

# The State of Toronto's Food



Discussion Paper for a Toronto Food Strategy

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# **THE STATE OF TORONTO'S FOOD: DISCUSSION PAPER FOR A TORONTO FOOD STRATEGY**

(Revised May 2008)

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this discussion paper is to provide background for a broader conversation about the development of a Toronto food strategy. Ultimately, the strategy would be an action plan to ensure that Toronto's food system:

- improves health
- promotes economic development
- promotes social justice
- protects the environment, and
- reflects and celebrates community diversity.

The paper cannot address all of the activities, players and processes involved in the food system in great depth. It does, however, provide a comprehensive introduction to a wide range of food system issues. The paper does not recommend specific actions nor does it outline a specific food strategy for Toronto. Developing and implementing such a strategy is a complex task and requires the collective wisdom and action of diverse players. This document is intended to be a starting point for that process.

## Why Food is a Big Issue for Toronto

- Toronto's residents and government spend \$7 billion per year on food<sup>1</sup>
- One in eight Toronto jobs is directly connected to food<sup>2</sup>
- Toronto sits on, and next to, the best agricultural land in Canada<sup>3</sup> but Ontario imports \$4.8 billion more in food than it exports<sup>4</sup>
- The average Ontario food producer earns a little more than \$7,000 annually from farming operations<sup>5</sup>, putting the viability of the greenbelt at risk
- The average food item sold in Toronto has traveled nearly 4,500 km<sup>6</sup>
- The food system is responsible for 30% of pollution and greenhouse gas emissions<sup>7</sup>
- There are only three days worth of fresh food in the city at any time<sup>8</sup>
- Agriculture is by far the biggest consumer of fresh water, accounting for almost two thirds of overall water consumption<sup>9</sup>
- Pollution in Lake Ontario has limited the local fish supply. Official advisories warn that large trout and salmon caught on Toronto's shores should never be eaten<sup>10</sup>.
- Food prices in Toronto are lower than in most other countries<sup>11</sup>, but low wages, low social assistance rates and the high cost of housing still cause many to go hungry<sup>12</sup>
- There are more than 744,000 visits to Toronto food banks annually<sup>13</sup> and community food programs serve almost 20,000 meals per day to those in need
- Toronto has at least 144 social and philanthropic food organizations<sup>14</sup>
- Access to culturally appropriate food is limited in some neighbourhoods and food access is not seen as essential in the urban planning process
- Poor nutrition is a key preventable risk factor for chronic diseases but seven out of ten Torontonians consume less than five servings of vegetables and fruit per day, whereas Canada's Food Guide now recommends 7-10 servings
- Toronto's Aboriginal families are two to four times more likely to experience food insecurity than the general population<sup>15</sup>
- Poor nutrition has been linked to behaviour problems among children and youth<sup>16</sup>
- More than one in three Toronto children are overweight or obese<sup>17</sup>
- One in 14 Torontonians over 40 has heart disease, one in 15 has diabetes<sup>18</sup>

## Introduction

Food plays a key role in not only the health and well-being of Torontonians, but in the city's economic, social, cultural and environmental health. The city is built on and next to some of Canada's best agricultural land, is the second largest food distribution hub in North America and, with its multicultural character, boasts thousands of food outlets representing at least 200 different food cultures. Food is also key to building and maintaining strong neighbourhoods. It can animate communities through numerous exchanges – food growing, selling, buying, cooking and consuming. Food brings people together in celebrations of community and diversity, an important part of the city's culture. Toronto has a wealth of community groups and organizations that have a long history of working to improve the food system into one that embraces health, social and environmental responsibility.

At the City level, Toronto is one of the first municipalities in North America to take a leadership role in food policy. Cities across Canada and the U.S. have used the Toronto Food Charter (see Appendix) as a model for developing their own. Toronto has also recognized the importance of food in addressing climate change. In July 2007, City Council unanimously adopted a call to action on Climate Change, Clean Air and Sustainable Energy that included a plan to promote local food<sup>19</sup>.

Toronto Public Health (TPH) has addressed food issues as a core activity throughout its history. Its current focus includes food and nutrition programs, community development, Nutritious Food Basket surveys, research, food and nutrition-related health promotion campaigns, skills training in schools and child care centres, advocacy initiatives and food safety programs. The Toronto Food Policy Council (TFPC), whose members are appointed by the Board of Health, is well respected for its food policy advocacy and innovative partnerships. Toronto is also the only municipality in North America that has a designated Food and Beverage Sector Specialist in its Economic Development Division to support the growth of the food industry locally.

While most elements of the food system are directed and regulated by provincial and federal governments or the private sector, local government has a large role to play. As a municipality, Toronto has many powers to influence food locally and as the sixth largest government in Canada, it also has considerable influence as an advocate and champion. In particular, the City has the ability to:

- leverage its multimillion dollar annual food purchasing budget in favour of local and sustainable food choices, making the city a supportive neighbour to nearby rural municipalities;
- provide public education and skills development related to healthy eating;
- support the viability and economic development of the local food and beverage industry;
- develop regional links by enabling producers and distributors in and around Toronto to understand and access the opportunities of Toronto's diverse markets;

- use food to connect Torontonians with each other and with people in the surrounding countryside by supporting food events (as it does with the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair and Summerlicious);
- implement policies to reduce food waste by households and commercial and public institutions through reducing food and packaging waste and increasing composting;
- work with school boards to improve the food environment for students, including school gardens, improve food knowledge and skills, provide high quality student nutrition programs, and develop links with local producers and the community; and,
- promote social cohesion, inclusive policies toward immigrants and minorities, and access to nutritious food through community gardens, community kitchens, farmers' and community markets.

In addition, the new City of Toronto Act provides Council with expanded powers. City Council has more authority to provide public services, pass bylaws, levy taxes, and independently enter into agreements with other levels of government.

The body of the discussion paper offers an overview of the current state of Toronto's food including all of the activities from "grow it" to "throw it". To date, there has not been a scan that has looked at Toronto's food system in its entirety. Some stakeholders track specific parts of the food system, often in great detail, but much of the information is not publicly available and pieces are rarely brought together to provide a complete picture of how our food comes to be. Only a very broad assessment of the current state of food will allow TPH and other City and community partners to identify the most effective and appropriate ways to meet current and future food challenges and opportunities.

## **Toronto's Food Charter**

In 2001, Toronto City Council, led by the work of the TFPC and the Food and Hunger Action Committee, adopted the Toronto Food Charter (see Appendix). The Charter is Toronto's official vision of a food secure city and a useful starting point for a discussion of a food strategy. It highlights food as a critical connector among the city's priorities, stating that:

- Every Toronto resident should have access to an adequate supply of nutritious, affordable and culturally-appropriate food;
- Food is central to Toronto's economy, and the commitment to food security can strengthen the food sector's growth and development; and,
- Food brings people together in celebrations of community and diversity, and is an important part of the city's culture.

By adopting the Charter, Toronto City Council accepted a number of goals related to nutrition, income adequacy, environmental responsibility, urban agriculture, and waste

management. While the Charter is an important marker in the development of food policy thinking, the question of how to implement the Charter has not yet been pursued.

## **Why Focus on Food Now?**

There is an emerging recognition of the need for collective action to improve our food. Many big cities around the world are now committing to change the way they feed themselves. In the UK, the London Food Strategy was launched in 2006 to realize the vision of a “world-class sustainable city”<sup>20</sup>. The Strategy calls for increasing the choice, availability and quality of food for all Londoners, backed by local government funding of approximately \$8 million (CAD). The Strategy has influenced, and was itself inspired by, similar activities in cities such as Glasgow, Manchester, Amsterdam, Seoul, Hartford, Chicago, Vancouver and Toronto. The section below summarizes several reasons why more and more people in Toronto and elsewhere are focusing on food now.

## **Food, Nutrition and Disease Prevention**

Rising obesity levels and greater evidence linking diet with chronic diseases have raised the profile of healthy eating. In Toronto, this has led to changes in public policy and industry practices such as improving the quality of school food, action to reduce levels of trans fats, communication campaigns to promote healthy eating, and proposed changes to children’s food marketing.

At the same time, some have asked whether the food system as a whole is health promoting. A closer look soon reveals a disconnect between public health dietary recommendations and agricultural, processing and marketing practices. Canada’s Food Guide recommends 7-10 daily servings of vegetables and fruits but Canada’s farms only grow enough to provide each Canadian with 1.27 daily servings of vegetables and 0.42 servings of fruit<sup>21</sup>. Of the 3,936 new children’s food products introduced to the market from 1994-2004, only 41 were fruits and 11 were vegetables<sup>22</sup>. Governments and NGOs have also expressed concerns about the quality of foods marketed to consumers, especially children<sup>23</sup>.

Current food policy, such that it exists, is articulated by fragmented pieces of regulations, policy and programming. It was inherited rather than being born out of an intelligent and deliberate process<sup>24</sup>. Thousands of food stories have appeared in Canadian media sources over the last year, representing no less than 67 different food-related issues<sup>25</sup>. In the absence of overarching food policy, at the local, provincial or national level, the issues are usually discussed in isolation and solutions are often proposed and implemented without recognizing impacts on other parts of the food system.

## **Food, Poverty and Social Justice**

Substantial inequities exist in several parts of the food system. GTA area farms are kept afloat primarily by producers working second jobs. Ontario farmers earn 82.5% of their income from off-farm activities<sup>26</sup>. Wages for Toronto food processing workers have been declining in comparison to all other industries and it relies heavily on new immigrants to sustain the workforce<sup>27</sup>. In spite of an abundance of food in the city, 10.7% of households reported being food insecure in 2004<sup>28</sup>.

Low wages, low social assistance rates and the high cost of housing make it difficult, if not impossible, for many Toronto residents to put enough safe and nutritious food on the table. Several groups are especially vulnerable. This includes low-income households, lone parent mothers, recent immigrants and racialized minorities, especially urban Aboriginals. There is more research than ever documenting the impact of household food insecurity on children<sup>29</sup>, adults<sup>30</sup> and communities<sup>31</sup>. Activists have long noted the injustice of hunger in such a wealthy, food abundant city. Its persistence also violates several international charters and conventions that are binding on Canada's Federal Government. This includes the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the U.N. Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (1976) and the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).

## **Food and Economic Development**

Food is a critical component of the local economy with billions spent each year on food by individuals, agencies and community organizations. With the City's proposed adoption of a local food procurement plan in 2007, it is one of a growing number of big cities to realize the multiplier effect of spending money locally. Food is responsible for the employment of hundreds of thousands of Torontonians in the areas of food production, distribution, processing, retail and food service. An analysis from Michigan State University found that doubling or tripling the amount of fruits and vegetables sold by Michigan farmers to local outlets could generate up to 1,889 new jobs across the state and \$187 million in new personal income<sup>32</sup>. Ontario currently imports \$4.8 billion more in food than it exports. Spending more of that money locally could have a huge impact on the economy and job creation.

Current federal agriculture policy in Canada is mainly focused on support for commodity crops, livestock operations, food processing, and food safety standards. As a result, policies are generally set by supranational bodies, such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) and NAFTA<sup>33</sup>. International trade rules prohibit tariff barriers against imported products but also have provisions allowing governments to support domestic industries. Many U.S. states have initiatives that prioritize local products meaning that there are many more opportunities to support local food in Ontario that could be pursued without contravening existing trade rules<sup>34</sup>.

Power in the modern food system rests increasingly in fewer hands. The dominant players are those who connect producers with consumers, such as the agricultural input

industry (fertilizer and seeds), processors, distributors and retailers. The food system has been described as an hour glass on its side<sup>35</sup>. On one end are thousands of producers. On the other are millions of consumers. In the middle is a bottleneck representing a small number of companies that control the flow of goods, and to some extent, information. Canada's food system is dominated by a smaller number of companies than any other food economy in the western world<sup>36</sup>. In 2005, four companies controlled 88% of the market share in Canadian beef packing and four others controlled 78% of food retail<sup>37</sup>. More recently, food companies have implemented initiatives to promote healthier choices, provide better nutrient labelling, and alter marketing practices. However, given the dominant position held by a small number of players, concerns remain that most decisions influencing the kinds of food that are produced, promoted and available to consumers are made exclusively by the private sector<sup>38</sup>.

## **Food, the Environment and Climate Change**

The two largest impacts Torontonians have on the environment each day stems from our choices of food and transportation. The modern food system is dominated by industrialized monoculture<sup>1</sup> farming, fossil fuel inputs (fertilizers and fuel), industrial livestock operations (thousands of animals in one location) and long distribution lines. The rising price of oil is also a factor in rising food prices. Total energy use in the North American food system works out to the energy equivalent of nine barrels of oil per person per year<sup>39</sup>.

This makes the food system a major contributor to pollution, climate change and loss of biodiversity. Conventional agricultural policies over the last century have focussed on growing as much food as possible. The approach originated at a time when hunger and malnutrition were real problems for much of the population. The assumption was that the public good was best served by maximizing food availability. Until recently, this has allowed food production to keep pace with huge increases in global population. However, the increased interest in local and organic food reflects a growing understanding that this abundance has come at a cost. More people are recognizing that the industrialized food system detracts from, rather than contributes to, the health of the land, water and air around us.

## **Food, Culture and Community Building**

Underlying the passion surrounding food issues is an appreciation of the importance of food to our own sense of comfort, stability and community. Our connection with food starts early. Taste is the first sense developed by newborns and their first avenue for exploring the world. Food is what connects mother and child. People in every culture come together around food, and food brings people together. In recent years, the growth of the Slow Food movement, an increase in TV food programs, cook books, and food

<sup>1</sup> Monoculture is the practice of producing or growing one single crop over a wide area.

events/festivals reflect a desire to rediscover the pleasure and conviviality of cooking and sharing good food.

Food plays a critical role in developing and maintaining the social infrastructure required to maximize urban quality of life. In many ways it is the means by which people and organizations come together to exchange ideas, solve problems and form partnerships<sup>40</sup>. For example, community gardens in local parks can cultivate liveable communities by providing recreation, inexpensive healthy food (which frees up money to be spent elsewhere in the city), and making parks a safer place to be. School food programs can enhance the capacity of schools to act as catalysts for neighbourhood cohesion. Many community organizations in Toronto already provide multiple food-related services such as community gardens, community kitchens, skills training and direct food assistance. As much as providing nutritional support to those in need, the organizations help many residents get on their feet socially and establish new networks. These examples show that any city looking for ways to bring people together to improve quality of life should integrate food into their city planning.

## Overview of Toronto's Food

The remainder of the discussion paper provides information on Toronto's food arranged according to the following six stages:

1. Production
2. Processing and manufacturing
3. Transportation and distribution
4. Retail, marketing and purchasing
5. Preparation and consumption
6. Waste Management

Each section begins with a summary and is followed by selected statistics to provide further context. Given the multiple influences on the food supply, the paper also includes provincial and national perspectives where relevant or when necessary in the absence of local data. The information below is not intended as the final word on Toronto's food but as an introduction to how the city is fed and interacts with provincial, national and global food systems. A number of questions are included at the end of this section to guide feedback and inform next steps.

### 1. Production

#### Summary

Only a small percentage of the food that Torontonians eat is produced within city limits. Production is limited to the city's 76 farms and thousands of community gardens, municipal allotments and private backyard gardens. Green space makes up 18% of Toronto's land area, although not all of this could be used for farming. It includes ravines, valleys, woodlots, waterfront natural areas, parks and existing farmland<sup>41</sup>. Green roofs are also a potential production resource, with 5,000 hectares of rooftop space available across the city<sup>42</sup>.

The Toronto area contains some of the best agricultural land in the country. On a clear day, over one third of Canada's class one<sup>2</sup> farmland can be seen from the top of the CN Tower<sup>43</sup>. Just outside the city's boundaries, in the Toronto CMA<sup>3</sup>, there are 2,839 farms, although many of these are not food-producing operations. Compared to the rest of the province, the Toronto CMA has a higher percentage of fruit and vegetable growers and

<sup>2</sup> According to the classification system used in the Canada Land Inventory, class one farmland contains the best soil, has no significant limitations for agriculture and has the highest productivity for a wide range of crops.

<sup>3</sup> The Toronto CMA (Census Metropolitan Area) borders Ajax, Pickering and Uxbridge to the east, Georgina, New Tecumseth and Mono to the north and Caledon, Milton and Oakville to the west.

greenhouses. Field crops<sup>4</sup> make up a much smaller proportion of farms, but are still the most common type<sup>44</sup>. No information is available on the amount of food produced by Toronto area farms.

At the national level, the food system generates enough calories for every person in Canada, a total of 2,440 per day<sup>45</sup>. However, two thirds of Canada's food production is devoted to field crops and beef. Since 2001, fruit and vegetable farming has increased and now represents 5.5% of all farms<sup>46</sup>. Large operations account for most production, while smaller and medium sized farms have been declining for decades. Overall farm incomes are similar to other sectors, yet in 2004, the average Ontario producer earned \$7,368 from farm operations<sup>47</sup>. Some government payments exist, but farm family income is subsidized by off-farm employment more than anything else.

Most Ontario agriculture is not geared to growing food for a local market. Much of the agricultural land is used for non-food operations such as sod farms, horse farms, Christmas tree farms, flowers, tobacco, and crops grown for non-food purposes (corn for ethanol). Of the food that is grown, a sizable proportion is targeted for export or processing, not for sale directly to Ontario consumers<sup>48</sup>.

### **Statistics**

#### **Land Use - Toronto:**

- Toronto has over 1,000 community garden plots in parks, public lands and social housing areas. There are 20 municipal allotment gardens containing 2,500 plots. Individual garden plots total over 4,500<sup>49</sup>.
- A great deal of potentially fertile soil is paved over to accommodate vehicle parking. For example, retail parking on Eglinton Avenue East between Victoria Park and Warden (a 1.25 km stretch of road) totals 65.1 acres<sup>50</sup>.

#### **Land Use – Nationally:**

- Overall, 7.3% of Canada's land area was farmed in 2006<sup>51</sup>.
- Only a small proportion (0.5%) of Canada is Class 1 agricultural land<sup>52</sup>.
- Farm numbers have been declining steadily in Canada since 1941<sup>53</sup>.

#### **Production:**

- One-third of farms in Canada have sales over \$100,000 and these farms account for nearly 90% of all farm production<sup>54</sup>.
- Approximately 0.01 acres (or 436 square feet) per person of farmland in Canada is devoted to fruit and vegetable cultivation. The figure is the same for Ontario<sup>55</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Field crops are crops other than fruits or vegetables that are grown for agricultural purposes, e.g. wheat, canola or cotton.

### Economics and Demographics of Farming:

- The Canadian agriculture and agri-food system<sup>56</sup> accounted for 8.3% of Canada's total Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2003<sup>57</sup>.
- Off-farm income accounted for 78.8% of total income in 2004. This was the highest proportion during any point in the last decade. In 2004, Ontario farmers earned 82.5% of their annual income from off-farm activities<sup>58</sup>.
- The number of farms in Ontario declined 11.5% from 1996 to 2001. Farm population declined by 15.9% in the same five-year period<sup>59</sup>.
- The average age of farmers in Canada in 2006 was 52 (in Ontario 52.6), up from 47.5 in 1991. Only 9.1% of farmers are under 35 years of age<sup>60</sup>.

### Fisheries:

- Although the health benefits of fish consumption are well documented, consumption advisories for fish caught in Lake Ontario have become more severe compared to all other Great Lakes<sup>61</sup>. Official advisories warn against ever eating large trout, salmon, bass or smelt caught on Toronto's shores<sup>62</sup>.

### Agriculture and the Environment:

- Globally, humans get about 50% of their food from three crops (corn, wheat and rice) and 95% from less than 30<sup>63</sup>.
- The food system is responsible for 30% of pollution and greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions<sup>64</sup>.
- Primary agriculture contributes approximately 10% of Canada's GHG emissions<sup>65</sup>.
- Questions have been raised about children's exposure to chemical pesticide residues through food<sup>66</sup> and how government maximum residue levels are set<sup>67</sup>.
- Critics have argued that intensive livestock operations pose a risk to the environment, public health and rural communities<sup>68</sup>.
- Significant concerns have been raised about the potential environmental and public health impact of genetically modified foods<sup>69</sup>.

## **2. Processing and Manufacturing**

### Summary

The food processing and manufacturing sector in Toronto plays a large role in the city's economy. Annual sales totalled \$17.8 billion in 2004. The city has over 500 food processing companies and employs more than 50,000 workers or 12% of the industrial workforce<sup>70</sup>. Across the province, the food and beverage processing industry is the second largest manufacturing sector after the auto industry<sup>71</sup>.

Wages for Toronto food processing workers have been declining in comparison to all other industries. From 1997 to 2001, the gap between the average pay for food processors compared to all industries increased from 3% to 14%. There are also twice as many new immigrants working in the Toronto food industry compared to all other industries. Immigration has been the single most important factor over the past 50 years in staffing the industry. It is expected that new immigrants will assume an even greater level of importance in the food industry in the future<sup>72</sup>.

### **Statistics**

- At \$70.1 billion in annual shipments for 2001, Canadian food and beverage manufacturing accounted for approximately 13% of all Canadian manufacturing activity<sup>73</sup>.
- In the Toronto CMA, there are over 2,000 food and beverage manufacturing establishments.
- The food manufacturing industry has been a traditional employer of second income earners (generally females), new immigrants and lesser skilled persons<sup>74</sup>.

## **3. Transportation and Distribution**

### **Summary**

Toronto is a pivotal food transportation and distribution centre. The city is the second largest food hub in North America and among the largest for trucking, rail and air shipments for all industries. Toronto has access to a large regional market of over 6 million people, which is matched in size and concentration by only three other urban centres on the continent. The city is also the most cost effective location for road freight of all major metropolitan markets in North America<sup>75</sup>. Due to the “just in time” delivery methods used by major retailers, it is estimated that there are only three days worth of fresh food available in Toronto at any time. If an emergency disrupts the distribution network for an extended period, access to food would be a problem. Toronto Fire Services has developed food tips for residents to cope with short-term emergencies.

The Ontario Food Terminal is a key component of the city’s food distribution system. The terminal is Canada’s largest wholesale market for fresh produce and the third largest in North America. Nearly 6,000 buyers use it, representing small greengrocers in the GTA, independent supermarkets, institutions, restaurants and the food service industry<sup>76</sup>. Toronto is one of a small number of North American cities to have retained a public food distribution centre. Among its benefits, the terminal acts as a pricing market for produce. Without it, prices for fresh fruits and vegetables would be set by the major food retailers. The terminal also allows smaller neighbourhood retailers to acquire fresh produce, vastly increasing the availability of vegetables and fruit in neighbourhoods across the city. The multiplier effect of having a major distribution centre in the city makes it possible for

hundreds of food processors, packagers and freight forwarders in the city to employ over 40,000 people<sup>77</sup>.

Food miles, the distance food travels from production to consumption, have increased dramatically over the last generation. Waterloo Region Public Health found that of 58 commonly eaten foods, all of which could be grown or raised locally, the average food traveled 4,497 km to reach stores in their region<sup>78</sup>. The pollution associated with such long distance distribution amounted to 51,709 tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions annually. Assuming these findings could be extrapolated to food consumed in Toronto, replacing all of the same imported foods with locally grown GTA products would have the same impact on GHG emissions as taking approximately 205,000 cars off GTA roads<sup>79</sup>. This is more cars than use the Don Valley Parkway in 24 hours<sup>80</sup>.

### **Statistics**

- Ontario imports \$4 billion more in agricultural commodities than it exports. At the national level, Canadian producers export slightly more food than is imported<sup>81</sup>.
- The most common imports nationally are fruits and vegetables (27.5%), beverages (11.9%) and grains and oilseeds products (11.2%).
- Imports from countries other than the U.S. and Mexico have more than doubled since 1990. Sixty percent of Canada's imports come from the U.S.<sup>82</sup>

## **4. Retail, Marketing and Purchasing**

### **Summary**

Tens of thousands of Torontonians make a living selling food. The city has over 4,000 food retail outlets and over 6,000 restaurants representing 200 different food cultures<sup>83</sup>. Major retail food outlets are still the most common source for most Toronto food shoppers. The city also has 20 farmers' markets and numerous food box programs and food co-ops. Most neighbourhoods have access to good quality food retail outlets but a few lower income areas, such as Regent Park, are not well served. A survey of low income Toronto families with children in 12 high poverty neighbourhoods found the average distance to a discount grocery store was 1.3km<sup>84</sup>. No link was found between distance to stores and household food insecurity but it would be a significant barrier for those with a disability and single parents with young children and no car.

Food retailers have moved in recent decades to become the most powerful players in the food system. Toronto, as elsewhere, has seen the emergence of super sized food retail outlets. The average number of products carried by a typical supermarket has more than tripled since 1980, from 15,000 to 50,000<sup>85</sup>. Food retail is also dominated by a small number of big players. As of 2005, four companies controlled 78% of the market share in Canadian food retail<sup>86</sup>. The world's largest food retailer, Wal-Mart, has also recently expanded into Toronto.

Figures are not available for spending on food marketing in Canada, but in the U.S., companies spent \$10.4 billion in 2006<sup>87</sup>. Food marketing to children has increased dramatically over the last generation<sup>88</sup>. U.S. research shows that 97.8% of TV food ads viewed by children 2-11 years old are high in fat, sugar or sodium<sup>89</sup>. Governments and NGOs have expressed concerns about the appropriateness of this marketing<sup>90</sup>.

In 2003, Torontonians spent approximately \$6.6 billion on food<sup>91</sup>. The price of the most basic food items has increased 7% since 2006 and 24.5% since 1999<sup>92</sup>. Food prices are slightly lower than in Vancouver, but much higher compared to Montreal<sup>93</sup>. Toronto-based government agencies, community groups, non-profit organizations and charities spend about \$100 million on food each year<sup>94</sup>.

In spite of recent increases, food actually takes up a much smaller proportion of the average household budget than it did 40 years ago. On average, 10% of Canadians' overall household expenditures go to food, making the country's food supply among the least expensive in the world<sup>95</sup>. In spite of our cheap food, low wages, low social assistance rates and the high cost of housing result in many Torontonians being unable to put food on the table. However, in the absence of consistent national or regional measurement the size of the problem is not specifically known. One survey from 2004 found that 10.7% of Toronto households were food insecure. Foreign-born residents were more likely to be food insecure compared to those born in Canada (13.4% compared to 8%)<sup>96</sup>. There were 744,232 visits to Toronto food banks in 2006<sup>97</sup>.

### **Statistics**

- The food service and hospitality sector in Canada employs more than 1.7 million people but it is getting harder to find and keep employees. The sector will need another 300,000 employees by 2015<sup>98</sup>.
- Annual grocery retail sales across Canada totals \$57 billion<sup>99</sup>.
- The Ontario government recently amended regulations to allow street vendors to sell a broader range of foods<sup>100</sup>.

## **5. Preparation and Consumption**

### **Summary**

Although no information was found on the food skills of Torontonians today compared to previous generations, there is a perception that fewer people know how to cook from scratch. This stems, perhaps, from the loss of home economics courses in many schools and the trend towards “ready to eat” supermarket meals and fast food outlets. At the same time there has been an increased interest in food preparation, reflected by the recent surge in popularity of cookbooks and cooking programs on television. Home cooking can bring nutritional and social benefits but public health authorities also promote safe food

handling. Food preparation in the home is the leading cause of the 11-13 million cases of foodborne illness in Canada every year<sup>101</sup>.

The average Canadian adult now tends increasingly to eat alone and spend less time on meals. Time spent eating alone when not at work has increased. When asked about a specific day's activities, 42% of workers in 2005 had eaten at least one meal alone, compared to 28% in 1986. This was the third most important factor accounting for the decline in average time spent with family between 1986 and 2005<sup>102</sup>. Some research shows an association between the frequency of family meals and healthier dietary habits of children and youth<sup>103</sup>.

The typical Canadian adult consumes 1,900-2,600 calories per day. About half of daily calories come from grains, meat and alternatives. Children's diets differ from adults' by having less meat, vegetables and fruit but more milk products and grains<sup>104</sup>. More than half (56.7%) of Toronto children age 4-8 consume less than 5 servings of vegetables and fruit per day. Among adults in Toronto the proportion is even higher (69.1%)<sup>105</sup>. Canada's Food Guide now recommends a daily minimum of seven servings for adults.

Poor diet has been implicated in the rising prevalence of overweight and obesity. In 2004, 34.0% of Toronto children age 2-11 were overweight or obese, slightly lower than the national average. One in three Toronto adults was also overweight<sup>106</sup>. The estimated economic cost of obesity among all ages in 2001 was \$4.3 billion nationally (\$1.6 billion of direct costs and \$2.7 billion of indirect costs, such as the value of economic output lost because of illness, injury-related work disability and premature death)<sup>107</sup>.

Breast milk provides infants with essential nutrients and calories, and contains non-nutritive components that act as protective factors against allergies and common illnesses<sup>108</sup>. TPH promotes the World Health Organization recommendation of exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life, but research shows that only 18% of Toronto infants are breastfed this way<sup>109</sup>.

Food also affects brain function and development. There is increasing evidence that a healthy and varied diet can improve the symptoms of some mental illnesses and the effectiveness of medication for some conditions<sup>110</sup>. Mental health issues have surpassed cardiovascular disease as the fastest growing category of disability costs in Canada<sup>111</sup>.

### **Statistics**

- The average Canadian spends 42 minutes/day preparing meals (54 minutes/day by women, 24 minutes/day by men)<sup>112</sup>.
- Adults in the lowest income households are more likely than those in the highest to have fewer than five daily servings of vegetables and fruit: 58% versus 41%.
- Adults in the highest income households are significantly more likely than those in any other income group to report having eaten something from a fast food outlet<sup>113</sup>.
- Among Toronto food bank users, 18% have children under six years of age. Of this group, 81% reported that there are foods that they think they should eat for a

healthy diet but cannot afford. The food groups most commonly cited were meat and alternatives (81%), vegetables and fruit (78%) and milk products (59%)<sup>114</sup>.

- Among a sample of respondents from 484 low-income renter families with children residing in high-poverty Toronto neighbourhoods, almost two-thirds reported moderate or severe experiences of food insecurity. Experiences ranged from reducing the quality or variety of food to disrupted eating patterns and not having enough to eat. A majority of the families in the sample were headed by a lone mother (53%) and 82% of respondents were members of a visible minority<sup>115</sup>.

## **6. Waste Management**

### **Summary**

A significant amount of waste is associated with the food system, both in food losses and in the waste generated through packaging. No Canadian analyses are available, but U.S. research suggests that 40-50% of all food ready for harvest is never eaten<sup>116</sup>. Poor weather and pest infestations are responsible for some losses as are minimum quality standards for fresh produce set by governments and retailers. With these requirements in mind, fruit and vegetable producers often harvest selectively, leaving small, misshapen, or otherwise blemished produce in the field<sup>117</sup>.

Toronto has diverted a substantial amount of waste from landfills through its Blue Box and Green Bin programs. Approximately 510,000 single-family households in Toronto can now use the Green Bin program and pilot programs are underway in apartment buildings. At present, the program produces approximately 5,000 tonnes of compost each year<sup>118</sup>.

### **Statistics**

- Based on U.S. research, the average household wastes 14% of its food purchases. This includes 15% that are products still within their expiration date but never opened. The research estimated that an average family of four throws out \$590 worth of food per year in meat, fruits, vegetables and grain products<sup>119</sup>.
- Older research by the U.S. Department of Agriculture reported that:
  - 5.4 billion pounds of food were lost at the retail level (2% of edible food supplies)
  - 91 billion pounds of food were lost by consumers and foodservice (26% of edible food supplies)
  - Fresh fruits and vegetables accounted for 19.6% of consumer and foodservice losses, followed by fluid milk (18.1%)<sup>120</sup>

## QUESTIONS TO GUIDE FEEDBACK

A Toronto Food Strategy would be an action plan to ensure that Toronto's food system improves health, promotes economic development and social justice, protects the environment, and reflects and celebrates community diversity. Based on the information presented in this paper and your own expertise, please provide us with feedback to the questions below.

1. Does the State of Toronto's Food discussion paper accurately represent current issues and trends? If not, what's missing?
2. In the next couple of years, where do you see the greatest opportunity to make progress on the issues outlined in the paper?
3. What would you like to see a Toronto Food Strategy accomplish?
4. What organization(s) or individual(s) is(are) best positioned to provide leadership in the development of a Toronto Food Strategy?
5. How should key stakeholders be involved? What kind of process would be most effective? What supports are required to make this happen (please be realistic!)?
6. Would you participate in developing a Toronto Food Strategy? How could such a strategy assist your work? What could you contribute?

## **Toronto Food Charter (2001)**

In 1976, Canada signed the United Nations Covenant on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights, which includes “the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger.” The City of Toronto supports our national commitment to food security, and the following beliefs:

Every Toronto resident should have access to an adequate supply of nutritious, affordable and culturally-appropriate food.

Food security contributes to the health and well-being of residents while reducing their need for medical care.

Food is central to Toronto’s economy, and the commitment to food security can strengthen the food sector’s growth and development.

Food brings people together in celebrations of community and diversity and is an important part of the city’s culture.

Therefore, to promote food security, Toronto City Council will:

- Champion the right of all residents to adequate amounts of safe, nutritious, culturally-acceptable food without the need to resort to emergency food providers
- Advocate for income, employment, housing, and transportation policies that support secure and dignified access to the food people need
- Support events highlighting the city’s diverse and multicultural food traditions
- Promote food safety programs and services
- Sponsor nutrition programs and services that promote healthy growth and help prevent diet-related diseases
- Ensure convenient access to an affordable range of healthy foods in city facilities
- Adopt food purchasing practices that serve as a model of health, social and environmental responsibility
- Partner with community, cooperative, business and government organizations to increase the availability of healthy foods
- Encourage community gardens that increase food self-reliance, improve fitness, contribute to a cleaner environment, and enhance community development
- Protect local agricultural lands and support urban agriculture

- Encourage the recycling of organic materials that nurture soil fertility
- Foster a civic culture that inspires all Toronto residents and all city departments to support food programs that provide cultural, social, economic and health benefits
- Work with community agencies, residents' groups, businesses and other levels of government to achieve these goals.

*The Food Charter also sets out “Ten Reasons Why Toronto Supports Food Security”. The full Charter is available from [http://www.city.toronto.on.ca/food\\_hunger/pdf/food\\_charter.pdf](http://www.city.toronto.on.ca/food_hunger/pdf/food_charter.pdf).*

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