

Implicating municipalities in addressing household food insecurity in Canada: A pan-Canadian analysis of news print media coverage

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ABSTRACT

OBJECTIVES: Household food insecurity (HFI) affects approximately 13% of Canadian households and is especially prevalent among low-income households. Actions to address HFI have been occurring primarily at the local level, despite calls for greater income supports from senior governments to reduce poverty. News media may be reinforcing this trend, by emphasizing food-based solutions to HFI and the municipal level as the site where action needs to take place. The objective of this study was to examine the level and framing of print news media coverage of HFI action in Canada.

METHODS: Using a quantitative newspaper content analysis approach, we analyzed 547 articles gathered from 2 national and 16 local/regional English-language newspapers published between January 2007 and December 2012.

RESULTS: News coverage increased over time, and over half was produced from Ontario (33%) and British Columbia (22%) combined. Of the 374 articles that profiled a specific action, *community gardens/urban agriculture* was most commonly profiled (17%), followed by *food banks/meal programs* (13%); 70% of articles implicated governments to take action on HFI, and of these, 43% implicated municipal governments. Article tone was notably more negative when senior governments were profiled and more neutral and positive when municipal governments were profiled.

CONCLUSION: News media reporting of this issue in Canada may be placing pressure on municipalities to engage in food-based actions to address HFI. A more systematic approach to HFI action in Canada will require more balanced media reporting that acknowledges the limitations of food-based solutions to the income-based problem of HFI.

KEY WORDS: Food insecurity; poverty; municipalities; newspapers; media analysis; Canada

La traduction du résumé se trouve à la fin de l'article.

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Household food insecurity (HFI) is defined as “the inability to acquire or consume an adequate diet quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways, or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so”.¹ HFI is a persistent problem in Canada, affecting 8%–10% of households since the late 1990s,¹ with a rise to 13% of Canadian households in 2012.² In the most recent Canadian analysis of food insecurity nationally, roughly one third (34%) of households identified as food insecure suffer from marginal food insecurity (i.e., worry about being able to afford to buy food), 46% suffer from moderate food insecurity (i.e., make compromises in quality or quantity of food intake) and 20% experience severe food insecurity (i.e., reduced intake of food and skipped meals).²

Adults in food-insecure households have a higher risk of inadequate nutrient intake,³ as well as poorer self-rated health and an increased chance of developing diabetes, heart disease, hypertension and depression.⁴ Children in food-insecure households are more likely to have poor overall health,^{5,6} be diagnosed with iron deficiency anemia and asthma,^{6,7} and have developmental and behavioural problems.⁸ Alarming, childhood hunger has been associated with higher rates of depression, suicide ideation and suicide attempts in adolescence and early adulthood.⁹

* We conceptualize “municipalities” as food system entities encompassing municipal governments, public health units, not-for-profit community organizations, and advocacy groups operating at the local level.

Determinants of and actions to address HFI

The risk of food insecurity is well correlated with declining income.² HFI rates are especially elevated for households that have high rates of poverty, including those reliant on social assistance (56%), Worker’s Compensation/Employment Insurance (25%), or headed by a female lone parent (25%).¹ Within a prevailing neoliberal climate, the federal and provincial governments across Canada have been reducing income security benefits for Canadians since the 1980s,¹⁰ while increasingly downloading responsibilities for delivering social programs to municipalities.¹¹ As income insecurity has grown, so too has HFI, compelling municipal governments, public health units and the non-profit sector to become key players in addressing HFI.¹² Since municipal governments cannot access policy levers to increase income security—a key strategy for the long-term elimination of HFI¹³—food-based approaches to HFI have emerged as the default option. Municipal-level* interventions

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to address HFI generally fall into one of three models,¹⁴ with many organizations delivering some combination of these: “charitable” (e.g., food banks, soup kitchens); “household improvements and supports” (e.g., good food boxes, community kitchens, budgeting and cooking skills workshops); and “community food systems” (e.g., community gardens, food charters, food policy councils). While these food-based interventions have been adopted as a means to address HFI, many of them also aim to achieve a range of other objectives, such as promoting nutritious food for all, social cohesion and food system sustainability.^{15,16}

Rationale and knowledge gaps

While HFI has been a problem in Canada since the 1990s, local-level actions to address HFI (i.e., beyond charitable programs) have increased tremendously in the last decade. There has been particular growth in the number of municipalities in Canada that are participating in “good food box” programs, reclaiming land for community gardens, and formally adopting food charters to guide local-level food system planning. These food-based responses to HFI have received considerable support from various provincial-level organizations,^{17,18} despite limited evidence of their effectiveness to reduce HFI.^{19,20} In other words, locally-based interventions are being developed, funded and delivered in the absence of a robust evidence base to support their value.¹⁴ Meanwhile, it is well established that news media play key roles in raising the profile of current issues, and in framing issues in ways that shape how the general public perceive them and how key stakeholders (e.g., policy-makers) act on them.^{21–25} As news media coverage in Canada may be a key driver behind the popularity and growth of these interventions, the objective of this study was to determine the level and framing of print news media coverage of HFI action in Canada.

METHODS

Methodology and theoretical framework

This study employed a quantitative media content analysis of HFI actions at the municipal level in Canada. Quantitative approaches to content analysis are typical when the volume of coverage is high,²⁶ as was the case here. In contrast to media production and reception studies, this was a media representation study because it involved direct analysis of media messages, as opposed to examinations of the environments of news media outlets or the ways in which audiences receive media messages.²⁵

The various ways in which news media can influence (public and elite) opinion have been summarized and described elsewhere.²² This study draws, in particular, on two theories of media effects. First, we draw from the theory of news media as agenda-setter.²⁷ According to this theory, coverage of issues in news media, particularly in high volumes, serves to place it on policy-makers’ agendas, either directly or through public pressure, compelling them to take action. The second theory pertains to news media as framer.^{24,25,28,29} According to this theory, the ways in which issues are covered (e.g., placing emphasis on certain aspects of a story, repeated coverage, tone) shape how those issues are perceived and corresponding responses to them.

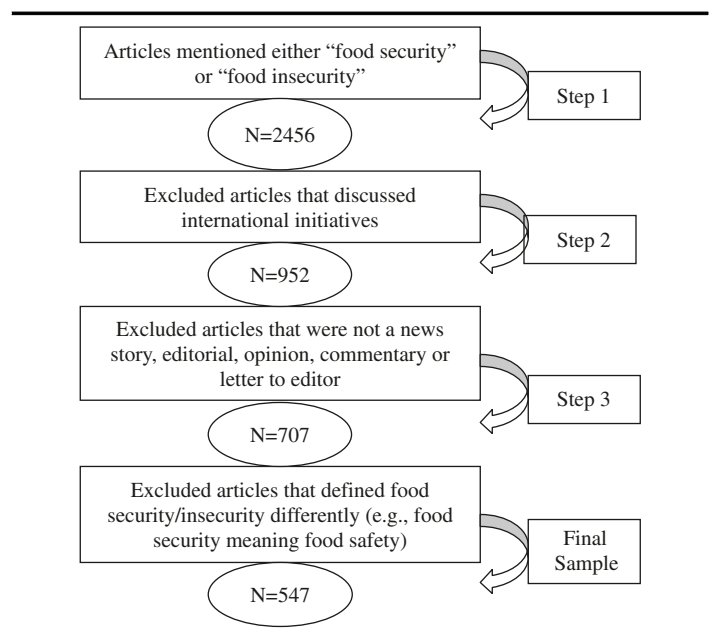


Figure 1. Article sampling strategy

Article sampling and retrieval strategy

Articles were gathered from 2 national and 16 local/regional English-language newspapers from 6 provinces across Canada (Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia). We excluded newspapers from eastern Canadian provinces a priori because previous research illustrates that minimal efforts are being made to address HFI in this region of the country beyond food banks and meal programs.^{30,31} News reports, columns, editorials, and letters to the editor were all eligible for inclusion if they were published between January 2007 and December 2012. The sampling strategy followed a stepwise process, detailed in Figure 1, generating a total of 547 included articles. Articles were included in the study if they focused on food insecurity/security in the Canadian context. Articles did not need to focus on the municipal level or discuss a specific HFI intervention or action to be included in the study (for instance, a column that examined the prevalence and determinants of HFI in Ontario was deemed eligible). However, articles that focused on food insecurity or food security in the international context, and/or that profiled an initiative outside of Canada, were excluded. Articles were retrieved from Lexis Nexis.

Article coding and analysis

Prior to coding the full sample of articles, two team members each independently coded 10 articles to establish the validity and reliability of the codebook. The individual results for each article were compared, any discrepancies were discussed and resolved, and the codebook was finalized. After the test period, all included articles were coded using a quantitative codebook that captured four categories of variables: basic article characteristics (e.g., newspaper source, date); characteristics of the intervention(s) being profiled (e.g., type and model of intervention), when applicable; recommendations (e.g., organization or government implicated for action); and tone (i.e., positive, neutral, negative).

Table 1. Passages from selected newspaper articles exemplifying the three categories of article ‘tone’

Tone category	Article excerpt that exemplifies tone
Mostly positive	<p>“The last of the hot meals rolled out for more than 200 seniors and shut-ins in B.C.’s capital last month, bringing to an end the 35-year tenure of Meals on Wheels. But there is fresh hope the program can be rekindled. After the program’s closing was announced in June because of a combination of a dwindling client base and rising food and gas prices, the idea of someone taking over the operation was shopped around to community groups. There weren’t any takers. But now, a band of people has come together and started talking seriously about restarting the program.”³²</p> <p>“A West Island community group has doubled the number of collective kitchen events it will offer in the coming year to help a greater number of local residents on tight food budgets do more with less... The atmosphere is convivial and when all the chopping and cooking is done, the group’s participants sit down to share the meal – and then go home with the recipe and some new kitchen know-how. And if they’re lucky, leftovers, too.”³³</p>
Neutral	<p>“For the second straight week, University of Victoria students armed with garden implements, potted seedlings and pails of compost dug up a patch of lawn and planted gardens in front of the McPherson Library... ‘Overwhelmingly students want a place to enact the sustainability and food security lessons they’ve been learning in class,’ she said. ‘We should be able to have a place on campus to grow healthy and affordable food.’”³⁴</p> <p>“On the fringes of many Canadian cities, where urban and rural forces collide, the farm is losing in the competition for land to house and feed Canadians... That’s why, says Dickson Despommier, a professor of microbiology and ecology at Columbia University, we need to implement a radical new way of growing our food – vertical farming. The concept of raising crops in high-rise buildings within the urban core has yet to be put in into practice, but it’s winning favour among urban planners around the world.”³⁵</p>
Mostly negative	<p>“Food banks in the Greater Toronto Area tallied more than 1.12 million visits in the year to March, the second-highest level on record, an annual study to be released Wednesday shows... Food-bank usage – a key indicator of poverty – is now 18 per cent above prerecession levels. The growth reflects a number of economic shifts, from difficulties newcomers face in landing jobs that match their skills, to rapidly rising costs for food, energy and rent.”³⁶</p> <p>“Last week, Oliver De Schutter, the United Nations special rapporteur on the right to food, completed an 11-day mission to Canada. His report was not favourable to Canada... Aglukkaq chose to attack and ignore the valuable findings. She accused De Schutter of being an ‘ill informed and patronizing academic.’ This kind of rhetoric may play to the Tory base, but it does little to address the very real problems our people face as an impoverished population that relies on food banks and welfare.”³⁷</p>

Table 2. Distribution of articles by newspaper source

Province	Newspaper	Number of articles
British Columbia	Vancouver Sun	78
Ontario	Toronto Star	48
Saskatchewan	Saskatoon Star Phoenix	47
British Columbia	Victoria Times-Colonist	43
National	Globe and Mail	41
Alberta	Edmonton Journal	40
Ontario	Hamilton Spectator	36
Quebec	Montreal Gazette	31
Ontario	Guelph Mercury	31
Manitoba	Winnipeg Free Press	29
Alberta	Calgary Herald	24
Ontario	Windsor Star	24
Saskatchewan	Regina Leader-Post	24
Ontario	Waterloo Region Record	17
Ontario	Ottawa Citizen	14
National	National Post	9
Ontario	Sudbury Star	9
Ontario	Kingston Whig-Standard	2
	Total	547

Determinations of article tone were based on the coder’s impression from the entirety of the article; articles that presented an overall optimistic outlook, or were focused on offering praise for a particular approach, intervention or key stakeholder were coded as “positive”, while articles that presented a negative outlook, or were focused on criticizing an intervention or stakeholder were coded as “negative”. Articles that conveyed neither positive nor negative messages, or both positive and negative messages, were coded as “neutral”. Examples of each category of article tone are provided in Table 1. While the majority of the codebook variables were quantitative to facilitate in-depth statistical analysis of a large sample of articles, the codebook also included string variables to facilitate coding of qualitative data if needed (e.g., title of article, name of intervention profiled). The data generated from the coded articles was input into SPSS (version 22) to facilitate basic

descriptive analyses, involving primarily frequency distributions, cross-tabulations between key variables, and time-series analysis of coverage.

RESULTS

Sources, timing and volume of news coverage on HFI

Of the total sample, 72% were news stories, 13% were opinion or commentary pieces, 9% were letters to the editor, and 5% were editorials. Nearly half (47%) of all articles originated from just five newspapers (*Vancouver Sun*, *Toronto Star*, *Saskatoon Star Pheonix*, *Victoria Times-Colonist*, and *Globe and Mail*), with articles from the two national newspapers constituting 9% of the total sample (7.5% from *Globe and Mail*, and 1.5% from *National Post*) (Table 2).

Total coverage rose steadily over the 2007–2012 time period, from 24 articles in 2007 to 140 in 2012 (Figure 2). Newspapers from the province of Ontario consistently produced the greatest number of articles each year, followed by newspapers from British Columbia.

Interventions profiled

The codebook captured data on a few variables related to the interventions profiled in the articles. A total of 374 articles profiled some kind of intervention, and these interventions were categorized based on categories of municipal-level HFI action described elsewhere.¹⁴ Of these articles, 44% fell into the *community food systems* category, 24% into *household improvements and supports*, 13% into *charitable* and 9% into multiple categories. Interestingly, another 9% fell into an entirely new category that we termed *awareness and consciousness raising*; articles from this category tended to offer more general analyses of the problem of food insecurity and the inadequacies of current approaches to deal with this issue. The distribution of the specific types of interventions that were profiled is displayed in Figure 3.

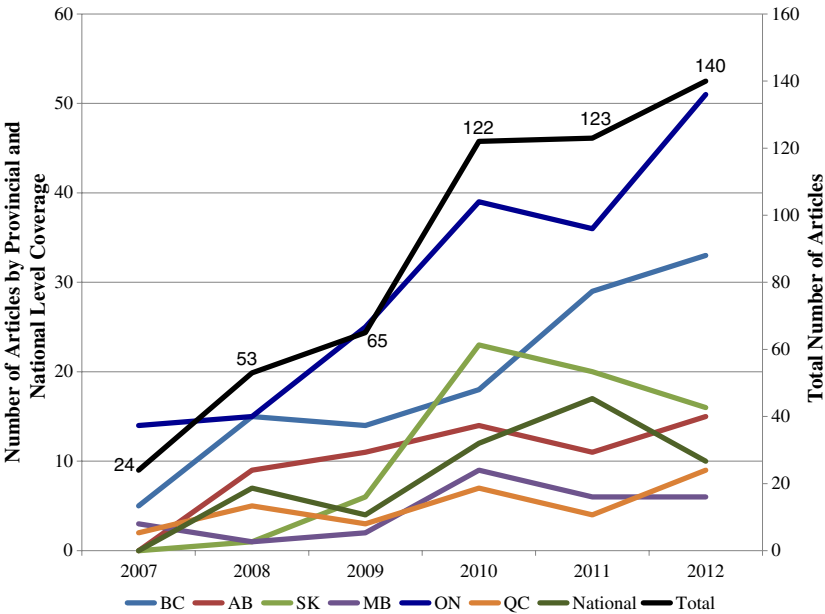


Figure 2. Level of coverage of food security and food insecurity issues in Canadian newspaper media from 2007 to 2012

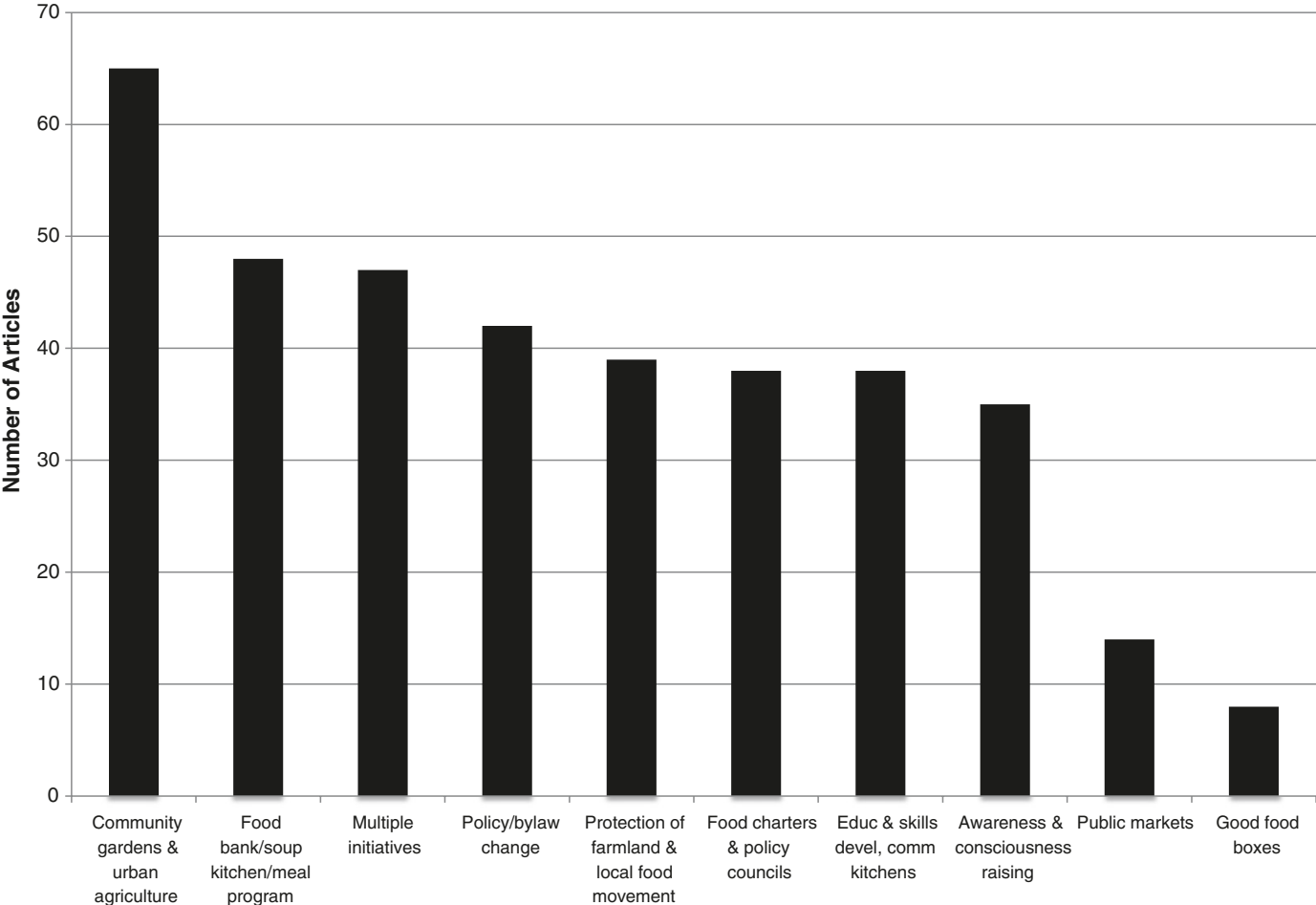


Figure 3. Frequency distribution of food-based programs profiled in Canadian newsprint media from 2007 to 2012

Table 3. Cross-tabulation of tone of coverage by key article characteristics

		Positive	Neutral	Negative	χ^2
Region of coverage	Total (N = 527)	26.9	53.1	19.9	32.901 ($p = 0.001$)
	BC (N = 114)	27.2	63.2	9.6	
	AB (N = 60)	23.3	63.3	13.3	
	SK (N = 66)	28.8	51.5	19.7	
	MB (N = 27)	18.5	63.0	18.5	
	ON (N = 180)	27.2	42.2	30.6	
	QC (N = 30)	43.3	50.0	6.7	
	National (N = 50)	22.0	56.0	22.0	
Publication year	2007 (N = 24)	33.3	41.7	25.0	5.324 ($p = 0.869$)
	2008 (N = 53)	34.0	45.3	20.8	
	2009 (N = 65)	26.2	50.8	23.1	
	2010 (N = 122)	28.7	54.1	17.2	
	2011 (N = 123)	26.0	55.3	18.7	
	2012 (N = 140)	22.9	56.4	20.7	
Program model	Charitable (N = 49)	32.7	46.9	20.4	66.490 ($p < 0.001$)
	Household improvements and supports (N = 91)	40.7	53.8	5.5	
	Community food systems (N = 165)	34.5	60.6	4.8	
	Multiple models (N = 34)	50.0	17.6	32.4	
	Awareness and consciousness raising (N = 35)	5.7	54.3	40.0	
Level of government implicated	Municipal (N = 134)	18.7	70.1	11.2	40.317 ($p < 0.001$)
	Provincial/territorial (N = 83)	15.7	51.8	32.5	
	Federal (N = 58)	3.4	50.0	46.6	
	Multiple levels (N = 40)	10.0	42.5	47.5	

Organizations responsible for action

In addition to capturing the types of food-based programs that were profiled in the coverage, we examined the articles for the types of organizations that were being implicated in actions to address HFI. *Governments* were implicated in 70% of the articles, *multiple organizations* in 16%, *private citizens* in 6% and *non-governmental organizations* in 5%. Only 1 article (0.2% of the sample) profiled *public health units*. Of those implicating governments, *municipal governments* were implicated most frequently (43%), followed by *provincial governments* (26%), the *federal government* (18%) and *multiple levels of government* (13%).

Tone of coverage

The tone of the coverage was examined in the context of several key variables of interest (Table 3). First, over half (53%) of all the articles adopted a neutral tone and one fifth adopted a negative tone. National and Ontario-based coverage was significantly more negative; coverage from British Columbia and Quebec was significantly less negative; and Quebec coverage had the highest proportion of positively toned articles. Second, tone did not differ significantly over time but did vary significantly by the categories of interventions. Specifically, tone was more likely to be negative for interventions that fell within the “charitable” model, while articles that profiled “household improvements and supports” interventions were least likely to adopt a negative tone. Third, articles that implicated municipal governments in actions to address HFI were significantly more likely to adopt a neutral tone, while negative tones were more prevalent among articles implicating any other level of government.

DISCUSSION

Setting the food security and insecurity agenda

The results from this study suggest that, from 2007 to 2012, Canadian print news media has played an important role in placing food security on the agenda in Canada, particularly in

Ontario and British Columbia. This inference is supported by several findings. First, we observed a large increase in total coverage, and in coverage across all regions, over time. Persistent and steadily increasing levels of coverage would have increased salience of this issue among various audiences across the country (e.g., policy-makers, public health and social service practitioners, food security advocates, general public). Additionally, the majority of coverage was generated from news stories, as opposed to opinions, editorial or letters, suggesting that these articles received a reasonably high profile in their respective newspapers. Finally, the vast majority of articles profiled local-level (i.e., neighbourhood- or municipal-level) programs, and implicated municipal governments to take action to address food security. Taken together, it is likely that Canadian print media from 2007 to 2012 stimulated an increased awareness and concern about food security issues across the country and, we suspect, compelled local-level policy-makers and practitioners to take action.²⁷ Indeed, one type of food-based program that has increased considerably in recent years (i.e., community gardens and urban agriculture) was also the most frequently profiled program in the coverage. While the existence of these programs likely generated coverage, it is reasonable to expect that the high level of coverage of these programs stimulated further action in this domain.

Framing the food security and insecurity agenda

In addition to setting the agenda, the findings from this study suggest that Canadian print media has been influential in framing the agenda in a way that supports and reinforces local-level, food-based responses to food security and insecurity. On the whole, 80% of the coverage was either positively or neutrally framed, suggesting that very few of the articles applied a critical lens regarding current approaches to address food security and insecurity. This trend towards more positively and neutrally framed news was consistent over time, suggesting little change in media discourse on food security issues in Canada since 2007.

While Ontario and British Columbia produced the highest levels of coverage by province, the prevailing tone of the coverage differed by province; Ontario coverage tended to be more negative, while coverage from British Columbia was more neutral. It is unclear why this difference was observed, but we suspect it might be attributable to locally-based food interventions being more widespread in British Columbia compared to Ontario, which may inhibit BC reporters from being overly critical of the value and/or effectiveness of these interventions (personal communication, L Marks to MH Little, 2015).

Articles profiling neighbourhood-level programs (e.g., community gardens, community kitchens, good food boxes) were most likely to be positively framed. This finding is noteworthy given the growth of these types of programs in Canada, and the dearth of evidence to support their effectiveness at addressing food security and insecurity. While another category of programs, namely *awareness and consciousness-raising*, did emerge during the coding process, and tended to adopt a more negative tone, articles profiling such efforts were in the minority. Meanwhile, articles that profiled municipal governments were far less likely to adopt a negative tone compared to those profiling federal, provincial and even regional governments in Canada.

Implications for policy and practice

The positive framing observed in this study for neighbourhood-level programs and for the role of municipal governments in addressing HFI reinforces the neoliberal trend of downloading social responsibilities to the local level,¹¹ along with inadequate levels of income support from provincial and federal governments to prevent HFI. The positive framing may also convey the message to policy-makers that HFI is being effectively addressed through local-level initiatives, which may breed complacency among the general public about the urgency of the issue. Thus, more critical news reporting on this issue is needed across Canada to foster an informed public who will feel compelled to demand more vigorous action be taken on this issue at all levels of government, and not just at the municipal level.

Limitations and directions for future research

Given the volume of clippings (over 500 articles) and our objective of examining Canada-wide coverage, we chose to employ a quantitative approach in this media content analysis study. Richer and more thorough accounts of the coverage, and the discourses therein, would have been generated through a qualitative approach. Future research might want to employ a qualitative approach to examine the differences in coverage in Ontario and British Columbia, since these two provinces generated the greatest amount of news coverage. Additionally, we examined only English-language newspapers, which may have skewed our findings, particularly for the province of Quebec. Similarly, our decision not to include more community-based and/or ethnically-based newspapers may have inadvertently excluded news coverage of HFI actions that are targeted at particular subpopulations in Canada and go largely unnoticed by traditional print media outlets.

Another limitation of this study was its focus on how HFI actions are *represented* by news media (i.e., media representation study), and not how target audiences *receive* the messages that are conveyed through these media (i.e., media reception study). As

such, assumptions were made, which drew on established literature of media effects,^{24,25} regarding the potential impacts of such coverage on key stakeholders, such as policy-makers and the general public. Future research ought to engage in key informant interviews with news reporters, policy-makers at all levels of government, as well as directors and coordinators of food programs, to gather their perspectives on the influences of news media coverage on HFI-related actions at various levels.

CONCLUSIONS

This study analyzed print news media coverage of food insecurity in Canada, a persistent public health problem affecting approximately 13% of Canadian households.² Since the 1980s, actions to address HFI have been occurring primarily by governments, public health agencies, and non-profit organizations at the local level, despite calls from food insecurity experts, scholars and advocates for greater income support from senior governments for low-income households to prevent the establishment of HFI in the first place.² We found that the volume of coverage on HFI actions has increased considerably since 2007, with much of it originating in the two provinces of Ontario and British Columbia. Nearly half of the articles implicated municipal governments as the level of government responsible for action, and the coverage adopted either a positive or neutral tone the majority of the time. These findings suggest that news media reporting of this issue in Canada has not applied a sufficiently critical lens. A more systematic approach to HFI action in Canada will require that such reporting adequately communicate the bigger picture to its readership, and acknowledge the true upstream causes (i.e., poverty) of this important public health problem.

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RÉSUMÉ

OBJECTIFS : L’insécurité alimentaire des ménages (IAM) touche environ 13 % des ménages canadiens et prévaut particulièrement parmi les ménages à faible revenu. Les mesures de lutte contre l’IAM se prennent principalement à l’échelon local, malgré les appels à un meilleur soutien du revenu auprès des paliers de gouvernement supérieurs afin de réduire la pauvreté. Il est possible que les médias d’information renforcent cette tendance en mettant l’accent sur les solutions alimentaires à l’IAM et en faisant valoir que les mesures devraient se prendre à l’échelon municipal. Notre étude visait à examiner le palier de gouvernement et le cadrage de la couverture des mesures de lutte contre l’IAM présentés dans la presse écrite au Canada.

MÉTHODE : À l’aide d’une démarche d’analyse quantitative du contenu des journaux, nous avons analysé 547 articles recueillis dans deux journaux nationaux et 16 journaux locaux ou régionaux de langue anglaise parus entre janvier 2007 et décembre 2012.

RÉSULTATS : La couverture médiatique a augmenté avec le temps, et plus de la moitié des articles ont été rédigés soit en Ontario (33 %), soit en Colombie-Britannique (22 %). Sur les 374 articles portant sur une mesure particulière, les articles sur *les jardins communautaires/l’agriculture urbaine* ont été les plus courants (17 %), suivis de ceux sur *les banques alimentaires/ les programmes de dépannage alimentaire* (13 %); 70 % des articles demandaient aux gouvernements d’agir pour contrer l’IAM, et de ce nombre, 43 % interpellaient les administrations municipales. Le ton des articles était remarquablement plus négatif quand il était question des paliers de gouvernement supérieurs et plus neutre ou positif quand il était question des administrations municipales.

CONCLUSION : Il est possible que les reportages des médias d’information sur cette question au Canada fassent pression sur les municipalités pour qu’elles prennent des mesures alimentaires afin de lutter contre l’IAM. Une démarche plus systématique pour aborder les mesures de lutte contre l’IAM au Canada nécessitera des reportages médiatiques plus équilibrés, qui reconnaissent les contraintes des solutions alimentaires au problème de l’IAM fondée sur le revenu.

MOTS CLÉS : insécurité alimentaire; pauvreté; municipalités; journaux; analyse média; Canada