Social Determinants of Inuit Health in Canada

Food Security

Food security is a key social determinant of Inuit health that exists when "all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life." The Inuit food system incorporates both market and country food to support overall well-being.

Inuit in Canada

The roughly 59,500 Inuit in Canada live in the four Inuit regions (Inuit Nunangat): Nunavik (Northern Quebec), Nunatsiavut (Northern Labrador), Nunavut, and the Inuvialuit Settlement Region of the Northwest Territories (NWT), as well as outside Inuit Nunangat in city centres such as St. Johns, Montreal, Ottawa, Winnipeg, Edmonton and Yellowknife. Overall, the Inuit population is relatively young and rapidly growing.

Adequate food security is linked to:

- Harvesting and consumption of country food
- Reducing the negative impacts of climate change and contaminants on the Inuit food system
- Addressing the high cost, quality and availability of store-bought food in Inuit communities

Numbers at a Glance

70% of Inuit preschoolers in Nunavut resided in food insecure households (Egeland et al 2010)

6x The rate of household food insecurity in Nunavut compared to the Canadian national average representing the highest food insecurity prevalence rate of an Aboriginal population residing in a developed country. (Egeland, 2011)

$395-$460 is the cost of a basic nutritious diet of a family of four in an isolated Inuit community compared to $226 for the same diet in a southern city centre such as Ottawa (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2009)
What is a Social Determinant of Health?
Social determinants of health are “the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age, including the health system. These circumstances are shaped by the distribution of money, power and resources at global, national and local levels, which are themselves influenced by policy choices.”

Other Key Information
- Inuit are undergoing a dietary transition as a result of societal and environmental changes. This transition is characterized as a move away from traditional food which has consequences for diet quality, nutrient intakes and nutritional status since consuming even small amounts of traditional food can be of benefit (Egeland, 2011).
- Individuals who are food insecure are more susceptible to malnutrition, infection, chronic health problems, feel a loss of control, and struggle psychologically (Lambden et al., 2006).

What is Being Done?
- The Food Mail Program subsidized shipping costs for nutritious perishable food and other items. It is noteworthy, however, that this program was replaced in 2012 by the Nutrition North Canada Program which no longer provides air transportation subsidies through Canada Post, but instead provides subsidies directly to retailers. This change has yet to be evaluated to assess whether it has in fact lead to decreased costs for Inuit consumers.
- Harvester support programs improve access to country foods by offering financial assistance to individuals and Hunters and Trappers Associations for equipment for hunting or to organize community events such as feasts.
- Grassroots organizations like Feeding My Family have been successful at drawing attention to the high cost of food in the North.
- Collective kitchens have been effective in many Inuit communities at bringing people together to learn new recipes, eat healthy meals and save money on the cost of food.

For more information on the Social Determinants of Health, contact the Department of Health and Social Development at Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami at 75 Albert Street, Suite 1101, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, K1P 5E7, Phone: 1 (613) 238-8181, toll-free (Canada) 1 (866) 262-8181.

References