

# **The Challenge of Hunger in Montreal: The Power of Narrative Stories in Solution-Building**

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## **Abstract**

This paper argues that long-term solutions to hunger can be achieved through concerted efforts around raising the awareness about food insecurity and poverty, in addition to increasing the visibility of both food-related resources and public services dedicated to provide legal, economic and social council. To do this, four policy recommendations are offered: hosting creative events on food insecurity and poverty; incentivizing more sharing of coping mechanisms between individuals in solution-building; increasing awareness of services through a state-led marketing campaign; and incorporating a class in high school and university curricula on identifying, using and managing available resources.

## **Introduction**

Montreal hosts the second highest food insecure population in Canada, where more than 650,000 Montrealers request food assistance on a monthly basis, with nearly 150,000 of these individuals being monthly food aid recipients.<sup>1</sup>

Traditionally, the primary recipients of food aid were homeless individuals and persons on social assistance. Although they remain the principal population (52.7% of all beneficiaries received social assistance as a primary source of income in 2017), over the past decade, types of beneficiaries benefitting from this service have broadened significantly, as families, lone parents, students, and working individuals are in need of food assistance<sup>2</sup>. In fact, 67% of total food aid beneficiaries were single individuals in 2017, whilst more than 25% were families (11.4% two-parent, 14% single-parent). In Laval, a suburb of Montreal, of those receiving food aid, 30% were young adults between the age of 18 and 35<sup>3</sup>. "Youth are increasingly in need of food assistance and that's troubling", declares Jean Gagnon<sup>4</sup>, Executive Director of Moisson Laval.

In 2017 alone, Moisson Montreal, the region's primary organization that redistributes donated goods to more than 200 smaller nonprofit food banks, has recouped more than \$80 million worth of food, averaging nearly 1200 tons per month. It has also launched high profile, public campaigns since 2016, such as *Hunger Doesn't Take a Holiday* and the *Great Food Drive for Children*.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Moisson Montréal (2017). *2017 Montreal Hunger Count*.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Centraide Montréal. (n.d.). *Give to fight food insecurity*. Retrieved at: <http://www.centraide-mtl.org/en/giving/give-fight-food-insecurity/>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Retrieved from <https://moissonmontréal.com>. Visit website for additional information.

Despite the apparent success of these campaigns and the ever-increasing numbers of nonprofits participating in this cause, hunger in Montreal still persists and continues to grow every year.<sup>6</sup> As such, this paper will try to understand what drives these increases and will offer long-term, sustainable solutions. In the first section of this report, poverty, particularly working poverty, will be explored as the primary driver of hunger. Spatio-temporal access to supermarkets and other food sources will then be argued as a significant secondary source. In the following section, narrative stories conducted with individuals that have experienced or are experiencing hunger will be examined. Furthermore, this section will explore how a lack of visibility and awareness of available resources emerged from these interviews as a third major driver of food insecurity. Finally in the last section, existing policies - at the governmental, city and individual level - will be investigated and policy recommendations will be offered.

### **Understanding the Measures**

#### Low-income measure (LIM)<sup>7</sup>

Low income measures are relative measures of low income, set at 50% of adjusted median household income. These measures are categorized according to the number of persons present in the household, reflecting the economies of scale inherent in household size.

The concept underlying the LIM is that all persons in a household have low income if their adjusted household income falls below half of the median adjusted income. The household income is adjusted by an equivalence scale to take economies of scale into account. This adjustment for different household sizes reflects the fact that a household's needs increase, but at a decreasing rate, as the number of members increases. The adjustment factor, also known as the equivalence scale, is the square root of the number of persons in the household.

#### Low income cut-offs (LICO)<sup>8</sup>

LICO convey the income level at which a family may be in straitened circumstances because it has to spend a greater proportion of its income on necessities than the average family of similar size. Specifically, the threshold is defined as the income below which a family is likely to spend 20 percentage points more of its income on food, shelter and clothing than the average family. There are separate cut-offs for seven sizes of family - from unattached individuals to families of seven or more

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Definition was copied from [www.statcan.gc.ca](http://www.statcan.gc.ca) - "Low Income Lines: What they are and how they are created"

<sup>8</sup> Definition was copied from [www.statcan.gc.ca](http://www.statcan.gc.ca) - "low income definitions"

persons - and for five community sizes - from rural areas to urban areas with a population of more than 500,000.

#### Low income cut-offs after tax (LIM-AT)

LIM-AT are income thresholds below which a family will likely devote a larger share of its after-tax income on the necessities of food, shelter and clothing than the average family.<sup>9</sup>

A household is considered to be low income if its after-tax income is less than half of the median after-tax income of all households in Canada, according to the LIM-AT. For example, the low-income after-tax threshold for a family of four was \$44,266 in 2015 (Statistics Canada, 2017, Table 4.2 Low-income measures thresholds). The same reasoning applies for the LIM-BT.<sup>10</sup>

#### Market Basket Measure (MBM)<sup>11</sup>

Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) has collaborated with the provincial and territorial ministries of social services to develop the Market Basket Measure (MBM) of low income. The approach to defining the MBM is to cost out a basket of necessary goods and services including food, shelter, clothing and transportation, and a multiplier to cover other essentials. The results define thresholds that represent levels of income needed to cover the cost of the basket.

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<sup>9</sup> Definition was copied from [www.statcan.gc.ca](http://www.statcan.gc.ca) - "Low income measures"

<sup>10</sup> Definition was copied from [www.simcoemuskokahealthstats.org](http://www.simcoemuskokahealthstats.org) - "Low Income Measure (LIM)."

<sup>11</sup> Definition was copied from [www.statcan.gc.ca](http://www.statcan.gc.ca) - "Low income measures"

## **Section 1: The Principle Drivers of Food Insecurity in Montreal**

### Montreal's Historical Poverty Trends

Since the industrial revolution, the development of the working poor social class in Montreal has largely followed global trends experienced by other developed countries around the world<sup>12</sup>. The definition of being working poor varies, but is understood in this paper as *an individual who falls under the poverty threshold despite benefitting from a revenue*. In this paper<sup>13</sup>, the working poor is characterized<sup>14</sup> as:

- Being between the ages of 18 and 64;
- Living in a household that is considered below Statistics Canada's low income measures (LIM, defined above);
- Having earned at least \$3,000 annually (the minimum income required to qualify for the Working Income Tax Benefit);
- Living autonomously (that is to say alone, in a couple, with or without kids, but not with a parent or another family member);
- Not being a full- or part-time student.

It is important to note that the definition of 'working poor' is not a person that is employed, but one that receives at least \$3,000 annually. As such, this definition also includes unemployed persons receiving social assistance and/or other types of government benefits.

Indeed, Montreal's increasing rate of the working poor population and social inequalities can be traced back to its industrial past. The year 2017 marked the city's 375<sup>th</sup> anniversary, filled with a history of fluctuating social and economic importance for the country. First beginning as the industrial and economic centre of Canada, the city then entered a period of economic transition to services and the development of high-tech activities. After the end of its industrial dominion, Montreal was left with deeply rooted income inequalities and social divide, composed both of a low percentage of aristocrats made wealthy thanks to the newly-invented machinery, and a high number of poor, uneducated workers. As a result, combined with the city's relative weakness of wages compared to other Canadian cities, Montreal progressively became a prime source of unskilled workers for Canada's expanding international trade, which in turn only intensified the emerging wedge between the different social classes.

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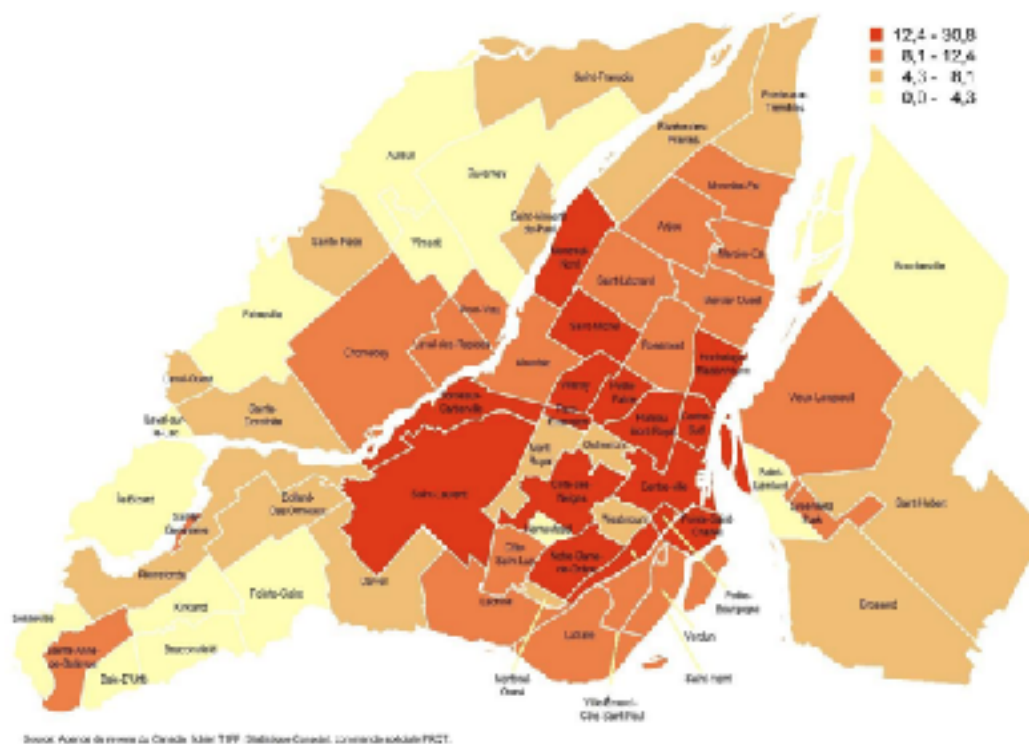
<sup>12</sup> Leloup, X., Desrochers, F. and Rose, D. (2016). *The Working Poor in the Montréal Region: Statistical Profile and Spatial Distribution*. [online] Institut national de la recherche scientifique.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Characteristics are copied from Leloup *et al.* (2015).

These phenomena then led communities to fragment the city into segregated neighborhoods, principally regrouped by ethnic groups, which in terms are correlated to income. Over time, this division has led to neighborhoods benefitting from different economic prosperity, leading to today's highly unequally distributed areas. *Figure 1* details the geographical distribution of working poverty in Montreal. As can be observed, the most underprivileged neighborhoods include: Parc-Extension, Côte-des-Neiges, Downtown, the Centre-Sud and Hochelaga-Maisonneuve, Saint-Michel and Montreal North and finally, Bordeaux-Cartierville and Saint-Laurent.

**Figure 1: Working poverty rate by neighborhood – Montréal Island, Laval and Longueuil (2006).**



Retrieved from Leloup *et al.*, 2012.

Over time, impoverished neighborhoods became poorer, whilst regions composed of highly skilled workers progressively became more prominent. Indeed, the link between working poverty and total poverty was first studied by Xavier Leloup<sup>15</sup>, who found that there was a strong correlation between the two variables. He argues that “the working poor not only have to deal with the growing casualization of the labour market, but also live in neighborhoods where the social milieu, housing conditions and services can be of lower quality as a result of the concentration of

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

underprivileged and poor populations.”<sup>16</sup>. This could explain why these neighborhoods are also the ones suffering most from food deserts, due both to the lack of supermarkets present either in or close to these areas and the inadequate means of transportation to reach existing ones<sup>17</sup>. The growing costs associated with maintaining impoverished communities living in poor housing conditions, he explains, further contributes to the deterioration of that community’s physical and mental wellbeing, which in turns impact their ability to extract themselves from this cycle of poverty.

### Poverty in Montreal by the Numbers

In 2016, roughly 150,000 Montrealers received Quebec social assistance, roughly translating to 10% of the total population of the island. The median earning income for families was \$58,000, which is below the Canadian national benchmark of \$64,000.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, nearly 378,000 people lived under the low-income baseline in 2016, translating to approximately 22% of the city’s population<sup>19</sup>.

The low-income cutoffs after-tax (LIC0-AT) for a family of four living in the Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) of Montreal is \$36,504 annually, roughly translating to \$702 per week.<sup>20</sup> Of the families receiving Quebec social assistance, their mean income hovered around 64% of that same baseline threshold, and 75% of the Market-Based Measure (MBM). Lone-parent families received \$18,041, translating to 77% of the after-tax LIC0, and 82% of the MBM<sup>21</sup>, proving that despite being on welfare, low-income families still do not have enough income to live above the poverty threshold, regardless of the measure used.

The average weekly cost of a nutritional food basket (NFB) in Montreal is \$199.82 for a family of four<sup>22</sup>. The baseline rent price, excluding furniture and utilities for a 4 ½ (2 bedrooms) is \$650 in the most remote neighborhoods of the city<sup>23</sup>. Together, the rent price and NFB would amount to \$363 dollars a week, and excludes other necessities such as transportation, school supplies, clothing, etc. This estimate is often much higher for many families.

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<sup>16</sup> Leloup *et al.* (2015). Page 18

<sup>17</sup> See Apparicio *et al.* (2006). Page 11

<sup>18</sup> Citizens for Public Justice & World Vision Canada (2013). *Poverty at your Doorstep - Montreal*. Poverty at your Doorstep. Online

<sup>19</sup> Retrieved from Statscan Canada (2016). *Income Highlight Tables, 2016 Census*.

<sup>20</sup> Citizens of Public Justice. (2012). *Poverty Trends Scorecard: Canada 2012*.

<sup>21</sup> Citizens for Public Justice & World Vision Canada (2013). *Poverty at your Doorstep - Montreal*. Poverty at your Doorstep. Online

<sup>22</sup> Montréal Diet Dispensary (2015). *Cost of the Nutritional Food Basket*. Montreal.

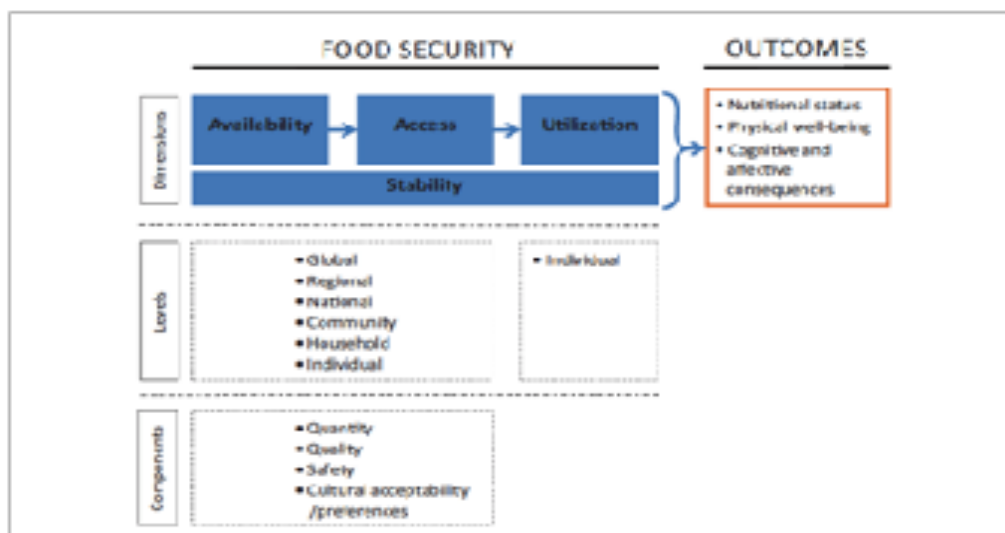
<sup>23</sup> Retrieved from <https://myrent.quebec>. Visit website for more information about rental prices.



Families below, at or just above this threshold, are either already in or are vulnerable to, falling into a cycle of poverty. Their proximity to high vulnerability magnifies the consequences they experience during shocks (temporal, financial, seasonal). For example, an increase in food prices in 2015 due to the falling Canadian dollar and California droughts - a majority of food imports spring from the US state - have increased the price threshold for a NFB significantly<sup>24</sup>, consequently forcing the most vulnerable families further into hunger. Similarly, the CMHC<sup>25</sup> has reported that the rental affordability index for Montreal has fallen by 6% (2012) - the housing costs have outpaced the income growth among Montreal’s renter populations. In 2012, the mean monthly rental price was \$708. In 2017, it has risen to \$766, a 2.2% increase from 2016. This significant change further solidifies the empirical evidence presented above.

### The Socio-Spatial Distribution of Supermarkets Leading to the Creation of Food Deserts

The widely accepted definition for food security is “when all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active lifestyle”<sup>26</sup>. Over time, the definition has broadened, to include: temporality and shocks, such as one’s agency to physically reach, purchase and access to food; nutritional values, such as one’s ability to eat safe, high quality food; and individual agency, such as one’s ability to choose culturally accepted or preferred food. *Table 1* depicts the complex interlinkages necessary to solving hunger:



<sup>24</sup> CBC. (2015). *Quebec food prices spike* | CBC News.

<sup>25</sup> Retrieved from <https://www03.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/>. Visit website for more information about Montreal’s rental market.

<sup>26</sup> Leroy et al. (2015). *Measuring the Food Access Dimension of Food Security*. Food and Nutrition Bulletin. 36(2), pp. 167-195

**Table 1: The complex nature of food security: food security dimensions, levels and components.**

Retrieved from Leroy *et al.*, 2015

Researchers studying food insecurity in Montreal have found critical deficiencies in the components displayed above, particularly around the availability of food and the access to (nutritious) foods.

Indeed, Françoise Rodier<sup>27</sup> conducted research to determine what drove the supply and demand for fresh fruits and vegetables in food deserts in Montreal. Through individual structured interviews, she found that most of the respondents placed a particular emphasis on physical access to food:

*Respondents justified their choice of shopping place mainly through the notions of proximity: "It's closer," "It's the only grocery store that's close to me," "It's next door," "Because it's the nearest, that's all," "It's the only shop that's close, otherwise I'd go to IGA, it's a lot cheaper" and access: "Easier because it's on the bus route," "The bus stops right on the corner," "It's the only thing we've got in the area," "I've got no choice, there's nothing else [...] I'd rather go to IGA, but it's too far."*<sup>28</sup>

As well as the cost factor:

*"Because it's cheaper and they've got more promotions," "For the specials," "Cheaper than the corner cheese shop," "When there's not much money," "Prices are reasonable," "It depends on my budget and the specials," "The cost, it's less expensive," "It's the best value for money."*<sup>29</sup>

Her findings mirror other literature on the topic. Antonio Paez<sup>30</sup> finds that the highest levels of physical access to food are around Montreal's central business district (CBD), although there is clear evidence that individuals possessing a vehicle experience much higher levels of accessibility, particularly for low-income residents, as they tend to travel higher distances to benefit from lower prices. However, this phenomenon does not hold true for low-income residents living in peripherals of the city, suggesting that access to food in Montreal is correlated with income (higher income citizens can live in the CBD, hence benefit from a high number of supermarkets) or owning a vehicle (citizens with a vehicle can travel further to purchase food). For low-income populations, most elect to live in areas much further away from the CBD, as it may be the only areas they can afford. Most of them do not own a car. Hence, when combined with the low amount of supermarkets in those residential areas (see Apparicio *et al.*, 2007 below), communities are limited in their opportunities to access foods.

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<sup>27</sup> Francine Rodier, Fabien Durif, Myriam Ertz, (2017) "Food deserts: is it only about a limited access?", *British Food Journal*, Vol. 119 Issue: 7, pp.1495-1510.

<sup>28</sup> Rodier *et. al.*, 2017. Page 1500

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Páez, A., Gertes Mercado, R., Farber, S., Morency, C. and Roorda, M. (2010). Relative Accessibility Deprivation Indicators for Urban Settings: Definitions and Application to Food Deserts in Montreal. *Urban Studies*, 47(7), pp.1415-1438.

This is reinforced by Catherine Morency<sup>31</sup>, who found that the mean distance traveled increases with access to a private vehicle, suggesting a vehicle gives citizens higher access to food.

Similarly, Lise Bertrand<sup>32</sup> found that access to healthy foods (fruits and vegetables) is quite easy for vehicle owners. However, for non-motorized populations, 40% have no access or less than 640 sq. ft. of fruits and vegetables within walking distance (500m), which represents *one* typical supermarket surface. Although certain ethnic shops have been established around their respective communities, and having some low-income neighborhoods being adjacent to large public markets, almost 100,000 people in impoverished neighborhoods cannot walk to purchase healthy foods.

When identifying socially deprived areas within cities that have poor access to food retailers (also known as “food deserts”), Philippe Apparicio<sup>33</sup> (Apparicio *et al.*, 2007) concludes food deserts do not present a major problem for Montreal. However, he does find supermarkets are less accessible for populations in areas associated with relatively high levels of social deprivation (an index used to compare a group of individuals to the rest of society – the higher the number, the higher the social deprivation).

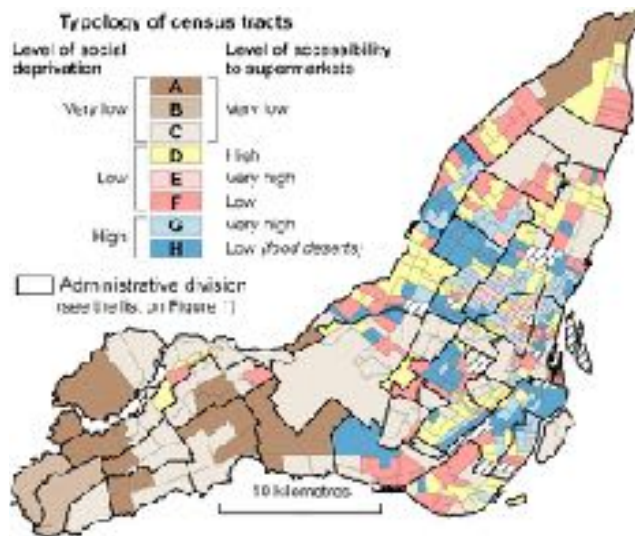
***Figure 2: level of social deprivation vs level of accessibility to supermarkets – Montreal (2006)***

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<sup>31</sup> Morency, C., Paez, A., Roorda, M., Mercado, R. and Farber, S. (2011). Distance traveled in three Canadian cities: Spatial analysis from the perspective of vulnerable population segments. *Journal of Transport Geography*, 19(1), pp.39-50.

<sup>32</sup> Bertrand, L., F. T. and M.-S., C. (2008). Measuring and Mapping Disparities in Access to Fresh Fruits and Vegetables in Montréal. *Revue Canadienne de Santé Publique*, 99(1).

<sup>33</sup> Apparicio, P., Cloutier, M. and Shearmur, R. (2007). The case of Montréal's missing food deserts: Evaluation of accessibility to food supermarkets. *International Journal of Health Geographics*, 6(1), p.4.



**CENTRES OF GRAVITY OF CLASSES**

Class	Census tracts (N)	Index of social deprivation	Nearest supermarket (in metres)	Number of supermarkets within 1000 metres	Average distance to three closest different chain-name supermarkets
A	10	0.012	<b>2,002</b>	0.003	<b>3,037</b>
B	3	0.050	<b>3,488</b>	0.000	<b>3,064</b>
C	93	0.027	1,375	0.274	2,113
D	116	1.057	845	1,412	1,166
E	36	1.509	422	<b>3,448</b>	757
F	73	1.559	<b>848</b>	0.628	1,813
G	86	1.583	461	2,183	575
H	82	<b>2.258</b>	816	0.887	1,340
All	506	1.507	810	1.220	1,490

Average values in bold are higher than those of all census tracts.  
Classes are sorted by mean value of social deprivation index.

Retrieved from Apparicio *et al.*, 2006.

Per the map above, several neighborhoods of Montreal, particularly those diametrically opposed to the CBD (the Eastern area, as well as the general Montreal-North region) score a high index of social deprivation, whilst also averaging less than 1 supermarket within 1000 meters, with the nearest supermarket located more than 816 meters away on average (class H). Even in less impoverished neighborhoods, the average distance to the closest supermarket was approximately 500 meters (class G), and sometimes double that (class F).

The literature presented above suggests accessibility to food is a principal factor for food insecurity in Montreal. Furthermore, the monopolistic nature of the grocery store market in Montreal (all supermarkets fall either under Loblaw's, Metro Inc or Sobeys' parent companies) both disincentivizes the big players from price capping or reducing food prices in those supermarket and creates high barriers to entry for emerging companies<sup>34</sup>.

<sup>34</sup> Thibaut Martelain, founder of Second-Life. Interviewed by Paul Berthe, 25 February 2018.

## **Section 2: Narrative Stories and their Analysis**

### **Britney, a McGill University International Student**

*“I wonder how it’s like to eat food that you really crave without worrying about how much it costs, and really nice meals”*

Britney<sup>35</sup> has been food-insecure for most of her life, but focused on discussing her experience since she arrived at McGill University as an international student from Hong-Kong. Coming to study abroad on a full scholarship, she often experiences difficulties in meeting ends meet. Most of her scholarship goes to tuition and rent-related expenses, and whilst her family wires her some additional money from China, often there is not enough left for her to purchase food.

Since a young age, Britney chose to be vegan, partially due to religious reasons and because she suffers from lactose intolerance. As such, she tries to arrange her diet around canned and dry foods, such as rice and beans, as they are often more available during the year. In addition, biological fruits and vegetables are staples in her diet, however they prove to be costly to purchase from the very limited grocery stores around her. Due to her food restrictions and the expensive nature of her diet, she must often find other ways to eat: she drinks a lot of water to reduce her hunger, eats smaller portions and uses on-campus free meal services such as Midnight Kitchen<sup>36</sup>, although she sometimes arrives too late to eat, at which point she often skips a meal. She also established a system with her close friends, where they bring her leftovers from residence cafeterias in exchange for school notes. However, she does not use this system often.

*“I don’t really dress well, so maybe they can kind of tell”*

Britney also feels the stigmatization around food insecurity and more generally, poverty. She explains that some students she meets carry judgements on her clothing (the visible aspects of her lack of income), particularly after she says she is an international student, as most assume she is well-off enough to come live abroad. She explains that she sometimes has difficulties being friends with some peers due to their lifestyles: they often propose expensive outings she cannot afford. As opposed to rejecting them every single time, she prefers to not stay close to them, as she does not want to continuously explain herself to them.

Britney also faces the pressure of being successful at school. Being the first of her immediate family to leave Asia, she has set a goal for herself to assist her parents financially once she graduates and

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<sup>35</sup> Britney Anonymous. Interviewed by Paul Berthe, March 2018. Name was changed to preserve participant’s anonymity.

<sup>36</sup> Student-run soup kitchen on McGill University campus. Open to all McGill students.

finds a job. Although grateful for being in Canada and part of McGill's student body, she sacrifices her own health - for example, she elected not to get a job in order to focus on school - in hopes of a stable future.

*"I wish some sort of student support - people who want to be anonymous - group, gathering where we could talk to each other about these experiences without being judged."*

A solution Britney suggested to help cope with these challenges is a support group with people in similar situations, a safe space to discuss, share and hear experiences from people who truly understand.

#### Sara, a McGill University International Student

*"We lived in a 3 ½ apartment [until I was 12 years old]"*

For most of her childhood, Sara<sup>37</sup> lived in a one-bedroom apartment with her 3 siblings and two parents in Côte-des-Neiges, one of Montreal's most impoverished neighborhoods. Her mother worked as a housewife, whilst her father worked for more than 16 hours a day until Sara turned 12. Between the two of them, her parents earned between 30 and 40 thousand dollars annually, whilst putting some aside for the future. Their small home was only one of the coping mechanisms the family used to deal with the financial hardships. Another was that Sara and her siblings often wore clothes her mother had earned in exchange for cleaning services instead of purchasing new clothes.

Thanks to their savings, her parents managed to purchase a \$150,000 duplex in Verdun, another neighborhood of Montreal. Despite the added space and reduced financial burden from no longer paying rent, her father began working fewer hours shortly after moving into their new home, which left the family in a tight financial situation. As such, they began going to a food bank called *Welcome Hall*, approximately once every two weeks. Over time, the family developed additional strategies to cope with the food insecurity, such as going to Costco by car with their cousins, which allowed them to buy food in bulk for cheaper, or doing smart grocery shopping by walking to neighborhood supermarkets offering daily deals such as Maxi, and going to either small local stores - such as Pommès Verte, where they can purchase about-to-expire fruits and vegetables for significantly discounted prices - or using farmers' markets. Sara also used school-related food services, such as Dawson's free vegan lunch once weekly during her Cégeps years.

*"If I had stayed in Côte-des-Neiges, I would have begged my parents to buy me clothes."*

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<sup>37</sup> Sara Anonymous. Interviewed by Paul Berthe, March 2018. Name was changed to preserve participant's anonymity.

On top of the physical difficulties of her living conditions, Sara also experienced the social stigma surrounding living in poverty. She did not invite anyone home until she was sixteen years old, fearing that the invitee would judge the state of her home and her social status. She describes that she felt ashamed of her living situation, and deliberately avoided speaking about it with her friends. She was embarrassed that her family could only afford an old TV with no remote and cable/satellite, or the fact that she would have water when everyone else at school would have Kool-Aid. She feels lucky her school had a uniform-only policy, as it allowed her to hide the fact from her classmates that she possessed no expensive clothes.

It was a journey of acceptance for Sara. Her family is now breaking out of the cycle of poverty - her mother can now send money back home to her family, and Sara is doing well at university. Yet, this stage of her life heavily impacted her and played a big role in her development - she now tries to always have a positive outlook on life and feels she greatly appreciates the opportunities life has given her.

#### Thomas, a McGill University International Student

*“One time, I had to choose between eating or buying a textbook. I bought the textbook because I needed it for my class.”*

Thomas<sup>38</sup> is an international student attending McGill University who lives in a small flat with his younger brother. For the past year, he has been experiencing food insecurity. Originally from Dubai, his parents are aware of the challenges they face, but unfortunately do not have the financial resources necessary to allow him and his brother to satisfy their hunger. As such, Thomas resorts to alternative strategies.

Particularly, Thomas uses Midnight Kitchen, a free meal service offered by the university he first discovered during a mental health conference. A student-run “show-up and go”, the communal kitchen distributes free vegan meals to hungry students whom are required to bring their own plates. Unfortunately, Thomas cannot always benefit from Midnight Kitchen, as the service only runs from 12:00 to 1:30pm daily, is not open on weekends and does not have enough food to supply everyone. As a result, if Thomas is late, he does not eat.

Thomas also tries to ration his food. In order to maximize his budget, he carefully strategizes his shopping habits. He can purchase cheap imported noodles and spices from Asia at Mizan, a grocery store near Concordia; he finds cheaper meat and rice at the Supermarché Noor, a butchery and small-

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<sup>38</sup> Thomas Anonymous. Interviewed by Paul Berthe, March 2018. Name was changed to preserve participant’s anonymity.

scale market; he often finds promotions at Pharmaprix for eggs and milk; and prefers Adonis for fruits and vegetables, where a pound of beans is \$0.99 compared to \$2.99 at bigger supermarket chains.

*“I used to go to the cinema once a week. Now I only go maybe once a month.”*

Thomas also began working at a shop on weekends three months ago, that specializes in leasing home equipment and tools. Although the income mostly goes into his living necessities, he finds a little additional income for leisure.

In his solutions, Thomas suggests having a car to be able to purchase food in bulk at Costco, as he estimates he would be able to purchase twice as much food for the same costs. Food in downtown Montreal is expensive and not easily accessible, as a transportation pass costs \$6.00 for a return trip or close to \$50 for a monthly student pass. He also mentions having a higher paying job or finding a cheaper place to stay. However, both those things prove very difficult to achieve in practice, he explains.

#### Anthony, a Concordia University Student

Anthony's<sup>39</sup> daily food struggles began when he stopped working full-time to attend school. After having spent most of the savings he had managed to accumulate, he faced difficult choices regarding where to use his money. In order to ensure he covered his rent, he began reducing the amount of money he spent on groceries, whilst trying to stretch the food he purchased to last longer.

He experienced a difficult transition in his lifestyle, going from being able to purchase foods such as pistachios and eating meals centered around different types of fish and meats to having a more staple diet around broccoli and rice. When he does not have enough money left, he cuts out the more nutritious aspects of his diet to eat high-starchy foods, which cost less and satiate him with less food. This change has had a very high impact on his mental health, contributing to stress, anxiety and worry, as well as his physical health, where he observed he lost a considerable amount of weight.

*“I would try to take my mind off of it. I would try to go to sleep early because I knew that if I went to sleep, I wouldn't have to deal with hunger”*

In order to compensate for his lack of food, Anthony began exploring restaurants and services distributing free meals. He began going to the *Ketch Café of Diners St-Louis*, a restaurant giving out free dinners three weekdays (Monday, Wednesday and Friday) and weekends. He also sometimes

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<sup>39</sup> Antony Anonymous. Interviewed by Paul Berthe, March 2018. Name was changed to preserve participant's anonymity.



goes to *Café St-Denis*, where he can get free lunches every day from 12:00 - 1:00 pm, but prefers to opt for Concordia's downtown *People's Potato*, where he can get bigger portions.

Thomas also had to make other sacrifices: he now works 25 hours doing Alumni outreach at Concordia's call center - unfortunately, the additional income barely covers his needs. In order to save money, he cut back on many aspects of his life: he used to go to the laundromat once two weeks, but now goes only once a month. Similarly, as a passionate fan of movies, he loved going to the cinema about once a week, but last went two months ago. He also noticed he spends much less on clothing, opting to purchase new clothes once every season. Whilst working full-time, he could afford living with a single roommate in an apartment with a \$1,600 monthly rent. Now, he moved to another neighborhood and lives with three roommates, and manages to save approximately half of what he used to pay.

*“If you're not able to provide for yourself, it's because you're not doing enough.”*

Anthony senses the social stigma around poverty and food insecurity. “We all have our own view of the world, but unfortunately, not everyone is understanding”, he explains. In many instances, he prefers to keep his struggles for himself, as it is “[his] burden to shoulder” and prefers not to have sympathy from his friends. He does share his challenges with his family, who try to help him.

In his solutions, Anthony argues that increasing minimum wage would have a drastic impact on his life. It would give him more freedom in his food diet and his financial choices, which in turn would greatly alleviate the mental stress he experiences. The primary barrier to food insecurity, he explains, is the ever-increasing food prices in the city. A solution, albeit presently uncommon, would be community gardens, which may help alleviate hunger whilst offering a closer interaction with food production.

#### Gabriela<sup>40</sup>, a Nonprofit Worker

Gabriela was diagnosed with early-stage breast cancer in 2009/10, a few years after completing her Bachelor's degree. For several months after her initial diagnosis, she had to go through daily 25-minute radiation sessions. Every morning at 8:30AM, she would arrive at the Montreal Jewish Hospital to undergo her treatment.

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<sup>40</sup> Gabriela Anonymous. Interviewed by Paul Berthe, March 2018. Name was changed to preserve participant's anonymity.

Both the diagnosis and subsequent treatment has had a huge impact on Gabriela's body, often leaving her emotionally and physically drained after her sessions. Due to these circumstances, she decided to take a three months leave of absence from her work. This decision left her in a difficult financial situation, as she still had many financial commitments, including outstanding student loans, rent, medical bills, two pets to take care of and financially supporting her family living in suburban Ottawa due to her father also being on sick leave, while her mother was not working full-time.

*"Food was the easiest to give up. If I was really hungry in the evening, I would go to bed."*

When Gabriela had a little bit of money left over, she preferred to feed her pets at the expense of eating herself. "I would rather starve or not eat as much rather than get evicted", she explained. In order to find alternative sources of food, she found ways to stretch her groceries. For example, she began collecting points on her OPUS (public transportation) card which gave her coupons of \$5 or \$10 to spend on food. She also began purchasing the cheapest foods in the supermarket whilst trying to find a somewhat nutritious diet. Her food basket was generally composed of canned goods such as beans, vegetables and fruits. She also had to cut down her meal portions, and often had to find ways to trick her body to think she was eating fresh produce.

*"I can buy food tomorrow or two days from now. I would get excited and that would keep me going."*

Despite her challenges she was experiencing, Gabriela refused to use go to places offering free meals, as she still felt others in direr situations needed the services more than she did. She discovered a food basket service in Notre Dame de Grace, a North-Western neighborhood of Montreal, where she could obtain fresh vegetables. Unfortunately, she did not use this service often, as it prioritized families in need and did not always have basket left for individuals. Living at the other side of the city, Gabriela preferred not to pay \$6.00 of public transportation and risk getting nothing.

*"I felt like I should have been more responsible. I should have saved up more instead of buying clothes."*

Gabriela also delved into the stigmatization of living in hunger. She particularly felt embarrassed and ashamed of not having the agency (opportunity) to purchase food. "I felt like I should have been more responsible. I should have saved up more instead of buying clothes". Some of her friends had been laid off, yet had enough savings to live during their transition period, she explained. It induced a feeling of regret and self-blame for not being responsible enough with her money.

She also chose not to share her challenges with others. Her parents were also experiencing financial difficulties, and she felt opening up to them about this would have caused her more stress. By

deliberately not telling them, she felt she had created this healthy boundary thanks to which she was able to be strong enough on her own. She also elected not to tell her friends about her challenges with eating, in fear they would pity her. She felt compelled to keep it a secret for her own self-esteem, and to give others the impression she could handle it. Coming from a poor background, she did not feel like others needed to know that.

*“Everyone has a right to fresh food, not just any food.”*

This stigmatization was a significant contributing factor to Gabriela experiencing food insecurity. She believes increasing promotion of neighborhood-specific access to food baskets and food drives would have helped. “Everyone has a right to fresh food, not just any food”, she explains. Making the eligibility criteria to obtain food at food banks clearer would have helped her understand the resources available to her.

### A Third Emerging Factor: A Lack of Awareness of Available Resources

These stories give a glimpse into the difficulties and challenges vulnerable populations experience when living in poverty. They demonstrate: the impact on both physical and mental health, living with the social stigma of being hungry and/or poor, adapting to the “do-or-die” situations, and strategizing alternative sources of livelihood, amongst countless other factors.

Yet, these interviews also revealed a largely, unstudied factor as a barrier to food access: a lack of awareness of existing resources dedicated to either food aid or alleviating poverty.

For example, Nathalie<sup>41</sup> moved to Montreal from a rural village in Eastern Canada. After establishing that she would cohabit with a friend during her studies, her friend decided otherwise, leaving her stuck with the full rent of the apartment to be paid alone. In order to pay the apartment, Nathalie exclusively ate peanut butter with banana chips for three months, losing five pounds every week in the process. Unfortunately, it had not been made aware to her that existing services either in food assistance or legal renting counsel existed and were available. For example, the *Régie du Logement*<sup>42</sup> (Québec’s government-regulated agency dealing with dwelling leases) could have offered counsel regarding subletting or transferring her lease. Alternatively, she may have been able to find a roommate by posting an ad in *Concordia Off-Campus Housing and Job*<sup>43</sup>. Finally, she may have qualified for financial aid or work study, had she known that this office existed on campus.

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<sup>41</sup> Informal interview with Nathalie, a government civil servant who also experienced hunger during her studies at Concordia. Interviewed by Paul Berthe, March 18, 2018.

<sup>42</sup> Quebec’s regulatory body for dwelling leasing. Retrieved from <http://rdl.gouv.qc.ca>. Visit website for more information.

<sup>43</sup> Concordia’s Housing service. Retrieved from <http://csu.qc.ca/services/housing-and-job-bank-hojo>. Visit website for more information.

Thomas, whose story we explored above, must ration his meals and walk close to a kilometer to be able to purchase more affordable foods, yet never discovered that *Second-Life*, an organization specializing in selling cheap discarded fruits and vegetables at precise pick-up points around downtown Montreal on a weekly or bi-weekly basis, has been up and running since 2014. Alternatively, *Hall Mission*, a market in the same model as an on-donation grocery store that allows individuals to freely choose which foods they would like to take home, was a place he could have gone when he ran out of food to eat. In his suggested solutions, he mentioned that, although impossible for him to afford, owning a car would largely help him, as he would be able to purchase food in bulk at a discounted price by going to Costco. Yet, he would already be able to go to Costco by using cheap, small-scale businesses that periodically organize trips to big shopping centers, had he known this option existed.

Similarly, Gabriela was hesitant to use food-aid services because she was unaware if she qualified. She also used a specific service across the city because it was the closest one she knew, yet many organizations scattered in Montreal's different neighborhoods work towards alleviating hunger, either directly or indirectly. Britney uses food banks, but when she must purchase her food, she cannot always buy nutritious ingredients due to their price. Yet, she was not aware of the fact that *McGill's Scholarship and Student Aid office* offers very small cash loans (less than \$100) for students in need, which she could use to purchase the foods she was missing.

Despite the limited sample size, this apparent shortage of information and communication between services and vulnerable populations appears to be a significant contributor to the continuing hunger in the city. Although probably not a determining factor in finding sustainable, long-term solutions to food-insecurity, increasing awareness would undoubtedly provide more humane lifestyles to people in need.

### **Part 3: Existing Solutions and Policy Recommendations**

#### **Existing Solutions**

##### Government-Led Policies

Over the past twenty years, the Quebec government has taken certain steps to eradicate poverty:

1. The *Act to Combat poverty and Social Exclusion*.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Retrieved from <https://mtess.gouv.qc.ca>. Visit the website for more information on the Act.

At the beginning of the 21st Century, Quebec began emphasizing proper living conditions for all citizens. This marked a revolutionary initiative for provincial governments, which until then had not focused on poverty as a collective priority. As a result, Quebec adopted the *Act to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion* in 2002, and set in motion a plan to implement it.

## 2. 2004-2010 Government Action Plan to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion.<sup>45</sup>

Quebec's first government plan's main objective was to empower communities with higher concentration of poverty to craft and implement local strategies. To achieve this, it was primarily based on two principles<sup>46</sup>:

- Employment is the leading solution to assuring the economic security and social inclusion of individuals.
- More protection must be granted to individuals with a severely limited capacity for employment.

In practice, these objectives were divided into an array of measures totaling \$4.5 billion, which was implemented over 6 years. These included a participation premium to support the efforts of social assistance recipients trying to find a job, increasing minimum wage from \$7.45 to \$9.50, establishing a baseline threshold for poverty, emphasizing social assistance for low-income families and the youth and promoting cooperation between the government and civil society.<sup>47</sup>

The plan yielded positive results for the time period. Between 2003 and 2009, the percentage of people on social assistance decreased from 8.4% to 7.4%; there was an 18.2% decrease of children on last-resort financial assistance; and minimum wage earners saw their average income increase, particularly for low-income households.<sup>48</sup>

Unfortunately, the end of the plan came after the 2007 financial crisis, leading to significant reversals of the progress that had been achieved, leaving the next plan with a big challenge.

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<sup>45</sup> Ministère de l'Emploi, de la Solidarité sociale et de la Famille (2004). *2004 - 2010 Government Action Plan to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion*. Montreal: Government of Québec.

<sup>46</sup> Principles were copied from Ministère de l'Emploi, de la Solidarité sociale et de la Famille (2004). *2004 - 2010 Government Action Plan to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion*. Montreal: Government of Québec.

<sup>47</sup> Retrieved from report on Ministère de l'Emploi, de la Solidarité sociale et de la Famille (2004). *2004 - 2010 Government Action Plan to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion*. Montreal: Government of Québec.

<sup>48</sup> Retrieved from report: Ministère de l'Emploi, de la Solidarité sociale et de la Famille (2010). *Government Action Plan for Solidarity and Social Inclusion 2010 - 2015*. Government of Québec.

3. The *Government Action Plan for Solidarity and Inclusion: 2010-2015*.<sup>49</sup>

A major critique of Quebec's first plan was that it did not include a participatory approach in conjunction with relevant communities in its policy-making and subsequent implementation. As such, it composed one of the four critical components of the second plan, the other three being:

1. Taking into consideration the value of work in order to create self-sufficiency.
2. Financially supporting the most impoverished communities.
3. Improving the living standards for low-income populations.

With a \$7 billion budget over 5 years, the measures put into practice primarily focused on building relationships amongst individuals by creating Solidarity Alliances with local and regional communities, ensuring the coherence of government actions, instituting a Solidarity Week and a responsible public procurement strategy. Additionally, this second plan viewed building on the previous one by adding voluntary sector investment in housing and employment support.<sup>50</sup>

This second plan also had mild successes. By 2016, Quebec still had 419,527 people on social welfare and 802,377 people living under the poverty line set at \$18,000 annually for a single person. This compared to 485,114 (recipients on social welfare) in early 2010 (no accurate numbers were found for the total number of people under the poverty line for 2010).<sup>51</sup>

As a result, the government drafted a third plan, *Government Action Plan to Foster Economic Inclusion and Social Participation 2017-2023*, aiming to lift 100 thousand people out of poverty, by investing in social housing, continuing to promote local participation and increasing the effectiveness of government action against poverty. No figures yet exist for 2018.

### The City of Montreal

In order to fight poverty, the city of Montreal, in partnership with the Quebec government, developed a strategy based on three axes of intervention:

1. Preventing emerging poverty
2. Mobilizing local actors in the identification of poverty clusters and solutions

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Retrieved from World Vision Canada (2013). *Poverty at your Doorstep - Montreal*. Poverty at your Doorstep.

3. Promoting a multi-sectorial approach with various services to target particularly vulnerable populations (e.g. homeless individuals, substance users and, mentally unhealthy individuals)<sup>52</sup>

The plan had a facet regarding hunger, particularly aiming at creating a link between food security and sustainable development, and included<sup>53</sup>:

- Increasing access to healthy foods (particularly fruits and vegetables) with a particular emphasis on the most impoverished neighborhoods
- Mobilizing citizens and actors to increase access to food in a sustainable way
- Reinforcing the link between the efforts to increase food security to sustainable development through a transfer of knowledge, linkages with producers, better urban infrastructure and housing, etc.

### Civil Society

Amongst the countless organizations dedicated to bringing immediate relief to the hungry, the most prominent is *Moisson Montreal*, a huge non-profit charity that regroups and redistributes food donations to community organizations on the Island of Montreal. The organization provides food donations to 241 community organizations, distributing roughly 14.4 million kilos of foodstuffs throughout the year<sup>54</sup>. The umbrella of *Moisson Montreal* is the catalyst to the functioning of countless, neighborhood-based initiatives, which in turn gives vulnerable populations the opportunity to have access to a local food bank in their area.

Soup kitchens also have a tremendous impact on the hungry, as it gives them an opportunity to eat a hot meal, regardless of the season, in a safe-space environment, often surrounded by a friendly and understanding staff. Prominent soup kitchens include *Robins des Bois*<sup>55</sup>, *NDG Food Depot*<sup>56</sup>, *Mile*

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<sup>52</sup> Anténor, R. (2014). *La lutte contre la pauvreté dans les quartiers montréalais : le cas de l'organisme Les Fourchettes de l'espoir à Montréal-Nord*. Master's Thesis. Université du Québec à Montréal.

<sup>53</sup> Targets were copied from Anténor, R (2014).

<sup>54</sup> Retrieved from <https://moissonmontréal.org>. Visit website for more information on the nonprofit's activities and achievements.

<sup>55</sup> Consult <https://robindesbois.ca> for additional information.

<sup>56</sup> Consult <https://depotndg.org> for additional information.

*End Community Mission*<sup>57</sup>, as well as university campus organizations like *Concordia's the People's Potato*<sup>58</sup> and *McGill's Midnight Kitchen*<sup>59</sup>.

Supermarket Recovery Programmes<sup>60</sup> (SRP) is another large scale initiative aiming to reduce food wastes and promote food security. Big supermarket chains such as Provigo, Maxi, Metro, Super C and IGA donate unsellable and undesired produce to Food Banks of Quebec, who can then feed people in need. In 2016, the project recovered 2.5 million kilograms of food from 177 supermarkets, representing an impressive \$20 million worth of food. The project aspires to collect 8.5 million kilograms of food from 647 supermarkets in the coming future.

### Alternative Schools-of-Thoughts and Projects

Despite the ever-growing number of nonprofits aimed at reducing food wastes and poverty in Montreal, hunger counts do not appear to be decreasing<sup>61</sup>. This has led to alternative reflections, projects and movements seeking to steer away from traditional methods of relief and seek to empower vulnerable populations to pull above the poverty threshold.

*Ecosystèmes Alimentaires Urbains*<sup>62</sup> (EAU) is a project created by Emilie Nollet and Olivier Demers-Dubé which seeks to make aquaponic farming a solution to food insecurity. As a complex agricultural technique combining aquaculture (fish farming) and hydroponics (growing plants in water), the project would allow farmers to grow vegetables in extra-nutrient rich water. By accounting for factors such as temperature, wind, humidity and pests, the farms have the potential of nourishing populations that cannot afford purchasing foods in grocery stores. These farms - the prototype being about the size of a small shipping container - could be incorporated in an urban setting. Still in development, the project still has hurdles to overcome, such as finding a way to inexpensively produce the farms, training locals on how to use them and making farms entirely manageable locally.

The question of taking an active stance on poverty has also been explored. Mary Ellen Prange<sup>63</sup>, chair of the Food Insecurity Workgroup, argues that food banks do not contribute to the long-term solution

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<sup>57</sup> Consult <https://mileendmission.org> for additional information.

<sup>58</sup> Consult <https://peoplespotato.com> for additional information.

<sup>59</sup> Consult <https://midnightkitchencollective.wordpress.com> for additional information.

<sup>60</sup> Retrieved from <http://banquesalimentaires.org>. Visit the website for more information on the Supermarket Recovery Program.

<sup>61</sup> Moisson Montréal (2017). *2017 Montreal Hunger Count*.

<sup>62</sup> Retrieved from <http://eau-agriculture.com>. Visit the website for more information on the project.

<sup>63</sup> Ghebreslassie, M. (2017). *Food banks are not solving food insecurity problem, expert says*. CBC.



to hunger, but are rather a “short-term band aid on this huge gaping wound”<sup>64</sup>. Instead, she argues putting pressure on politicians is necessary for finding income-based solutions. She quotes that a living wage in Toronto is around \$19/hour, so increasing the minimum wage to \$15/hour would still be significantly short of the income required to live above the poverty threshold.

Valerie Tarasuk<sup>65</sup> goes beyond that by exploring the implications establishing a Basic Income Guarantee (B.I.G.) would have on solving food insecurity. Unlike Prange, she argues that alternative strategies such as: increasing minimum wage, creating more affordable housing and increasing social welfare assistance, would not be as effective as establishing a B.I.G. By doing so, it would more effectively solve challenges of food insecurity due to it being able to affect all individuals.

*“Problems of food insecurity are not limited to any single population subgroup defined by household structure, main income sources, or some other socio-demographic characteristic – the only common denominator is inadequate, insecure incomes”, she explains. “A major advantage of a B.I.G. over policy initiatives tailored to specific population subgroups such as seniors, social assistance recipients, working families, or youth, is that a B.I.G. can reach all individuals and households who are vulnerable to food insecurity by virtue of inadequate, insecure incomes.”<sup>66</sup>*

### **Policy recommendations**

In light of the aforementioned existing strategies, it is important to note that arguing for seemingly simple solutions, such as increasing the number of organizations offering food, whilst alleviating hunger, would not be maximized unless paired with efforts to promote said resources. As such, drafting policies centered around increasing awareness of existing organizations and government bodies either directly or indirectly linked to aiding in the fight against food insecurity, would have more significant impact on reducing the hunger count in Montreal.

#### 1. Awareness Campaigns

- A. Hosting creative events on food insecurity and poverty to provide a platform in which a dialogue around hunger and poverty can be created amongst the general public.

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Tarasuk, Valerie (2017). *Implications of a Basic Income Guarantee for Household Food Insecurity*. Research Paper 24. Thunder Bay: Northern Policy Institute. Retrieved from <http://proof.utoronto.ca/>

<sup>66</sup> Tarasuk (2017), quote retrieved from Press Release published on <http://proof.utoronto.ca/>

When exploring how to reduce the stigma toward persons with mental illnesses, Corrigan and Watson<sup>67</sup> (2000) mention protest, education and contact as the three principals most effective approaches of achieving this. A similar idea could be conceptualized here through raising awareness. As illustrated above, all of the participants in this research have mentioned suffering from the social stigma surrounding poverty, being food-insecure, or both. A dialogue around hunger and poverty could be created by using the city of Montreal's high propensity to organize eccentric and successful, public, free festivals. Featuring either as a singular public event or combined with other prominent challenges the city faces today, this would help facilitate a platform in which the general public can start to understand the struggles and difficulties of living in poverty in their city, along with giving them a safe space to ask further questions and inquire about solutions and movements at hand. This could also present an opportunity for organizations to actively participate in solutions to increase their visibility among the general public.

Furthermore, incorporating visual and performing arts into such an event - such as poetry, painting, music, photography and dance - would allow artists and speakers to accurately portray their experience with hunger and poverty in the manner they best see fit, and would attract a more diverse audience.

B. Increasing visibility of both government-offered and nonprofit services through state-backed marketing campaigns.

Firstly, the government must increase the visibility of the services it provides, particularly focusing on:

- HydroQuébec<sup>68</sup>;
- La Régie du Logement<sup>69</sup>;
- The Commission des normes, de l'équité, de la santé et de la sécurité du travail (CNESST)<sup>70</sup>;
- Emploi-Québec<sup>71</sup>;

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<sup>67</sup> Corrigan PW. Penn DL. Lessons from social psychology on discrediting psychiatric stigma. *Am Psychol.* 1999;54:765–776.

<sup>68</sup> The company in charge to providing electricity. Retrieved from <https://hydroquebec.com>. Visit website for additional information.

<sup>69</sup> The organization in charge of ensuring rental laws are enforced and respected. Retrieved from <https://rdl.gouv.qc.ca>. Visit website for additional information.

<sup>70</sup> The organization in charge of ensuring workplace equity and safety is respected. Retrieved from <https://cnesst.gouv.qc.ca>. Visit website for additional information.

<sup>71</sup> The organization primarily dedicated to helping find employment. Retrieved from <https://emploi.quebec.gouv.qc.ca>. Visit website for additional information.

The state must actively promote the public services it offers. To promote visibility, the city of Montreal could engage in maximizing active marketing programs by placing them in affluent public spaces, such as busy metro stations, heavily used bus lines and billboards, as well as semi-public places like certain cafés and movie theaters. Although currently done to some extent, the municipality must increase the visibility of its public entities in order to reach its most isolated populations, which often are the ones most in need of aforementioned services. This could be achieved through increased traditional marketing tools such as print advertisement - including newsletters, billboards, big posters and flyers - as well as TV and radio commercials. Living in the age of the internet, content-based marketing must also be incorporated and should include social media campaigns, tutorial videos, Q&A sessions with experts and webinars. Within public websites, modern tools minimizing wait times must be incorporated, such as live chats, links to speak to customer service on social media platforms, as well as better placed information, like having a section on websites detailing the services offered by each public company detailing the services offered. Finally, eliminating silos by regrouping all services on an easily accessible, clear website is a must.

Secondly, civil society itself must take a more active stance in its awareness campaigns. Although understandably falling low in the priority list of tasks to achieve, better reach and visibility is primordial to concerned individuals, as they cannot be aware of available places they can go or reach out to if they are unaware of their existence. By basing themselves on famous marketing campaigns for nonprofits, these organizations could better be recognized by the general public, which in turn could lead additional awareness through word-to-mouth channels. Famous recent nonprofit marketing campaigns include the *Ask Alex*<sup>72</sup>, *27 Empty Buses*<sup>73</sup>, *Ask Him*<sup>74</sup> and *#MeToo* (Just Be Inc.)<sup>75</sup>.

These recommendations may imply a switch in mentality and strategies for both the city and nonprofits. For the former, it must switch from a profit-based strategy (allowing businesses to promote their brands in metro stations for example) to need-based strategies (targeting at-need populations). For nonprofits, it may include redirecting valuable resources (e.g. income donations) from active participation in causes to longer-term, passive campaigns.

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<sup>72</sup> A campaign led by Cyrenians to raise awareness around homelessness and family exclusion. Visit <https://askalex.scot> for more information.

<sup>73</sup> A campaign led by UNICEF representing representing the 27 million children out of school and living in conflict zones. Visit <https://unicef.org/media> for more information.

<sup>74</sup> A campaign led by Movember and Unmute encouraging men to reach out to others either face-to-face or online. Visit <https://ca.movember.com/mens-health/we-need-to-ask> for more information.

<sup>75</sup> A campaign aimed at encouraging men and women who have suffered from sexual violence to speak out. Visit <https://metoomvmt.org> for more information.

## 2. Increasing Local Participation and Education in Learning Environments

### A. Incentivizing more sharing of coping mechanisms and knowledge between individuals and communities (e.g. promoting carpooling in a community);

An issue stemming directly from stigma is the lack of information-sharing amongst general individuals. In other words, feelings of shame, embarrassment, a fear of pity and wishing not to burden other people with their problems, often induce people to keep their struggles internally, or in certain instances make it a secret only bestowed upon close friends. As a result, information silos are created amongst communities whom experience similar or same challenges, as each individual develops coping mechanisms that are not shared with others.

Breaking information silos could be a key component of poverty alleviation and hunger reduction in Montreal. It could be done at city-level through active participation, as discussed in Part A. At individual levels, it could be achieved through ideas mentioned by participants, such as creating support groups on university campuses where vulnerable students could share information in a safe space. Many of the participants mentioned that the interviews were difficult yet “helpful”, “self-reflective”, “therapeutic”, proving that discussing these issues with a dedicated, interested person or group can yield extremely positive results. Not limited to student campuses, these groups could be advertised around the city, targeting either particular communities or strangers, and could be offered in many different neighborhoods by a regulated body that would ensure a healthy environment and a provide a trained staff.

A secondary benefit of such meetings could be the sharing of coping mechanisms and community-based solution-building. For example, ridesharing initiatives such as *Amigo Express*<sup>76</sup>, *Turo*<sup>77</sup> or *Getaround*<sup>78</sup> have risen to extreme popularity over the last decade. Yet, these companies focus on intra-city services. These group discussions could allow the identification of common interest in creating neighborhood-specific carpooling cooperatives to local stores. This would then turn an individual coping mechanism into a group-sharing operation.

Another benefit of community gathering is that it creates local empowerment. An individual person has little chance to request change, but demanding change through a communal body could yield further progress. This could lead to better cooperation between leaders for change and local populations, and could push initiatives to gear towards more bottom-up approaches.

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<sup>76</sup> A carpooling company. Visit <http://amigoexpress.com> for more information.

<sup>77</sup> A peer-to-peer carsharing marketplace. Visit <http://turo.com> for more information.

<sup>78</sup> A carpooling company. Visit <http://getaround.com> for more information.

- B. Incorporating a class in high school and university curricula on identifying, using and managing available resources.

During her interview, Nathalie mentioned that she wished a class had been incorporated in her high school curriculum that focused on teaching her “life” skills, such as filing taxes, ironing, cooking, how to change a tire, what to look for when visiting an apartment and what to do when being in trouble, amongst many other topics.

This idea, although with tremendous potential, could be remodeled (to keep with the relevance of this research) in order to create linkages between poverty as well as food insecurity and resources. Education represents the key to breaking down barriers permeating society, such as stigma and challenges around access. Through this course, young minds would be made aware of food insecurity in the specific context of Montreal, would explore the current solutions established to combat it and could actively participate in long-term sustainable projects by pitching in relevant ideas.

Furthermore, these students would then be equipped to tackle these challenges should they encounter them at some stage later in their lives. These courses would be a medium of communication and learning, through which they would learn how to identify the resources available to them, such as understanding the role of Quebec’s complex network of public utility companies. Through focused workshops, students would be brought into complex life-like scenarios, allowing them to learn the tools necessary to handle such situations should they arise in the future.

Finally, these courses could act as intergenerational bridges and foster collective appreciation and solidarity. Guest speakers, either working in the field or having experienced such issues, would be decisive actors in making the connection between students and these challenges.

## **Limitations**

It is important to note that this paper is not without limitations. The interviewees all mentioned experiencing some form of stigma, as well as being unaware of services available to them. Yet, the participant pool was quite limited in sample size (six) and type (most were university students). Further research on the topic including a much broader spectrum of participants is required to safely and accurately confirm these findings. Furthermore, the most prominent factors influencing food insecurity were explored here, but due to limited resources, others were excluded. These would have to be studied and included in order to set forward policies.

## **Conclusion**

Often associated with poverty in countries struggling to develop, there appears to exist wide discrepancies in the perceived and understood notion of food insecurity and the reality of its existence in developed urban contexts such as Montreal. In other words, it appears society either ignores the existence and magnitude of the challenge of hunger in the city, or deliberately avoids speaking about the subject, leading to taboo-like social stigma. This in turn prevents the creation of a healthy dialogue around these issues and limits the scope, range and effectiveness of existing policies.

Hence, this report emphasizes first focusing on breaking down the social barriers allowing this stigma to exist in order to achieve significant, long-term results in the fight against poverty and hunger. Four solutions were argued, centered around: organizing collective events, clever marketing campaigns and emphasizing these issues during school years. If these collective efforts are successful, more tangible solutions mentioned in this report (e.g. establishing a Basic Income Guarantee) face much higher probability of yielding significant positive results.

There is no doubt achieving such solutions would represent significant progress not only in the fight against hunger and poverty, but would also be a pioneer project illustrating the importance of including the study of social isolation in global thematic solution-building.

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