

Increasing Access to Farmers' Markets during COVID-19 and Beyond:
The Role of Policy

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	3
1. Background	3
2. Assessing Current Government Policy	6
<i>2.1 Federal</i>	6
<i>2.2 Provincial</i>	9
<i>2.3 Municipal</i>	13
3. Addressing COVID-19	14
4. Case Study: Courtyard and Scarborough Farmers' Markets	17
5. Policy Recommendations	20
<i>5.1 Municipal</i>	20
<i>5.2 Provincial</i>	20
<i>5.3 Federal</i>	21
6. Conclusion	22
Bibliography	23

Introduction

In the literature, farmers' markets have been established as a key player to creating a more sustainable food system, especially within urban areas. Unfortunately, their role in helping to build a more resilient food system has yet to be implemented through governance structures in Canada. In fact, the COVID-19 pandemic led to them being deemed as non-essential in Ontario - even though they could have played a huge role in supporting communities - especially when there were grocery store shortages and other factors that led to price hikes that made food inaccessible for low-income consumers. During the 2021 market season, they were allowed to re-open with a plethora of rules and regulations that must be followed in order for them to be allowed to remain open under provincial guidelines. This paper seeks to integrate the literature on the topic of farmers' markets and food insecurity in Canada with current events regarding farmers' markets throughout the nation along with a first-hand account of the difficulties of running a farmers' market during COVID-19. It also looks at current government policy both federally and provincially, and ultimately hopes to provide policy recommendations regarding the question of how farmers' markets can be made more equitable following the COVID-19 pandemic and thus overall help reduce food insecurity within the Greater Toronto Area.

Background

Food insecurity, according to the Canadian government, is defined as: "an inability to access a sufficient quantity or variety of food because of financial constraints," and an approximated 1.2 million or 8.8% of Canadian households suffered from it in the 2017-2018

year.¹ Food insecurity ultimately needs to be addressed at its roots, rather than the government providing band-aid solutions to ensure that Canadians have access to food such as promoting food banks as the main solution for food insecure residents. Given that the Canadian government is unable to stop the problem where it begins, the least it can do is start to provide more sustainable solutions that promote both local economies and healthy food consumption – farmers’ markets. Ultimately, the lack of federal policy to address food insecurity as a whole drives the inability to mitigate it across the nation. While policies to address food insecurity in cities versus rural areas would differ, the Canadian government has not attempted to address either other than through lofty statements about creating more sustainable food systems, as will be discussed later in this paper. Ultimately, the literature shows that change must occur at the policy level to influence the dietary patterns and overall health outcomes of a population, and that food insecurity cannot be solved through increasing food charity such as through food banks.² Thus, fiscal policies such as subsidization of nutritious foods are vital to supporting healthy dietary patterns especially for low-income populations that cannot afford these goods otherwise.³

When the world shut down due to the onset of the pandemic in early March of 2020, the food systems that are so heavily relied upon also faltered. As such, the pandemic has

¹ Jane Y. Polsky and Heather Gilmour, *Food Insecurity and Mental Health During COVID-19 Pandemic*. Statistics Canada Health Reports, 2020, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/82-003-x/2020012/article/00001-eng.htm>.

² Michelle L. Aktary, Stephanie Caron-Roy, Tolulope Sajobi, Heather O'Hara, Peter Leblanc, Sharlette Dunn, Gavin R McCormack, et al., "Impact of A Farmers’ Market Nutrition Coupon Programme on Diet Quality and Psychosocial Well-Being Among Low-Income Adults: Protocol for a Randomised Controlled Trial and a Longitudinal Qualitative Investigation," *BMJ Open* 10, no.5 (2019), 2, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7228519/pdf/bmjopen-2019-035143.pdf>

³ Ibid.

highlighted the issue with the global interdependence of the food system and long supply chains, with prices skyrocketing and sold-out shelves at supermarkets in March and April 2020.⁴ The literature notes that when a community's food sources are more self-reliant, they are also more resilient – and farmers' markets are a key example of this, given their short-supply chain that was not as brutally affected by the pandemic as compared to services with longer supply chains.⁵

Ultimately, farmers' markets help achieve a more sustainable food system and can also help ensure that everyone in a given community has access to affordable and fresh food.⁶ Often times, this is culturally-appropriate food that consumers may have difficulty accessing elsewhere.⁷ This is especially important in Toronto given that it is one of the most diverse cities in the world, where racialized communities often face food insecurity due to issues surrounding class.⁸ Farmers' markets also serve as a place of socialization, increasing cultural-mixing within urban areas.⁹ Thus, farmers' markets prove vital in urban areas, yet there is still a lack of accessibility to farmers' markets among low-income consumers.

⁴ Neda Yousefian, M. Soubadra Devy, K. Geetha, and Christoph Dittrich, "Lockdown Farmers Markets in Bengaluru: Direct Marketing Activities and Potential for Rural-Urban Linkages in the Food System," *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, advance online publication, (2021): 2, <https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2021.102.034>.

⁵ Jim Worstell, "Ecological Resilience of Food Systems in Response to the COVID-19 Crisis," *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development* 9, no.3 (2020): 26. <https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2020.093.015>

⁶ Deborah Bond and Robert Feagan, "Toronto Farmers' Markets: Toward Cultural Sustainability?" *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development* 3, no.2 (2012): 47, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2013.032.005>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Fabrizio Panozzo, "Policy Paper on the Role of Urban Markets for Local Development and Urban Regeneration," University of Venice, Central Markets – European Union (European Regional Development Fund), 8, 2013. http://www.centralmarkets.eu/files/Study_on_the_role_of_urban_markets.pdf.

Assessing Current Government Policy

2.1 Federal Policy

Canada's federal government has no policy to battle food insecurity, and the right to food is not mentioned anywhere in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, despite it being recognized as a universal human right by the United Nations.¹⁰ 8.8% of Canadian households live with food insecurity,¹¹ yet the federal government has taken no real action to address it. While one might expect the government to create social programs or policies to address food insecurity, it was only in 2017 that the federal government began to take action to create a sustainable food policy.¹² In 2019, this policy received \$134 million in funding which was put into initial investments; however, this is a number that critics of the policy say is quite low for the lofty goals of building a healthier and more sustainable food system, especially given the growing concerns and scale of food-related health issues within the nation.¹³ In addition, there continues to be a lack of clarity in how the government will attain their goals, because they failed to provide any way to measure them. Prefacing their goals, the government put out this statement about their vision for Canada regarding food: "all people in Canada are able to access a sufficient amount of safe, nutritious, and culturally diverse food. Canada's food system is resilient and innovative, sustains our environment and support our economy."¹⁴ In their policy,

¹⁰ Graham Riches and Valerie Tarasuk, "Canada: Thirty Years of Food Charity and Public Policy Neglect," In *First World Hunger Revisited: Food Charity or Right to Food?* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 48, https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1057%2F9781137298737_4.pdf.

¹¹ Jane Y. Polsky and Heather Gilmour, *Food Insecurity and Mental Health During COVID-19 Pandemic*. Statistics Canada Health Reports, 2020, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/82-003-x/2020012/article/00001-eng.htm>.

¹² Government of Canada, Department of Agriculture, "The Food Policy for Canada," November 17, 2020, <https://agriculture.canada.ca/en/about-our-department/key-departmental-initiatives/food-policy/food-policy-canada>.

¹³ "The Launch of the First 'Food Policy for Canada' – Everyone at the Table," Food Secure Canada, accessed 21 August 2021, <https://foodsecurecanada.org/first-national-food-policy-for-canada>

¹⁴ Government of Canada, Department of Agriculture, "The Food Policy for Canada."

they recognize that food systems are interconnected and vital to the wellbeing of communities all over Canada and that “resilient communities that support individuals and households facing immediate and long-term food related challenges” can be addressed “by providing culturally diverse solutions in an inclusive manner” yet completely failed to provide any real direction as to how they planned to accomplish this goal.¹⁵ In addition, the policy fails to address that having more localized food systems goes directly against the dominant agricultural system both within the world and within the nation today.¹⁶ While it is a step in the right direction to address long-term solutions that are culturally diverse in nature rather than continuing to rely on food charity and short-term solutions, without any way to measure if their goals are being achieved (ie. getting below a certain threshold of people who continue to suffer food insecurity), the policy is just a nice idea to refer to.

The onset of the pandemic only made this worse. Long-term solutions were essentially abandoned by the government, with all focus being shifted to short-term solutions to getting food on peoples’ tables. However, the pandemic is proving to not just be short-term as many originally thought, and thus longer-term solutions are going to be necessary. In addition, because only large chain grocers were allowed to remain open especially at the beginning of the pandemic, many of the communities in question were ultimately made less resilient because their local economies were devastated.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ The Launch of the First ‘Food Policy for Canada’ – Everyone at the Table.”

In a similar vein, the Canadian Federal Sustainable Development Strategy lists 13 goals, one of them being having a sustainable food system and to “ensure that all Canadians, including those in isolated northern communities, have access to nutritious foods.”¹⁷ Once again they list a lofty idea, but failed to create any measurable goal or plan to achieve this main objective. Most of the other goals on the 13-goal list have a certain, measurable goal that action is being taken towards, but as seen in the “progress” section of the website they have created, there is no goal for ensuring Canadians have access to food.¹⁸ Once again, these are ambitions with no real measurable progress being made toward making that ambition a reality.

For the sake of comparison, the United States’ policies regarding food insecurity will also be discussed – namely their Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) as a means of helping low-income consumers afford nutritious foods. Consumers who are eligible for SNAP (eligibility differs based on state) are able to purchase good such as fruits and vegetables, protein such as meat, poultry and fish, dairy products, and breads and cereals.¹⁹ Consumers are given a plastic electronic benefits transfer card, that works the same way as a credit or debit card, which can be used to purchase nutritious foods from both grocery stores and farmers’ markets.²⁰ SNAP also has different programs that fall under it, including free meals for children, free food programs for seniors, and the special supplemental nutrition program for women,

¹⁷ Government of Canada, Environment and Climate Change, “The Federal Sustainable Development Strategy,” 2021, <https://www.fsds-sfdd.ca>

¹⁸ Government of Canada, Environment and Climate Change, “The Federal Sustainable Development Strategy – Scorecard: Progress Toward Our Targets,” 2018, <https://www.fsds-sfdd.ca/en/progress-report>

¹⁹ Government of the United States, “Food Assistance,” August 19, 2021, <https://www.usa.gov/food-help#item-35787>.

²⁰ Ibid.

infants, and children.²¹ The US government has clearly taken steps toward addressing food insecurity that the Canadian government has failed to do.

2.2 Provincial Policies

Policies surrounding farmers' markets specifically are ultimately made mostly at the provincial level. In Canada, two provinces that have created subsidization policies of goods at farmers' markets for low-income consumers – similar to SNAP in the USA – are British Columbia and Nova Scotia.

In British Columbia, the Farmers' Market Nutrition Coupon Program (FMNCP) was created to strengthen food security around the province, and individuals are able to purchase nutritious goods such as vegetables, fruits, nuts, eggs, dairy, cut herbs, meat, and fish with their coupon dollars.²² Once eligible, consumers are given \$21 a week per household, to be used during the market season (typically June to November/December).²³ This policy began in 2007 and in 2012 began to receive funding from the BC ministry of health, with full-fledged operations beginning in 2015.²⁴ This cause has served 79 communities and reached over 15 000 families, seniors, and pregnant women since then.²⁵ In June 2020 additional funding was provided by the BC government, giving an additional 1800 individuals or approximated 600

²¹ Ibid.

²² "BC Farmers' Market Nutrition Coupon Program." BC Farmers Market. Accessed 10 August 2021. <https://bcfarmersmarket.org/coupon-program/how-it-works/>.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

households the benefits of the program, and also letting online purchases from farmers' markets that decided to go virtual to be made with the provided coupons.²⁶

However, the program continues to be inaccessible to those who need access to these foods in the short term because the process to become eligible is lengthy and difficult. According to their website, consumers who wish to participate must find a community partner and inquire to them about the eligibility requirements, and if they are deemed to be eligible they must go on a waitlist because demand for the coupons exceeds the supply available – both due to underfunding and the requirement that community partners must oversee the program's participants and help those individuals become more "food literate" in the future to help reduce food insecurity in the province.²⁷ While in theory requiring that consumers gain knowledge on how to be "food literate" is a good idea that will prevent future food insecurity, it does not address today's issues in a reliable and quick way – forcing people to go for band-aid solutions such as food banks instead.

Nova Scotia also launched a similar coupon program in May of 2019, recognizing that Nova Scotia is the province with the highest rate of food insecurity in spite of the fact that they have the most farmers' markets per capita in Canada.²⁸ Their goal was to provide an experience

²⁶ "Farmers' Market Nutrition Program Funds Topped Up," *East Kootenay New Online Weekly*, June 6, 2020, <https://www.e-know.ca/regions/east-kootenay/farmers-market-nutrition-program-funds-topped-up/>.

²⁷ "Individuals: How to Become a Participant (Coupon Recipient)," BC Farmers Market, accessed 10 August 2021, <https://bcfarmersmarket.org/coupon-program/get-involved/individuals/>

²⁸ Acadia Entrepreneurship Centre, "An Evaluative Summary of the Nourishing Communities: Food Coupon Pilot Program," *Farmers Markets Nova Scotia*, March 2020, <https://farmersmarketsnovascotia.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/FMNS-Food-Bucks-Final-Report-Amended-May-25-2020.pdf>

that supported physical, mental, and community health as well as to support local producers and farmers in developing robust food systems.²⁹ In the Food Bucks initiative's first year, the province invested \$42 000 dollars worth of food coupons to 105 households, with 88.9% of those coupons being redeemed, and 90% of participants reporting that as a result of the program they were able to purchase nutritious foods they were previously unable to.³⁰ It was also found that the program reduced stigma surrounding food insecurity, as opposed to food banks which are seen to increase stigma around the issue.³¹ As of July 2021, the government of Nova Scotia revealed that they will be investing \$350 000 into the program going forward.³²

Some problems surrounding the Nova Scotia program include the lack of transparency surrounding the selection of participants because they once again go through community partners.³³ In addition, farmers' markets were in charge of creating their own "market bucks" as opposed to a standard procedure throughout the province.³⁴ Thus, some chose to distribute food bucks weekly, while others gave them out on a bi-weekly or even monthly basis.³⁵ However, it is important to note that giving out coupons monthly gives participants more flexibility in their purchases as well as reduced administrative requirements of the program/weight on the community partners' shoulders.³⁶

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Office of the Premier – Nova Scotia, "Support for the Nourishing Communities Food Coupon Program," *Government of Nova Scotia*, July 2, 2021, <https://novascotia.ca/news/release/?id=20210702004>

³³ Acadia Entrepreneurship Centre, "An Evaluative Summary of the Nourishing Communities: Food Coupon Pilot Program."

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

Ontario has no similar program, despite having the highest population of any of the provinces. However, Ontario has implemented some programs to battle food insecurity, especially for school-age children. One policy that has been implemented is the Student Nutrition Program, also called the Food for Kids policy.³⁷ Typically, this program provides over 212 000 nutritious meals to students every day, in around 812 different school and communities around the province.³⁸ The Toronto Foundation for Student Success estimates that 40% of children in the city show up to school hungry, with this number reaching as high as 68% in at-risk communities.³⁹ The Student Nutrition Program is in place to help alleviate some of this hunger children face (at least at school), but COVID-19 has also caused a hitch in the services they are able to offer. According to the Ontario government website, one change that they have implemented during school closures due to the pandemic over the last school year was to provide grocery store gift cards to families whose children are usually part of the program.⁴⁰ Thus, the province clearly has the means to identify and distribute things such as gift cards to at-risk families and children, and this initiative could be extended to all food-insecure families. One way that the government could extend on this program in the future would be to extend such a policy to farmers' markets, allowing families to purchase nutritious food from them while also supporting their local economies.

³⁷ "Student Nutrition Program," Toronto Foundation for Student Success, accessed 18 August 2021, <https://tfss.ca/student-nutrition-programs/>

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Government of Ontario, "Student Nutrition Program," August 20, 2021, <https://www.ontario.ca/page/student-nutrition-program>

2.3 Municipal Policies

Toronto's policies regarding food insecurity are only to be found in their Poverty Reduction Strategy, which was created in 2015 to – as the title suggests – reduce poverty in Toronto by 2035.⁴¹ Their vision statement says: “We want to be renowned as a city where everyone has access to good jobs, adequate income, stable housing, affordable transportation, nutritious food, and support services.”⁴² They have stated two goals regarding food access, which are as follows: eliminate hunger, and increase access to affordable, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food.⁴³ As with the federal policy, they have not stated a certain threshold or way to measure if they are achieving this goal. Currently, it is estimated that 1 in 5 households, or about 18.5% face issues related to food insecurity in Toronto.⁴⁴ The 2018 update on the progress of the Poverty Reduction Strategy only mentions that improved access to nutritious food was acquired by adding more schools into the Student Nutrition Program.⁴⁵ The now five-year old policy clearly needs more clarification on how goals can be achieved.

During the pandemic, the city of Toronto was working with corporate partners – such as Sobeys, Kraft Heinz Canada, and Loblaw Companies Limited – to help ensure that the community food programs in Toronto, namely food banks, would be able to keep running for

⁴¹ City of Toronto, “Recommendations and Reports – Poverty Reduction Strategy,” accessed August 18, 2021, <https://www.toronto.ca/city-government/accountability-operations-customer-service/long-term-vision-plans-and-strategies/poverty-reduction-strategy/poverty-reduction-strategy-recommendations-reports/>.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ City of Toronto, “Food Insecurity in Toronto,” accessed August 19, 2021, <https://www.toronto.ca/community-people/health-wellness-care/health-programs-advice/nutrition-food-basket/>.

⁴⁵ City of Toronto. “2019 Operating Budget Briefing Note Toronto Poverty Reduction Strategy,” January 30, 2019, <https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2019/bu/bgrd/backgroundfile-124434.pdf>.

citizens in need of food assistance.⁴⁶ In April 2020, 40% of food bank programs had closed, despite the increasing demand for such services.⁴⁷ The city created programs such as food delivery for seniors and opened new food banks at Toronto Public Library locations.⁴⁸ Of course in a situation like this (the early pandemic), a band-aid solution such as increasing food banks was necessary; however, having people line up at a food bank would also cause people to accumulate – despite this being the reason why farmers’ markets were not allowed to open.

Addressing COVID-19

As with most aspects of daily life, the pandemic forced farmers’ markets to change completely. While farmers’ markets were at first not allowed to open because they were deemed inessential (at least in Ontario), some markets were forced to go online to stay afloat until they were able to reopen with significant measures to prevent the spread of the virus.

Several online markets were created where farmers’ were able to sell their goods to consumers, and according to Farmers’ Markets Ontario, over 100 farmers’ markets offered online options for food buying.⁴⁹ Additionally, websites such as ShopLocal Ontario were created and had over 250 vendors from farmers’ markets sell their goods at these sort of “virtual

⁴⁶ City of Toronto, “City of Toronto Working With Community and Corporate Partners to Implement Emergency Food Access for Vulnerable Residents,” April 6, 2020, <https://www.toronto.ca/news/city-of-toronto-working-with-community-and-corporate-partners-to-implement-emergency-food-access-for-vulnerable-residents/>

⁴⁷ City of Toronto, “City of Toronto Update on Emergency Food Access During COVID-19,” June 16, 2020, <https://www.toronto.ca/news/city-of-toronto-update-on-emergency-food-access-during-covid-19/>

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ “Online Shopping,” Farmers Markets Ontario. accessed August 15, 2021, <https://www.farmersmarketsontario.com/online-stores/>

farmers' markets" in June 2020.⁵⁰ Many online farmers' markets that existed previous to the pandemic greatly benefitted from this move to online, such as Calgary-based CultivatR. Previous to the pandemic, 90% of their sales were to restaurants, but when everything was forced to close down their business began to boom, because they already had the online infrastructure in place to accommodate for selling fresh goods online.⁵¹ They sold everything from fresh produce to coffee grounds that only came from local farmers,⁵² and provided straight to door delivery that allowed consumers to stay safe by avoiding in-store shopping at the beginning of the pandemic.⁵³ Ultimately, online farmers' markets are most likely here to stay, as is most online shopping, at least to supplement farmers' market sales in the off season and for the convenience aspect of having food delivered straight to your door for many consumers. However, studies find that the use of solely digital farmers' markets can create equitability issues for low-income consumers who may not have access to the internet as readily, or are simply not accustomed to online shopping.⁵⁴ Thus, it is integral that these online farmers' markets serve as a supplement to the regular farmers' markets moving forward, rather than a replacement.

⁵⁰ Jacquelyn LeBel, "Shop Local Ontario to Offer Virtual Farmers Market for Regions Across the Province," *Global News*, May 28, 2020, <https://globalnews.ca/news/6991193/shop-local-ontario-virtual-farmers-market/>.

⁵¹ Gil Tucker, "Online Farmers' Market in Calgary Provides 'Incredible' Opportunities During COVID-19 Pandemic," *Global News*, May 19, 2021, <https://globalnews.ca/news/7877942/online-farmers-market-pandemic-calgary/>.

⁵² "Why CultivatR," CultivatR Canada, accessed August 16, 2021. <https://cultivatr.ca>

⁵³ Gil Tucker, "Online Farmers' Market in Calgary Provides 'Incredible' Opportunities During COVID-19 Pandemic," *Global News*, May 19, 2021, <https://globalnews.ca/news/7877942/online-farmers-market-pandemic-calgary/>.

⁵⁴ Brian Raison and John C. Jones, "Virtual Farmers Markets: A reflective Essay on a Rural Ohio Project," *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development* 9, no.4 (2020): 302, <https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2020.094.020>

In Ontario, public safety protocols are applicable for both the physical markets where customers are welcome, as well as for farmers' markets that are selling via online platforms, where customers either drive or walk through to pick up their pre-ordered and pre-paid products.⁵⁵ For in-person markets, very detailed plans and procedures must be given to local public health units, including diagrams with proposed market layouts and vendors, and it is expected that those working at the markets uphold the social distancing of the customers.⁵⁶ In addition, very limited programming that would often attract customers to farmers' markets (ie. music) is allowed, and there is also limited use of communal tables and seating near the markets.⁵⁷ The onus of ensuring that customers adhere to COVID protocols is on those working at the market, which adds even more work to their already daunting task of trying to run the market with a limited capacity.⁵⁸ Similarly, for online markets where customers pick up their own products, detailed plans must again be given to the local public health unit with delivery plans (ie. how consumers will pick up their goods), once again with the onus of enforcing the rules being on the people who work there.⁵⁹

According to Alberta's farmers' market reopening plan, "the market manager, or person in control of the market, is ultimately responsible for ensuring that orders Chief Medical Officer of Health Orders are followed in the market and in any associated areas supporting the

⁵⁵ City of Toronto Public Health, "COVID-19 Guidance for Farmers' and Fresh Food Markets." City of Toronto, July 29, 2021, https://www.toronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/90ef-COVID-19-Recovery_Response-Guidance-for-Farmers-and-Fresh-Food-Markets.pdf

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

market.”⁶⁰ Their re-opening plan also notes that mask-wearing is to follow the provincial guidelines (and Alberta got rid of the mask mandate in July), and also notes that entertainment is considered a “higher-risk activity” but allows for singing and vocal performance along with instrumental music.⁶¹

The issue with both re-opening plans is that they place all the responsibility on the shoulders of those who are running the market, despite the guidance given by the provinces on how they must operate being extremely vague. In addition, with an increased number of rules that must be followed and increased supervision of market activities, this would require an increased number of employees, or at least a certain number of employees being devoted solely to ensuring social distancing is followed (if patrons of the market fail to social distance themselves). Ultimately, due to decreased profit of farmers’ markets due to limited capacity and shorter market seasons, being able to hire employees solely for this task is unrealistic.

Case Study: Courtyard and Scarborough Farmers’ Markets

The Courtyard and Scarborough Farmers’ Markets (Oakridge and Rosebank Park) are three farmers’ markets run in three different public parks around Scarborough by Jennifer Forde. These newly opened markets provide a key opportunity to look at the difficulty of opening farmers’ markets during COVID-19. In an interview with Jennifer Forde, steward of the

⁶⁰ “COVID-19 Information: Guidance for Farmers’ Markets and Public Markets,” Government of Alberta, accessed 8 August 2021, <https://www.alberta.ca/assets/documents/covid-19-relaunch-guidance-farmers-markets-and-public-markets.pdf>

⁶¹ Ibid.

Courtyard and Scarborough Farmers' Markets that Feeding the City has been partnering with, many of the topics discussed in this paper were discussed to get a firsthand point of view regarding running farmers' markets during the pandemic era.

Jennifer says that her goal in opening these markets is to bring markets to areas that are usually excluded from being able to access them due to the economic standing often associated with race of the consumer base in the area.⁶² She says that "it was difficult to prove that they are vital and viable" because while farmers' markets carry products that communities unique to the city of Toronto need (culturally appropriate food) that often cannot be found at bigger name brands, there was some doubt as to whether the markets would be able to turn a profit large enough to stay in business.

Last summer, the Scarborough and Courtyard farmers' markets were one of the first farmers' markets to embrace the concept of virtual farmers' markets to be able to provide some of the goods typically found at farmers' markets to nearby consumers. With their partner FreshBuy, the markets were able to fully launch their virtual platform in June and experienced high sales. However, Jennifer states that "in July (of 2020) the sales really went lower and that is because people were going to markets, they were free to leave after lockdown." This goes to show that consumers much prefer the physical space of farmers' markets where they can actually see the food they are purchasing as opposed to buying it online. Especially with

⁶² Jennifer Forde (Steward of the Courtyard and Scarborough Farmers' Markets), in discussion with the author, August 17, 2021. All interview notes and quotes to follow are from this same interview.

produce, many consumers may be skeptical about the logistics of buying it online and how fresh it will be by the time it arrives and is ready to be consumed. This year, the Courtyard and Scarborough Farmers' Markets relaunched the online market with the new vendors, but will only be delivering goods in the off-season starting in October. Thus, this online farmers' market is only meant to be a supplement to the physical space that is open during the summer months, but Jennifer believes that "if last year is any indicator it (sales) will definitely pick up during the winter."

Finally, Jennifer weighed in on the lack of policy surrounding farmers' markets here in Canada, and what can be changed to promote consumer awareness of farmers' markets. She states that - as the literature also shows - farmers' markets have a reputation of being in places of affluence and thus being elitist and unaffordable to those on a lower income. She also went on to say that the pandemic has benefitted grocery stores creating a monopoly of our food markets here in Canada, and that without markets and local farming/economies to help balance the playing field, this will only continue to occur. She also mentioned that the markets hope to implement a "market bucks" program similar to the system in BC to help some people be able to afford to shop at the markets. But, she notes that "it is incumbent on a government to recognize the importance of generating economy at all levels, not just for big stores and big brands."

Policy Recommendations

5.1 Municipal

- Establish a task force looking solely at reducing food insecurity within Toronto, that will:
 - Recognize the diversity of the City of Toronto and the need for culturally-appropriate food when addressing food insecurity as opposed to pushing a one-size-fits-all agenda and asking low-income consumers to rely on food banks
 - Create number-driven goals for reducing food insecurity within the next 10 years
 - Work with Toronto Public Health (which also monitors food affordability and looks at social determinants of health)⁶³
 - Work with local businesses in the food industry – included but not limited to farmers’ markets – in addressing food insecurity. Any actions taken in tandem with local businesses will also help increase the local economy.
 - Work toward achieving the goals listed in the Toronto Poverty Reduction Strategy

5.2 Provincial (Ontario)

- Follow in BC and Nova Scotia’s footsteps and create a coupon program for farmers’ markets so that consumers can purchase nutritious goods and contribute to the local economy in the wake of COVID-19.

⁶³ City of Toronto, “Food in Toronto: Affordability, Accessibility, and Insecurity,” October 16, 2019, https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2019/hl/bgrd/backgroundfile-138864.pdf#xd_co_f=OWRmNzc5ODMtYjhjYy00MWQxLWFiNjMtZTI1MmFkYTcyY2M4~

- Adapt Student Nutrition Program to work province-wide, and allow consumers to be able to purchase goods from local farmers' markets. This policy works two-fold: children (and their parents) are able to purchase nutritious foods, as well as support the local community by purchasing at farmers' markets instead of large-chain grocery stores.
- Provide more clarity on the COVID-19 rules at farmers' markets, recognizing that farmers' markets do not have the staff available to constantly be able to uphold vague rules, especially due to smaller profits than pre-pandemic farmers' markets.

5.3 Federal

- Make measurable goals for Food Policy and in the Canadian Federal Sustainable Development Strategy surrounding food insecurity and publish an actual goal for 2030 regarding eliminating (or at least decreasing) food insecurity
- Address the right to food as a fundamental human right, whether it be through issuing a statement or adding it into current policies
- Creating a SNAP-like federal policy to address food insecurity throughout the country, as opposed to leaving the situation to the provinces to address. This goes hand-in-hand with de-emphasizing the importance of food banks and food charity in addressing food insecurity.

Conclusion

Recognition of farmers' markets as a means of decreasing food insecurity and building sustainable food systems is something that has been occurring in the literature for several years now, but so far the Canadian government has failed to take actionable steps to decreasing food insecurity as a whole, let alone with farmers' markets. Efforts toward increasing accessibility to the nutritious foods sold at farmers' markets has been occurring at the provincial level – as seen through the food coupon initiatives that are occurring in British Columbia and Nova Scotia. Ultimately, what is necessary for farmers' markets to grow as a means for promoting food security as well as making them accessible to all consumers – specifically ones in low-income urban areas – is an overarching federal food security policy that cites farmers' markets as a potential solution. Further policy steps would also have to be taken at the provincial and municipal levels in tandem with the federal policy as the first-hand account from the steward of the Courtyard and Scarborough Farmers' market display. Thus, initial steps have been taken toward decreasing food insecurity within Canada, but much more has to be done to make a real difference.

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