

## A B S T R A C T

This study analyzed, through case studies of day-to-day observations and interviews with recipients and operators, the operations of nine children's feeding programs in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Newfoundland.

We found that children's feeding programs result in the stigmatization of participants and families, despite an ideology of equality. Most programs adopt a family substitution role in the lives of children they serve and function in a way that excludes parental participation. Programs also transmit a hidden curriculum to children that teaches them how to behave and how a 'proper' family functions. We found that the professionalization of food and nutrition, a desire for an expanded client base, and dependency creation through the provision of other material goods, permit programs to exert increasing institutional control over recipients, a process we, following Illich, call the dragnet. While these programs may be meeting some nutritional needs in a few poverty-stricken children, they ultimately reproduce, rather than reduce, inequities.

## A B R É G É

Nous avons étudié neuf programmes alimentaires pour les enfants mis en oeuvre dans les écoles en Nouvelle-Écosse, au Nouveau Brunswick et à Terre-Neuve selon des méthodes qualitatives.

Nous avons découvert que les programmes alimentaires à l'intention des enfants stigmatisent les bénéficiaires et leurs familles malgré une idéologie d'égalité. La plupart des programmes finissent par s'approprier le rôle de la famille auprès des enfants à qui ils s'adressent, et même par exclure la famille de toute participation. Ils ont également un effet subtil chez les enfants : ils modèlent leur comportement en tenant à leur montrer comment une famille «normale» devrait fonctionner. Nous avons découvert que la professionnalisation dans le secteur des aliments et de la nutrition, le désir d'avoir une clientèle plus large et la création d'une dépendance par l'approvisionnement en autres denrées matérielles, permettent aux programmes d'exercer un contrôle institutionnel de plus en plus grand sur les bénéficiaires; c'est un processus que nous appelons «dragnet» à l'instar d'Illich. S'il est vrai que ces programmes répondent aux besoins de quelques enfants pauvres, en fin de compte ils ne font que reproduire plutôt que réduire les inégalités.

# Children's Feeding Programs in Atlantic Canada: Reducing or Reproducing Inequities?

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The Canadian public has repeatedly been made aware through advocacy groups and the media of the serious and continuing issue of child poverty in the country. Poverty is a fact of life for about one in five Canadian children.<sup>1</sup> The child poverty rate is even greater in Nova Scotia (21.6%), New Brunswick (23.9%), and Newfoundland (26.0%).<sup>1</sup>

Poverty has been linked repeatedly to poor health outcomes in children.<sup>2-5</sup> Economic deprivation leads to poor nutritional status, unhealthy living conditions and sometimes inadequate parental care. All of these, in turn, hamper children's physical and social developments, their educational achievements and their inter-accional potential.<sup>6-15</sup>

As early as 1989, the Canadian Education Association conducted a survey of 121 school boards to determine the prevalence of school-based feeding programs. The findings revealed the widespread existence of school-based nutrition programs feeding thousands of children across the country.<sup>16</sup> Children's feeding programs have since proliferated in all Canadian jurisdictions as one response to poverty-related inequities in access to food, or child hunger.

This outpouring of support for poor and hungry children is a unique Canadian phenomenon. The motives for establishing children's feeding programs in Canada have been well-meaning – the improvement of nutritional status, and the enhancement of school performance.<sup>17</sup> Whereas in the United States, school feeding programs are legislated,<sup>18,19</sup> in Canada, the proliferation of feeding programs for children in schools and in the community has occurred through volunteer effort. Program operations have reflected local conditions with many programs involving strong community participation and support.<sup>20-22</sup> It is unclear, however, whether these programs contribute to family food security and to reducing nutritional inequities. We define nutritional inequities as inequalities in nutrient intake and nutritional status linked to income as a determinant of health.

The purpose of this study was to explore the contribution of children's feeding programs to the reduction of nutritional and broadly defined health inequities in Atlantic Canada. Stated in broader terms, we asked the question: Are children's feeding programs in Atlantic Canada reducing or reproducing inequities?

## METHOD

This study utilized a critical interpretation of qualitative case studies of a sample of Atlantic Canadian children's feeding programs. Participant observation and interviews/focus groups of participating children, their families, and operators of these programs were utilized as data collection techniques. We also included a document review of program promotional literature, operational reports, and media articles.

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Theoretical sampling<sup>23</sup> according to primarily demographic variables was used to identify programs that represented: urban, rural and suburban settings; the provinces of Newfoundland, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia (we could not identify a suitable program from Prince Edward Island); and both school and community lunch and breakfast programs that were established recently (less than 2 years), within the previous 5 years, and for longer periods. We identified these programs from a previously compiled mailing list of groups involved in children's feeding programs in Atlantic Canada<sup>11</sup> and through snowball sampling from public health units and provincial community agencies. After eight programs were selected, we learned of a new program that began operations during the course of data collection and added it for its unique inception features.

The nine Atlantic Canadian children's feeding programs were observed between November 1994 and June 1995. The study received ethical approval from a University ethics committee and each program, and each individual who was interviewed, including children, gave consent for participation.

#### Participant observation

The observation period for each site was between two weeks and one month, depending upon the complexity of the program and the researcher's saturation with respect to observation. Observations were conducted according to methods described by Jorgensen.<sup>24</sup> All field notes were typed into a laptop computer by the observer.

#### Individual and group interviews

Children were interviewed using a semi-structured interview schedule, in small groups of 3-6, usually only one group per program. A variety of program operators, volunteers, staff, administrators, and Board members agreed to be interviewed face-to-face in groups or individually. Most interviews did not exceed 30 minutes. Parents, who usually preferred a telephone interview, were referred to us by program operators. Audiotaping was done for face-to-face parent interviews but extensive note-taking was the main method of recording information gathered over the telephone.

All audiotapes were transcribed verbatim by the interviewer/observer and verbatim statements are herein reproduced.

#### DATA ANALYSIS

Raw interview data, field notes, and summaries of program-provided written materials including media articles were transformed into a permanent record of data for analysis and interpretation through transcription consisting of over 1,000 pages of transcript. All information was then coded and analyzed using QRS NUD-IST qualitative data analysis software. Four iterations of the coding framework were developed by the research team. Critical interpretation of the data used grounded theory methods including the constant comparison methods of Glaser and Strauss<sup>25</sup> and inductive and logical analyses of others.<sup>26-29</sup> Sites were re-visited between May and June 1996 when the overall findings of the study, and the results of their site in relation to the findings, were presented to them. Notes were made at these sessions, including errors, clarifications, questions, comments on the results, and overall response.

#### RESULTS

##### Program features

Of the nine feeding programs, six were breakfast programs and three programs served lunch. The oldest program had been in place for over 23 years. One program was established as recently as four months before it was studied. The majority of programs, however, had been established for 5-7 years.

Seven of the programs were school-based or school-administered (even though two of these seven were operated out of a church facility). One additional program was church-based, and one was operated by a community organization. Of the nine sites, one was formally incorporated as a non-profit organization; two others operated under the umbrella of large charitable organizations; four fell under the jurisdiction of schools; and the remaining two were informally organized. Only two programs had formally organized boards. All followed the school year and were, therefore, closed over the summer months.

Six programs were located in distinctly poor neighbourhoods, characterized by public housing and/or large numbers of residents who were unemployed and/or received social assistance. The remaining three programs served neighbourhoods whose residents came from varied economic backgrounds.

A majority of programs received partial funding from city, provincial or federal sources as well as from charities and a wide variety of other organizations and individuals. While annual budgets ranged widely, annual operating costs of a majority of sites were between \$2,000 and \$8,000. Only one site requested low-cost voluntary meal payments – the others served their meals for free. Four sites had paid daily operators while another site was supervised daily by two parent volunteers. The remaining sites were supervised daily by teacher volunteers (one site), principals (two sites), and community volunteers (one site). Sites with paid staff also used volunteer assistance.

Programs served from 10-800 meals per day to children generally aged 5-12 years of age. Most were small; three served less than 20 meals per day, an additional four served between 20 and 60 students per day. One lunch program served 92 meals per day while another served over 800 meals per day. Attendance was relatively stable, however, five sites reported some fluctuation depending on food choice, weather, and month of the year.

Although providers at all nine sites believed that they fed poverty-stricken children who did not get food at home, in eight sites, they also recognized that of those children who did attend, an estimated 75% were not poor, and attended for such reasons as convenience and socializing. Six of seven school-based sites served less than 30% of the school population, much lower attendance rates than they would have predicted or could have accommodated.

##### Ideologies

We found two ideologies that were shared by all feeding programs: the ideology of the family, and the ideology of equality; a third value that was often shared was the ideology of service. The ideology of the family in relation to feeding programs is

one that says that it is best for a family to eat together and talk. Programs tried, therefore, to create a second home for children.

\* *...and the fellowship that they get from each other, you know, it's a family, they become caring...the majority of them it's home to them, it's a warm feeling and they have time to sit down and eat quietly to the table.* (Board Member)

The ideology of equality is one that believes that people should be treated equally. Attention was paid to treating all the children the same and not picking favourites. The absence of fees also supported the ideology of equality.

\* *you know that's the way you've got to treat them all the same, for me that's what I try, I try to treat them all the same...* (Community Volunteer)

In some programs, the ideology of service was the dominant ideology. The teachers, volunteers, providers, and board members believed that they were contributing to a good cause by serving children a nutritionally sound meal.

### Stigmatization

Despite an ideology of equality pervading all programs, we found evidence of some stigmatization in all but two programs. The stigmata came from sources both internal and external to the programs and while most focused on children and their parents, in fact, 'everyone stigmatized everyone else.'

Despite the caring nature of these programs, in only three sites did stigmatization directed at recipients seem absent. Neighbourhood, community, non-participating children and providers in the remaining sites perceived recipients as lacking in social skills, being greedy or both. Although generally recipients were obedient, some providers felt that they came with an attitude, had behavioural problems, and presented unacceptable manners.

\* *Yea, they don't know how to use knives and forks.* (Board Member)

\* *When we started they said that we were welfare bums and that we shouldn't go there.* (Children's Interview)

One of our compelling observations was that 'everyone knew who the kids were who really needed to be there.' These

'needy' children were often offered extra food, yet this was hidden from others. Some providers clearly talked longer with and used more endearing terms for some children than others. Our observers noticed. Are we sure other children did not?

However, it was not the children who bore the brunt of the stigmatization, but their parents. In the seven stigmatizing programs, we found evidence of parent-blaming (most often mother-blaming) associated with the assumption of neglect. Parental stigmatization included harsh, stereotypical assessments:

\* *...they drink, they play bingo, they smoke it up or they booze it away...* (Program Operator)

The parents we interviewed were completely comfortable with their children's participation in the programs, however, they and program operators were often quick to judge non-participating parents for their perceived sense of stigmatization and felt 'they should get over it.' Parental stigmatization was a double 'catch-22' – they were blamed for both sending their children and not sending their children to programs; and for needing such programs and for becoming dependent upon them. They were also criticized for using the meagre money they received poorly, for not participating as volunteers, and for not caring at all for their children.

### Family substitution

\* *...it's a social thing, and it's a breakfast that they wouldn't get at home.* (Volunteer)

\* *...my parents don't cook me scrambled eggs and bacon anymore.* (Children's Interview)

\* *Last year they had parents coming in...but they don't come in no more.* (Student Volunteer)

The ideology of the family translated into programs adopting a family substitution model of functioning. The function of the family was believed to be substituted for by the program having recipients sit down together for their meals in an apparently leisurely atmosphere; have conversations with each other; eat with knives and forks at tables laid with nice table cloths and centre-pieces; and consume nutritious foods.

We found the family substitution function to be deeply embedded in the day-to-day operations of such programs. Family substitution included the program being a home away from home, and in fact offering a better place for the meal than the child would get from home. For the children, they experienced a community of caring, sometimes people to confide in, and familial role substitutes such as grandparents. The program was a safe place for them, and a place of advocacy for their welfare to outside authorities.

In order to achieve this substitute family, however, some parental responsibilities were appropriated, and parents were largely excluded, and if they did volunteer, they could be pushed out. Furthermore, while there was a code of non-interference in two programs, others practised indirect parental surveillance through a child abuse identification role.

### The hidden curriculum

\* *The napkins are printed with an anti-drug message. They say, "Say No to Drugs" and are printed in bright red.* (Field Note)

Although the purpose of feeding programs was expressed as nutritional opportunities for needy children and emphasis, therefore, was on their physical development, efforts were also made to influence children's social development. The hidden curriculum of children's feeding programs involved explicit training in manners, hygiene, and rules (with associated methods of rule enforcement), as well as implicit education about middle class cultural values through observational learning regarding food values, food practices, and culturally prescribed roles and relationships.

The hidden curriculum of feeding programs teaches children from an early age that institutions provide unlimited amounts of food, and sometimes other things, freely and free, that is, without monetary cost or labour in return. In this process, children are transformed into dependent professional clients. Children learn, too, social behaviours for successful participation in such programs, and the meaning of a 'proper' middle class family meal.

1. *And we have also found since the program started, some of these youngsters have never sat at a table, and now they sit at a table and they think it's wonderful, but the first few mornings that we were here we had to tell them that to sit at the tables, they were going to take a chair and sit in the corner or something...*
2. *I think they learned some social graces between themselves, too...* (Volunteers)

### The feeding program dragnet

Our last observation about children's feeding programs was their 'dragnet' function. We identified Ivan Illich's (ref. 30, pp. 219-20) theory of increased institutional control over the lives of individuals as applicable to these programs. Dragnets keep people in a permanently needy and dependent state while ultimately denying their right to withhold consent of the management of their lives by others (ref. 30, pp. 30,32,47,50-62,78,97,159). This is the opposite of empowering them.

\* *I like coming here because they give you things.* (Children's Interview)

We define the dragnet function as 'the deliberate hunting and gathering of clients.' The dragnet has three main dimensions: an expert function in which the service provision becomes professionalized; an expansion function, i.e., acquiring greater numbers of children; and a dependency function whereby consumers or clients learn to rely on the program's services. The dragnet was virtually absent or observed to a minor degree in two programs. These programs did not attempt to expand their client bases, and they resisted professionalization by maintaining simple menus and a small core group of independent, determined operators.

### Professionalization of food and nutrition

Rather than limit the program's intent to the alleviation of hunger, providers and parents believed that children's feeding programs supplied nutritious meals and providers presented programs as nutritional opportunities for children. Many menus were elaborate, featuring rare fruits and specialty items such as Hawaiian pizza for breakfast, and full course lunches, almost always with a dessert. The food delivery

process was also often professionalized. Two programs provided food handling and sanitation training for their servers, others were planning such training. Children were always served their food and rarely assisted in food preparation. They often gave their food 'orders' although were occasionally rebuked for treating the program like a restaurant. Even though most providers were convinced that, without the program, many children simply would not eat, programs were offered during school business 'hours'. They operated during the school year only, often closed before the end of the year, and service was interrupted if volunteers could not attend.

### Expanded client base

Most providers actively recruited children as a way of expanding their client base. Within a program, there were efforts to increase the numbers of attending children because they were perceived to be members of the program's target group who had not yet been reached. Most programs were convinced that they did not reach the majority of the children who really needed it. In addition, recruitment efforts seemed to be directed at all children, regardless of need, perhaps because attendance at the program was a good thing, in and of itself. Efforts to expand programs to new sites ultimately included 'franchising' to other sites. For a small number of other programs, new sources of clients were sought, such as from immigrant groups, or new age groups.

### Provision of other material goods

The creation of dependent clients included the provision of other material goods in some programs. For example, one site distributed free clothing on a regular basis and Christmas gifts while another had done so in the past and still another prepared Christmas treat bags. We observed one child trying to damage her zipper deliberately in order to qualify for a new winter jacket, and a boy claim that he needed new socks because his were wet from stepping in a puddle. Another girl asked the Principal Investigator for one of her rings because she was wearing several!

## CONCLUSIONS

It is clear that children's feeding programs provide more than a simple meal to groups of children. These programs are complex social systems. They manifest strong ideologies, particularly of equality and of the family. They operate within a context of family substitution and multiple stigmata, despite trying hard not to stigmatize recipient children. They also convey a hidden curriculum that maintains order, teaches socially appropriate behaviours, and transfers sociocultural messages, particularly to recipients, that may be perpetuating dependency.

By providing nutritional opportunities, programs do feed a minority of poverty-stricken children, thereby reducing nutritional inequities somewhat. However, the need for adequate nutritious food is neither prevented nor eliminated by these programs.<sup>31</sup> Instead, feeding programs may be turning children and their families into dependent clients. Based on our analysis, children's feeding programs in Atlantic Canada appear to be reproducing, rather than reducing, inequities.

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