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/inuit-go-hungry-more-than-any-other-indigenous-group-report-1.2588107>. CC0.

References

- Alaszewski, A., & Coxon, K. (2008). The everyday experience of living with risk and uncertainty. *Health, Risk & Society*, 10(5), 413–420. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698570802383952>.
- Anderson, M. (2016). Food Trends through Two Generations among Saami in Arctic Fennoscandia. *Advances in Gender Research*, 22, 3–23. <https://doi.org/10.1108/S1529-21262016000022012>.
- Brooker, A. (2015). Counselling within Inuit systems in Canada's North. *First Peoples Child & Family Review*, 10(2), 110–121. <https://doi.org/10.1108/S1529-21262016000022012>.
- Ford, J. D., & Beaumier, M. (2011). Feeding the family during times of stress: experience and determinants of food insecurity in an Inuit community. *Geographical Journal*, 177(1), 44–61. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4959.2010.00374.x>.
- Gionet, L. (2008). Inuit in Canada: Selected findings of the 2006 Census. *Canadian Social Trends*, 86, 59–64.
- Hund, A. (2004). From Subsistence to the Cash-Based Economy: Alterations in the Inuit Family Structure, Values, and Expectations. *Conference Papers -- American Sociological Association*, 1–18. https://doi.org/asa_proceeding_34458.
- Jackson, J. N. (1952). Norwegian Colonisation in an Arctic Village. *Sociological Review* (1908-1952), 44, 21–38.
- Odyssey Traveller. (2021). Sámi People of the Arctic. <https://www.odysseytraveller.com/articles/sami-people-of-the-arctic/>.

Acknowledgements:

Dr. Jenanne Ferguson, PhD.

Faculty Mentor – Department of Anthropology, Economics, and Political Science.

MacEwan University.



Scan these QR codes for more information