

## Homelessness and Food Insecurity on Canada's Food Island

*A Summary of the 2024 Harry Baglole Memorial Public Symposium in Island Studies*

**Co-hosts:** *Institute of Island Studies, UPEI Faculty of Science (Foods and Nutrition program in Applied Human Sciences), the Campus Food Bank, the UPEI Student Union, the Native Council of PEI, Meals on Wheels PEI, the John Howard Society of PEI, the Adventure Group, and the Upper Room Hospitality Ministry.*

**Date:** November 9, 2024

**Venue:** Alex H. MacKinnon Auditorium, Don and Marion McDougall Hall

“Homelessness and Food Insecurity on Canada’s Food Island” was the first Harry Baglole Memorial Public Symposium in Island Studies held since the COVID-19 pandemic. The symposium was a collaborative initiative, intended to create a baseline understanding of how organizations working to resolve food insecurity and homelessness on Prince Edward Island understand these two intersecting issues. The organizers’ priority was to offer a free, public event, the content of which was live-streamed and the recording of which could be accessed virtually at any time.

### **Opening Messages**

The evening began with a powerful greeting from **Jamie Lee Augustine** (the Native Council of Prince Edward Island), who helped us keep in mind that we are living and learning on the traditional and unceded lands of the Epekwitnewaq Mi’kmaq. Two keynote addresses put the panel discussion and audience interaction to follow into perspective:

- UPEI faculty member **Dr. Jennifer Taylor**, Professor, Foods and Nutrition, Department of Applied Human Sciences, and food insecurity researcher, and
- **Jacinta Brown**, a UPEI alumna and Program Manager of the Community Outreach Centre with The Adventure Group

Dr. Taylor provided an overview of household food insecurity as well as updated information on the situation in Prince Edward Island. Household food insecurity, defined as inadequate or insecure access to food because of financial constraints, is a growing public health crisis in Canada and in PEI, which has the highest rates of childhood food insecurity in Canada, with 2 of 5 children living in food insecure households. Her recent research found that over 80% of social assistance recipients on PEI were food insecure. People living in rural parts of the Island are also experiencing high levels of food insecurity, as Dr. Taylor noted with reference to the recent academic work of one of our speakers, **Oliver Batchilder** (a fourth-year student of philosophy, politics and economics at Mount Allison University at the time of the symposium).

Insufficient income and high costs combine to cause food insecurity which reduces one’s quality of life, increases the incidence of disease and is inseparable from shame, guilt, and the psychological impact that comes with the inability to provide for one’s loved ones. Dr. Taylor emphasized that while emergency food providers such as the evening’s panel discussants **Mike MacDonald** (Executive Director, Upper Room Hospitality Ministry), continue to work to respond to

escalating rates of food insecurity, the only solution is to address its root cause: poverty. Prince Edward Island is the only province to pass a Poverty Elimination Strategy Act, which provides an opportunity to strengthen public health policies and programs.

Jacinta opened her keynote address by acknowledging how controversial it is to even talk about homelessness (indeed, it was difficult for the Institute of Island Studies to find not-for-profit service providers willing to talk publicly about homelessness on Prince Edward Island for this symposium). Prince Edward Island is no different from Canada in that economics, health and substance abuse are some of the biggest causes of homelessness even as homelessness on Prince Edward Island has the highest cost per person for the loss of productivity due to substance use in Canada, at the time of this symposium, and a 100% increase in overdoses. At the same time, there are factors such as trauma that are also causal to homelessness but that are underresearched: as a result, the ultimate causes of homelessness are neither discussed openly nor accepted widely.

Jacinta's keynote was a call to action for the audience to educate themselves and those whom they know about the lives of people who are homeless. Consider that a very high proportion of homeless individuals on Prince Edward Island are Indigenous, that homelessness and unemployment are directly correlated, and that people who are homeless are not only stigmatized but also experience crime. Consider your everyday reactions towards a person who is visibly homeless in relation to what challenges that person is likely to be experiencing on a moment-to-moment basis. Consider that there is nowhere for people who are being released from jail or mental health facilities to go if residents and governments do not recognize and support the creation of housing solutions that support their specific needs. The longer that a person is homeless, the more illnesses they will have and the more support they will need. Imagine how difficult it is to go from being homeless to being able to bathe, to sleep, to become employed, if the world around you is neither set up to support you nor wants to acknowledge the need to support you. Increasing public awareness about the need for collaborative reforms that create momentum for mental health services embedded in housing services, job training, long-term supportive housing and more is an action that every resident of Prince Edward Island can take in their own social circles.

### **Content Highlights**

**Josh Constantinou** (Coordinated Access Coordinator, John Howard Society of PEI) introduced us to the Prince Edward Island Homelessness Dashboard, reminding us that each of the 198 persons experiencing homelessness reflected in the dashboard at the time of the symposium is a real person in a real situation from whom information has been collected to create the Dashboard in October 2023. The Dashboard is available publicly and updated on a bi-weekly basis at: <https://www.johnhowardsocietypei.com/services/coordinated-access/>.

**Oliver Batchilder** (Mount Allison University), who completed a survey-based summer project about food insecurity on Prince Edward Island in 2024 under the supervision of Dr. Mario Levesque, gave us a sense of what food insecurity looks like in the general geographies associated with Souris, Three Rivers, Crapaud, Kensington, O'Leary, and Alberton. Oliver's research did not just identify if people are food insecure or the extent to which they are food insecure; it also considered the correlation between food insecurity and factors such as household characteristics, access to food, and informal systems that exist for food sharing in rural Prince Edward Island. If you would like to learn more about the work that led Oliver to identify a 52.8% rate of food insecurity amongst

the survey respondents, this research is available at:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1GmwsWVICKjzEs7Cmhol0JzL9jyjNrnWk/view?usp=sharing> or by contacting [onbatchilder@mta.ca](mailto:onbatchilder@mta.ca).

### **Panel Discussion**

**Chris Clay** (Reaching Home Coordinator, Native Council of Prince Edward Island), **Haley Zavo** (Executive Director, Meals on Wheels PEI), **Mike MacDonald** (Executive Director, Upper Room Hospitality Ministry) and **Josh Constantinou** (Coordinated Access Coordinator, John Howard Society of PEI) brought the themes of the evening into focus by talking about why they do what they do, and sharing what they believe is important for everyone on Prince Edward Island to do, if we are to work together towards alleviating the crises of homelessness and food insecurity.

While everyone on our panel did not get into their fields of work by way of intention, each of our four panelists has found the motivation to carry out their work because they see that their work is necessary. In speaking about their interaction with people who need the help that they provide, the panelists communicated how proximity to a problem makes us act differently than distance: we care more when we are closer and the communities of care that we create are collaborative ones that support each other.

We also heard from our panel about how impossible it is to find housing and provide food for the people in need, in a society that has increasingly focused on the idea of the individual instead of the community, and how complex solutions are not the only way to go when we think about solutions. Some key takeaways about what each person can do to help:

- **Be the voice of the voiceless**
- **Treat humans like humans**
- **Learn first, decide second**
- **Pay attention, and act accordingly**
- **Make it known that caring for community is important to you**
- **Keep the conversation alive**

### **Discussion and Closing**

We had an audience that was so engaged, and also knowledgeable, about the current structural issues that underlie food insecurity and homelessness that this symposium could have run for days. We talked about how food and housing are part of greed and profit systems, as opposed to need systems; about how these systems disable farmers from making affordable, local, and organic food available to consumers; about how food is so connected to mental and physical health; and how we need to move away from the systems we know and are used to in order to empower ourselves.

UPEI's **Sébastien Parker** (Assistant Professor, cross-appointed with UPEI's Departments of Political Science and Sociology) brought the evening together by touching on the themes of ***distance*** and ***interconnection*** that appeared through the evening, noting for instance that people experiencing food insecurity and housing are distanced from meeting their basic needs. It is essential to reconnect as communities and to reconnect services, if we are to reduce the intensity

of the food insecurity and homelessness circumstances that residents of Prince Edward Island are experiencing in 2024.

**Reach out to learn more**

Native Council of Prince Edward Island: <https://ncpei.com/>

Meals on Wheels PEI: <https://mealsonwheelspei.ca/>

John Howard Society of PEI: <https://www.johnhowardsocietypei.com/>

The Upper Room Hospitality Ministry: <https://www.urhm.org/>

**Disclaimer**

This symposium summary reflects the main learnings of the symposium facilitator and not the speakers or participants. It does not do justice to the wealth of knowledge reflected in the video recording, which is accessible at this link: <https://islandstudies.com/events/public-symposia/>

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