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WATERLOO REGION

Global food insecurity researchers find ‘widespread’ issues in Waterloo Region

‘Research suggests that things were difficult for refugees during the pandemic, and those difficulties haven’t gone away,’ said Wilfrid Laurier University political science professor Jonathan Crush

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Zack Ahmed talks about a photo project involving food security for immigrants Thursday at the Balsillie School of International Affairs.

Mathew McCarthy/Waterloo Region Record

By Robert Williams Reporter

When the COVID-19 pandemic arrived, many refugee households in Waterloo Region faced a daily tradeoff: pay for rising rents or purchase groceries.

A new multi-year study that tracked newcomer Somali, Syrian and Afghan families through the pandemic indicates food insecurity in the region is not just a matter of insufficient food — it is linked to housing pressures, transportation gaps, unstable employment, rising prices, gendered labour and mental health.

With research teams also documenting conditions in South Africa and Ecuador, the study reveals that even as pandemic constraints subside, many of the challenges do not, with rising food prices, inflation, disrupted work and housing pressures continuing to shape daily survival.

“The findings show clearly that food insecurity is widespread among refugee households, even when dietary diversity appears relatively high,” said Zack Ahmed, a PhD candidate in global governance at the Balsillie School of International Affairs at Wilfrid Laurier University.

“Many families were able to maintain a mix of food groups, but only through constant prioritizing, rationing, skipping meals and stretching limited budgets.”

Ahmed and fellow researchers Zhenzhong Si and Sujata Ramachandran led a post-pandemic policy forum at Laurier on Thursday, bringing together the team’s researchers with local policymakers, public health staff, food bank representatives, settlement workers and people with lived experience.

Among the forum’s speakers was Laurier political science professor Jonathan Crush, who established the Migration and Food Security in the Global South network (MiFOOD), a global research network that focuses

on the interactions between migration and food security. Ahmed, Si and Ramachandran are all researchers with the network.
This latest project allowed the team to delve deeper into South Africa and Ecuador food insecurity, but also included a local component in Waterloo Region — an emerging destination for newcomer settlement, particularly as the population is projected to reach a million people.

The extent of the growth has been challenged by some local researchers, but Statistics Canada's latest population projections for 2049, released earlier this week, continue to give a range of possible growth scenarios for the region from 911,000 to as high as 1.25 million.

If it is reached, much of the increase will be driven by immigration, refugee resettlement and the continued arrival of international students.

"This was the first time that our network was able to do a study of where we all live," said Crush, who has spent his career leading research in some of the most food-insecure communities in the world.

"We don't want to just sit in the ivory tower, and this is quite important information as we continue to work in this community. The research suggests that things were difficult for refugees during the pandemic, and those difficulties haven't gone away."

The study looked into a variety of factors impacting local refugees, including access to halal and cultural foods, the broader social environment, impacts on mental health and the differing experiences between genders in a given household.

Jonathan Crush, a professor at the Balsillie School of International Affairs, speaks at Thursday's forum.

Mathew McCarthy/Waterloo Region Record

The research shows women in Somali and Syrian households carried the majority of food-related labour, including meal planning, cooking, grocery shopping and rationing food during particularly difficult months.

Mothers frequently reduced their own food intake to ensure children were fed first, and several Somali women described waking early to prepare meals, manage online schooling and care for elderly or ill family members

while also navigating pandemic anxieties.
One mother noted that her workload “doubled overnight” when all seven children were home.

Across communities, women spoke of chronic worry, fatigue, loss of sleep and the emotional strain of managing constant scarcity.

But those mental health challenges were not limited to women.

Men described distress associated with disrupted employment, declining income and the erosion of their role as financial providers.

Job loss or reduced hours due to COVID-19 restrictions affected nearly every surveyed household.

The research also revealed remarkable resilience and creativity. Families cooked in bulk to reduce costs, shared food with neighbours, repurposed leftovers and supported one another through informal networks.

During roundtable discussions on Thursday, participants observed the region’s food banks are now serving as regular grocery sources for many households rather than emergency supports, and the number of people using food bank services has not declined since the pandemic spike.

According to The Food Bank of Waterloo Region’s latest impact report, its network set a record with nearly 622,000 total visits to its food hamper programs in the past year, and distributed a record-breaking 9.6 million pounds of fresh, frozen, and non-perishable food to network partners — a seven per cent year-over-year increase.

The report also revealed 7,000 households accessed a hamper program more than eight times, a 21 per cent increase from the year before.

“Many families are accessing food support multiple times a week. Newcomers often do not know how the system works or how to navigate fragmented services,” said Ahmed.

“Strengthening newcomer food security requires collaboration across sectors and levels of government. It requires planning for a growing and diversifying region. It also requires supporting the community networks and informal systems that were crucial during the pandemic and continue to bear much of the weight today.”

During the forum, facilitators documented ideas ranging from quick wins that could be implemented within a year to longer term structural changes in housing, planning, funding and governance.

These recommendations will be consolidated into a one-page action agenda and circulated to regional and municipal partners, service providers and community organizations.

“The forum underscored that food security is not only about food — it is about access to affordable housing, safe and reliable transportation, stable income, cultural identity, caregiving responsibilities and psychological well-being,” said Ahmed.

“It is about belonging, dignity and the promise of building a life in a new country.”

Robert Williams is a reporter with the Waterloo Region Record.