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Scrimping on Food

Sub-Title

Why some Westsiders are suffering from malnutrition

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Content

An old woman struggles to her feet on the No. 7 Dunbar bus. She reaches down to pick up the bags of groceries at her feet and nearly topples over. It's not easy going shopping when you don't have a car. But that's not the only problem for seniors and low-income residents living on Vancouver's Westside: in neighbourhoods famous for their trendy boutiques and cafés, some residents are suffering from malnutrition.

In 2005, BC Stats reported that nearly 40 per cent of Westside residents put more than a third of their income toward rent. This leaves little money for other necessities—like fresh fruits and vegetables.

“Food is the first thing to go,” says Heather Pottery, co-author of a 2007 report titled Exploring Food Security in Vancouver's Westside, which she and fellow University of Victoria nursing student Adrienne Jinkerson prepared for the Westside Food Security Collaborative (WFSC) last year. “A recurring comment we heard was: ‘What can I scrimp on in order to pay the rent?’”

Working in collaboration with Vancouver Coastal Health and WFSC, Pottery and Jinkerson conducted focus groups with five Westside social service agencies and 40 community members. They identified several categories “in need,” including single moms, people who had difficulty preparing meals either due to a disability or poor kitchen facilities, seniors, and low-income earners.

“Low incomes, health, the cost of food, and high rents are all factors that collide,” says Pottery.

The pair also found that focus group participants were reluctant to talk about their situations. “There's a real social stigma to admitting you have needs on the Westside,” Pottery says. (Of course, several other areas in the city have been identified as “food insecure” as well—including Renfrew-Collingwood, Grandview-Woodland, and so-called higher income neighbourhoods like Oakridge. Even Kerrisdale has only one big supermarket.)

Another major issue for Westside residents is mobility. “Even if you have an accessible bus on your route, carrying groceries can still be problematic,” says Jinkerson. “HandyDART [TransLink’s shared-ride buses, specially equipped for passengers with disabilities] does provide service, but that’s \$4.50 a round trip and comes right out of the food budget.”

Pottery says seniors who have difficulty walking are particularly vulnerable. “They may have walkers, scooters, or wheelchairs, and getting around is nearly impossible.” She says focus group participants complained about the narrow aisles in many food stores, and big marketing displays, which can be difficult to get around. And while there are several fresh produce stores in Kitsilano, residents say they can’t get their wheelchairs or scooters inside some of the cheaper grocers on West Broadway.

This has many residents opting to shop at convenience stores. But while they are often the easiest to get to, they’re also more expensive and may not offer fresh produce. As a result, people end up buying cheap, filling food such as pasta and rice.

“Food insecurity does not mean that people are going hungry,” the report explains. “Instead, it means that they are not accessing the best, or most nutritious, foods possible.”

Thankfully, there are now a number of innovative programs operating on the Westside. One subsidized housing residence has hot meal programs, a buying club (where more mobile residents do the shopping and buy in bulk for members), a weekly delivery of a “good food box” of fresh foods purchased through wholesalers, and an on-site, low-cost food store.

Other Westside agencies run community kitchens (where participants shop and prepare meals together), community garden programs, Meals on Wheels, and emergency food cupboards. One agency distributes roughly \$11,000 in grocery store vouchers a month, but says their clients still need to “double-dip.”

“People are very resourceful,” explains Jinkerson, “but even if they are watching for sales, cutting coupons, and participating in meal programs, they still often have to supplement their groceries at the food bank.”

Participants had some excellent recommendations for addressing food access issues, including better shuttle service to stores; an affordable farmers’ market; referrals to Quest, a food recovery outlet that has low-cost stores; growing more fruit trees on boulevards; shopping by phone; and grocery delivery services.

Spring Gillard is the author of [Diary of a Compost Hotline Operator](#), [Edible Essays on City Farming](#) (New Society, 2003). [Exploring Food Security in Vancouver’s Westside](#) is posted at [vancouver.ca \[1\]/foodpolicy](http://vancouver.ca/[1]/foodpolicy) under “Tools and Resources / Council Reports.”



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