



*Canadians*



*In Crisis*



*From Coast-to-Coast*



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# 01

**A NATIONAL SNAPSHOT:  
INTRODUCTION AND KEY FINDINGS**

# A NATIONAL SNAPSHOT

As uncertainty gripped the nation and the world around what would happen as the COVID-19 crisis started to escalate, food banks across the country began to rethink their operations and wait for the uncertainty to unfold. We saw the frightening scenes from other parts of the world showing overwhelmed health care systems, packed emergency rooms, and deserted streets as countries began their lockdowns in an effort to contain the virus and “flatten the curve”.

As lockdowns began across Canada in mid-March, the concern moved to not only being about the spread of the virus itself, but also the economy as millions of Canadians lost their jobs. Around this time, images were emerging from south of the border of lineups of cars – hundreds of them, bumper to bumper, down a highway as far as the eye could see – waiting to get food from a local food bank. The fear was that this would be what was in store for Canada as well. In an online survey conducted by Angus Reid from March 20 to 23, one third of respondents were worried about not being able to afford groceries, and one in seven worried about needing to use a food bank because of the economic downturn.<sup>1</sup>

Initial signs in late March and early April indicated that indeed, those concerning scenes were playing out at some food banks here too. Whistler, B.C., a prime example of a town whose jobs depend heavily on tourism and hospitality, went from seeing 55 people in a typical week to over 300 by April 1<sup>st</sup>. Others were reporting moderate increases, but were also waiting for a surge to happen in

a few weeks as jobs continued to disappear and people's funds ran out. With movement restrictions and temporary closures of some food banks inevitably affecting service in those early days, it was difficult to fully assess the true scale of need at the time. While various provincial and federal initiatives were announced that aimed to financially support people through this crisis, only time would tell the extent to which they would impact food bank demand.

## Confronting the unknown: fighting hunger on two fronts

In order to successfully combat hunger, work needs to be done on two fronts: ensure that people who are struggling are able to receive food as soon as possible, AND work towards an improved social safety net – such as better income supports – that prevent more people from falling into poverty in



1 <http://angusreid.org/covid-19-economic-impact-canada/>

the first place. As food banks grappled with the uncertainty of what was to come with regards to how new income support initiatives would impact client usage, they were faced with significant challenges in being able to meet the immediate need. These included a sudden drop in available labour as volunteers, who are the backbone of the food bank network, began to self isolate. There were large disruptions in the food supply chain that had major implications on food access for the general population, as well as donations available to food banks and the clients they serve. There was also the need for personal protective equipment, cleaning products, and other protocols for food banks to safely operate during the pandemic.

Due to an incredible demonstration of engagement and support from a community of businesses, the government, donors, and everyday Canadians, food banks were better able to meet this immediate need. If it were not for this support that was present at the local, provincial and federal levels, many food banks would not have been able to keep their doors open throughout this period. This support is what enabled a national network of food banks to survive during a period of incredible challenges so they could continue to provide food to hundreds of thousands of Canadians.

### **“Flattening the curve” for food bank use: A made in Canada story**

While food banks worked to tackle some of the immediate need, social policy - at least temporarily - helped to mitigate a much higher rate of demand that might have otherwise occurred. When looking at food bank use over a four month period from March to June, about one third reported an increase, one-sixth reported no change, and about half reported a decrease. While those who saw a decrease

attributed it to a range of factors, including restrictions of movement due to lockdown orders, and “pop-up” community food programs that provided alternative sources of food for people in need, the vast majority who reported a decrease over this period attributed it to increased government income supports.

These supports ranged from one-time top-ups to provincial social assistance programs to the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) – which delivered a significant amount of monthly income to those in need quickly and efficiently. One might say that, in effect, social policy *flattened the curve* of food bank use.

If anything, the CERB, along with the other income benefits and initiatives coming from the federal and provincial level, gave us a temporary glimpse – *a snapshot* – of what an almost “ideal” income security system could look like. A system that helped people during tough times by sending money directly into their bank accounts, with an amount that would give them a better chance of being able to afford to pay for essentials like rent and food. A less stigmatizing system, and one that would not condemn people to years of poverty. While there would still be people who needed help from a food bank, demand would remain at manageable levels, allowing food banks to provide *more* food and improved support.

### **Even in an “ideal” income security system, people still fell through the cracks**

What this snapshot in time also confirmed was what many in the food bank network already knew—even with an “ideal” income security system, there will be many who still need help. A significant number of food banks saw an increase

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throughout the entire period, and for various reasons that included clients having difficulties accessing increased benefits; not being eligible for benefits; or benefits simply not being enough to carry one through a sudden job loss and afford high housing costs, such as those in large urban centres. For those that reported no real change in food bank use, it was mainly due to the ongoing limitations of inadequate provincial social assistance programs leaving clients with very little income with which to meet basic needs.

The pandemic drove home, more than any other time, the importance of food security – *the ability for people at all times to “have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life”*.<sup>2</sup> The general public understands this, with a recent poll demonstrating that nearly 60 percent of Canadians see the agriculture and agri-food sector as being of very large importance when it comes to Canada’s national security and critical infrastructure, second only to health care.<sup>3</sup>

**Fear of what’s to come:  
when temporary benefits come to an end**

While the tide of need may have been stalled, there is a large sense of trepidation of what will happen with client demand once temporary benefits such as the CERB end. Before the pandemic, many were already on edge. Levels of food insecurity were at an all-time high, with 4.4 million Canadians having difficulty being able to afford food, and food banks were already at capacity - having to manage the longer-term need that has emerged due to the growing gaps in our safety net, gaps that grew exponentially wider since the 2008 recession. A sudden surge in need would be

as catastrophic now, and in the months to come, as it would have been earlier in the pandemic.

As the CERB ends, it is critical that new income support-models and other social policies be put into place so that Canadians can make ends meet. Food banks across Canada cannot accommodate a tidal wave of new clients while maintaining the level of support for long-term need created by decades of social policy neglect.

**The intent of this report**

While previous HungerCount reports provided a total, complete count of food bank use throughout Canada, this report instead documents the trends seen by a large sample of food banks within the network over a four-month period. The report does not present statistical correlations between government policy initiatives and food bank usage, but mainly the self-reported observations from nearly 1,000 food bankers working on the front lines during the pandemic. In effect, this report aims to do three things: illustrate some of the challenges faced by the food bank network during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, and how they adapted accordingly; show, from the food banks’ perspective, why social policy is critical in reducing the need for food banks; and propose what needs to be done on a policy level to continue to “flatten the curve”. From a social policy perspective, the COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated what is possible when there is a will to act. In that sense, the report is also a call to action – to achieve our vision of a Canada where no one goes hungry.



# KEY FINDINGS

**There was a surge in need in the early weeks of the pandemic, when there was a gap between when lockdowns began to occur, and emergency income benefits arrived.**

The majority (52 percent) of food banks saw an increase in the month of March compared to the previous year, with one-quarter seeing increases of greater than 25 percent. If it were not for the initial lockdowns and restrictions in movement that affected food bank access, it is likely that the surge would have been much higher. This early spike paints a concerning picture of what we could see in the months to come if unemployment rates remain high, the temporary supports put in place end or are reduced, and more folks turn to food banks for help.

**Food banks nationwide faced unprecedented challenges during this period.**

Food banks faced unprecedented operational challenges that arose specifically because of the pandemic. They ranged from huge reductions in volunteers, significant shortages in food supply due to large disruptions in the supply chain and a decline in public donations, large reductions in previous funding streams, and challenges to rapidly implement new public health protocols.

**By far, the biggest challenge faced by food banks throughout this period was lack of volunteers.**

42 percent of food banks reported a reduction in volunteers to be a challenge of critical importance since March. Volunteers have always been the backbone of the food bank network, with a significant portion of the food bank network being run entirely by volunteers. Because of restrictions in movement brought about by the lockdown, along with health considerations due to the pandemic, many food banks were desperately short on the workforce needed to perform key tasks such as sorting donations, transferring food in and out of vehicles, and distributing food to those in need.

**Federal funding initiatives, along with tremendous support from businesses, individuals, and local communities, is what enabled local food banks to survive throughout this period.**

If it were not for the support that was present at the local, provincial and national levels, many food banks would not have been able to keep their doors open throughout this period. New funding streams enabled food banks to better manage the challenges that arose due to the pandemic and continue to serve their local communities.





**Throughout the pandemic, food banks were able to innovate and quickly adapt to the rapidly changing needs of their communities and engage their local connections.**

Nearly 50 percent of food banks provided food support to an emergency program during the pandemic outside of agencies they usually support or share food with (such as school programs, social housing units, social services agencies, or neighbouring food banks). The most significant adjustment made to food bank services was nearly 70 percent of those surveyed initiated a home delivery service in order to better serve those affected by lockdown restrictions. Other adaptations included expanding hours and days of service, pivoting their program to target groups such as homeless populations, students and seniors, and offering gift cards when low on food or when unable to accommodate people in their food bank. These changes were often done in conjunction with other community partners such as local governments, community organizations and local businesses.

**While the food bank network stepped in to meet the immediate need, social policy temporarily helped to mitigate a much higher rate of demand that might have otherwise occurred.**

53 percent of food banks reported a decrease in overall usage from March 2020 to June 2020. 90 percent of food banks attributed the decrease in usage to increased financial support for clients from the government. When highlighting specific benefits, 64 percent felt the CERB had the most significant impact, with the increases to the Canada Child Benefit ranked second (58 percent).

**Other factors reduced demand for food banks during this period that did not necessarily indicate a reduced need.**

One third of food banks attributed the decrease in numbers to restrictions in movement, and other public health directives implemented due to COVID-19. One in six attributed the decrease in usage to increased community support through temporary “pop-up” type initiatives or through other services in the community that provided food supports, as clients who would have normally accessed their local food bank may not have needed to due to the support of these other individuals or organizations. In some cases, food banks were sharing more food, but often through these new initiatives where client numbers weren't tracked. As lockdown orders lift, and schools reopen, many of these pop-up initiatives have closed and clients are expected to return to their regular food bank.

**Despite new social policy initiatives, one third of food banks reported an overall increase throughout this period, and one-sixth reported no change.**

Many food banks were struggling with increased client need while also handling the stresses of operating during a pandemic. This includes urban centres with populations of 100,000 or more, and other areas whose economies were more heavily impacted by the pandemic and associated shutdowns. Of those who saw an increase, 87 percent attributed this increased need to COVID-19-related job losses. In addition, those who lost their jobs in these areas also had to contend with high housing costs, and benefits such as the CERB were not enough to fully cover those costs in addition to food.



**Looking ahead, food banks are wary and anxious about the possibility of more and more people needing their supports as temporary government supports wind down.**

There is a worrisome combination of factors that may lead to a steep rise in food bank use over the months and year ahead. The end of the CERB combined with the lifting of eviction moratoriums, people's savings dwindling months into the pandemic, limited job opportunities and provincial governments clawing back social assistance for those who received the CERB will all likely contribute to difficult months ahead for many Canadians left with no other choice but to turn to their local food bank to feed themselves and their families.

**Now is the time to transform our social safety net to permanently flatten the curve of food bank use through the duration of the pandemic and the recovery beyond.**

Now that the CERB has ended, it is critical that new permanent income support-models and other social policies be put into place so that Canadians can make ends meet. Food banks across Canada cannot accommodate a tidal wave of new clients while maintaining its level of support for long-term need created by decades of social policy neglect.



# SECTION

# 02

SURVEY RESULTS

# ADJUSTING TO THE NEW REALITY: CHALLENGES FACED BY FOOD BANKS IN THE EARLY STAGES OF THE PANDEMIC

## PROFILE – INTERFAITH FOOD BANK SOCIETY OF LETHBRIDGE, ALBERTA

**The unknown is a difficult thing to plan for—especially when people in need are depending on you.**

But back in March ‘the unknown’ is exactly what the Interfaith Food Bank Society in Lethbridge (IFB) was faced with. When the wave of the global pandemic forced mass shutdowns nationwide, the IFB had to quickly come up with multiple plans for many first-time challenges.

This included dealing with a massive drop in the number of volunteers. *“In the beginning (of the pandemic), we lost a ton of volunteers,”* recalls Danielle McIntyre, Executive Director of the IFB. *“There was a huge fear of the unknown and for good reason, as many of our regular volunteers consist of seniors and individuals with special needs. Since nobody knew how long this unknown threat was going to play out for, most decided to stay home as a precaution.”*

In addition to a loss in volunteers, the IFB also had to compensate for an immediate halt to local events that were essential in generating food and financial donations.

*“Another hurdle we had to overcome was the cancellation of fundraisers,”* explains Danielle.

*“Since these types of events usually involve mass gatherings, we didn’t quite know where money and food donations were going to come from. Then there were logistical issues to consider, such as how we were going to service clients in a community that was suddenly living under lockdown. It was definitely daunting, especially as the situation was changing by the minute. But the thing about dealing with the unknown is that you learn to adapt, real fast.”*

This meant having to modify their approach to recruiting donations during the pandemic.

*“When we were having difficulty purchasing the basics (because of interruptions to the supply chain), it didn’t take long for it to sink in that this wasn’t going to be a short-term crisis,”* states Danielle. *“For example, normally we’d be swimming in bread and pastries. Then, what seemed like overnight, none of those items could be found—anywhere. That’s when we shifted our focus to recruiting financial donations, versus asking for food.”*

The infusion of federal money, combined with local community support enabled IFB, who last year alone assisted nearly 10,000 clients, to keep the “lights on and doors open”. This money not only enabled the organization to purchase food, but also other essentials needed to keep the agency functioning during the pandemic, such as purchasing personal protective equipment, upgrading technology, and covering staff salaries.

While the situation stabilized over the summer months, there is great trepidation about the future as temporary income supports for clients (such as the CERB) end, and demand increases because of an economy that was struggling even before the pandemic hit.

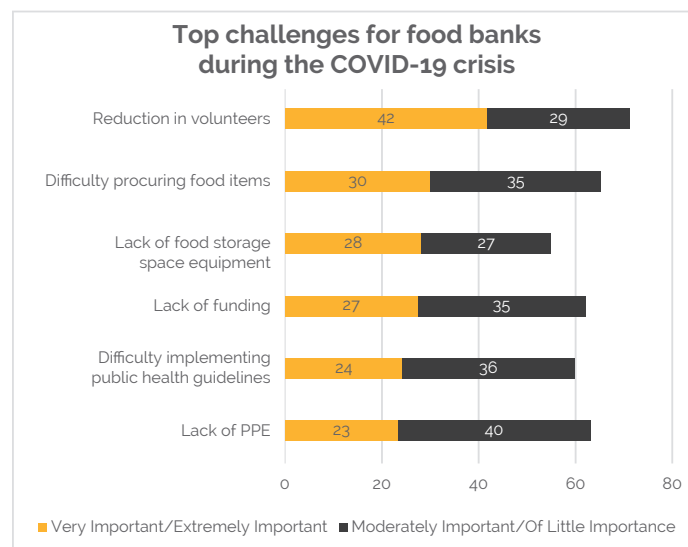
***“The pandemic has been a real learning experience,”*** says Danielle. ***“There was so much fear of the unknown in the beginning. Maybe there still is. But the difference since those first few days and weeks is that we’ve discovered we’re not alone. Many people in the community have stepped up to help out. We’ve also been fortunate enough to build many wonderful partnerships that will continue to serve us, well beyond this current crisis. So, while there still might be plenty of uncertainty ahead, no obstacle is too great as long as we face it together.”***

Danielle's story is just one example of the circumstances food banks encountered in the early days of the pandemic. Historically, food banks have been well positioned to quickly adjust to the realities of a society where social and economic circumstances can change on a dime – and where government policy, and their mechanics to respond to those circumstances, tend to move at a much slower pace. These circumstances could have included the closing of a local factory, rapidly rising cost of rent in a particular region, or a natural disaster such as a forest fire or flood that suddenly leaves many homeless.

The COVID-19 crisis was different. During the first few weeks when most of the country was on lockdown, food banks were faced with an entire new set of challenges that went beyond trying to accommodate a potential massive wave of demand. There were unprecedented shortages in labour and supply, as well as other issues that arose

specifically because of the pandemic. They ranged from huge reductions in volunteers, significant shortages in food supply due to large disruptions in the supply chain, large reductions in previous funding streams, and challenges rapidly implementing new public health protocols. The Wood Buffalo Food Bank in Fort McMurray, Alberta, had to contend with all the above, in addition to a massive flood that ravaged the community in April.

Fortunately, due to immense levels of local community support, new funding streams such as the \$100 million grant from the Government of Canada, and an embedded ability to respond and adapt to rapidly changing circumstances, food banks have come up with ways to meet these new challenges.



## Reduction in volunteers

42 percent of survey respondents considered a reduction in volunteers to be a critically important challenge. Many food banks operate with the support of dedicated volunteers. With the numerous changes that were created by the pandemic, the need for volunteers was increasingly essential for maintaining food bank operations.

**“OUR WAREHOUSE IS A SMALL BUT MIGHTY TEAM OF 3 STAFF AND WE USUALLY RELY ON OVER 50 VOLUNTEERS A DAY. MANY OF THESE ARE RETIREES WHO DID NOT FEEL COMFORTABLE VOLUNTEERING DURING THE PANDEMIC. WE ALSO WANTED TO KEEP OUR SMALL TEAM SAFE AND SO WE ONLY ALLOWED 6 VOLUNTEERS IN THE BUILDING AT A TIME. WE DID NOT HAVE ENOUGH HANDS TO SORT THROUGH DONATIONS, PULL ORDERS, DO DELIVERIES AND LOAD AND UNLOAD TRUCKS. OUR STAFF WORKED UP TO 70 HOURS A WEEK JUST TO ENSURE ALL THE WORK WAS GETTING DONE.”**

Survey respondent, Ontario

Food banks are powered by volunteers. Many food banks have dozens of volunteers present every day to sort food and make sure healthy, safe food is available for those in need. With physical distancing measures, large groups of volunteers operating in the same space is not possible.

Food banks had to reconfigure their spaces and reduce the number of staff and volunteers on site. A smaller number of dedicated food bankers were called on to do the heavy lifting, literally, of feeding their neighbours in need. This reduction of personnel created strains on the capacity for food banks to maintain their operations and tend to their clients' needs.

Of the 71 percent of food banks that ascribed any level of importance to the challenge of volunteers, 10 percent hired new staff, reimbursed volunteers, or paid for additional staff hours and 17 percent recruited new volunteers. Most other food banks described making changes in their operations such as expanding working hours and days, placing additional responsibilities on remaining staff and volunteers, and pulling in staff from cancelled programming. Carrying on operations with a skeletal staff that is overworked has its own challenges. Staff burnout and mental health issues were mentioned as an additional and ongoing challenge for food banks.

## Difficulty procuring food items

30 percent of respondents indicated that they experienced a high level of difficulty with procuring food items. The difficulties associated with procuring food items showcases how the pandemic has caused an inability to access essential and preferred food products, which directly influences food banks' ability to meet their client's needs.

The challenges associated with acquiring food items included the sudden and drastic dip in donations, interruptions in surplus food recovery programs, and a shortage of certain products like canned items. While food banks have increasingly been purchasing food to make

up for fewer food donations, supply shortages caused an inability to purchase in bulk and to make purchases locally. In addition to supply shortages, there was a lack of transportation, funds and personnel to purchase food.

**“OUR FOOD DONATIONS WENT FROM 100 PLUS GROCERY BAGS A WEEK TO SOMETIMES NOTHING IN THE DONATION BINS. AND OUR PURCHASING WENT FROM WAITING TWO DAYS TO WAITING TWO MONTHS FOR THE GROCERIES WE ORDERED”**

Survey respondent, Alberta

The inability to purchase essential items required food banks to quickly adapt to new food procurement methods. Of the 65 percent of food banks who experienced some level of challenge in procuring food, 40 percent purchased more expensive food than usual, changed suppliers, reached out to new suppliers, used volunteer shoppers to go out of town to purchase food, or otherwise made adjustments to hampers.

Additionally, 29 percent of food banks stated that they initiated community food drives or received external support, often in the form of food boxes from provincial associations and Food Banks Canada that helped mitigate this challenge short-term.

As a result of disruptions to central food chain distribution systems, delivery delays accounted as a challenge for about 42 percent of all food banks and 46 percent of food

banks in smaller communities. Many of these challenges were limited to the initial stage of the pandemic and led to similar changes such as hamper concessions and reaching out to additional suppliers. Food banks also made use of gift cards and recruited additional staff and volunteers to carry out deliveries.

#### **Lack of food storage capacity**

28 percent of food bank respondents experienced a lack of adequate food storage as a challenge of high importance. This problem exacerbated an existing issue of storage capacity constraints within the food bank network. As restaurants closed creating a surplus of food at different ends of the supply chain, food was being donated to food banks in forms for which they lacked the capacity to handle and wasn't suitable for immediate consumption.

**“WE AMALGAMATED PROGRAMS AND PROVIDED SERVICE OUTSIDE UNDER A DONATED TENT. WE ALSO BROUGHT IN A SEA CAN FOR OUTDOOR STORAGE. DEALING WITH INCLEMENT WEATHER, RAIN, WIND AND HEAT!”**

Survey respondent, British Columbia

Of the 28 percent that experienced storage capacity as a large challenge, the most pertinent issued was an overall lack of space and lack of cold storage space. At least 29 percent of food banks had to purchase additional resources such as freezers, refrigerated trucks, cold rooms, rented storage space, etc.



*Empty Shelves*

Another 22 percent adapted to the lack of space by giving out more food in hampers, and making use of empty spaces in nearby churches and offices during lockdowns. Food banks described the challenge of storage as making it work by “using every inch of their space” and “playing tetris in our premises.” About 16 percent were able to connect with local partners such as municipal governments and private businesses to borrow unused storage capacity including freezers, trucks, and storage spaces for a short duration.

### Implementing public health guidelines and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

Public health concerns have been at the forefront of everyone’s mind during this pandemic. Food banks had to rapidly adjust their services to make sure they are following public health guidelines. The most significant adjustment made to food bank services was nearly 70 percent initiated a home delivery service in order to better serve those affected by lockdown restrictions. Additionally, more than half the food banks surveyed moved from a shopping model to a hamper model for food distribution, from a user-packed hamper to a pre-packed hamper or began serving clients outdoors or in their cars. Adjustments to operations were both drastic and widespread.

**“THERE WERE DELAYS IN SECURING EQUIPMENT SUCH AS DISPENSERS, SANITIZER, OTHER PPE AND HAVING TO MAKE PHYSICAL CHANGES TO THE LAYOUT OF OUR FACILITY. OUR BIGGEST ISSUE IS KEEPING UP TO DATE AS RESTRICTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS ARE CONSTANTLY CHANGING. WE DID NOT HAVE A BUDGET AT ALL FOR THIS, AND HAVE BEEN FLYING BY THE SEAT OF OUR PANTS IN THIS AREA. WE HAVE ALSO SEEN ALMOST ALL OF OUR FUNDRAISING EVENTS/ACTIVITIES CANCELLED DUE TO PUBLIC HEALTH GUIDELINES.”**

Survey respondent, Alberta

Food banks also expanded operations to serve a different kind of need that emerged from the havoc that COVID-19 wrecked on the economy. About 75 percent of food banks had to make one or more significant change to their service model to adapt to the new environment.

#### Service Delivery Model Adaptations

Initiated a home delivery service	67%
Increased food distributed per person to reduce visits	61%
Moved from a shopping model to a hamper model	48%
Began offering appointments	40%
Offered meal delivery or take-out meals	27%
Started a drive-through service	22%
Set up pop-up location(s)	19%
Other: Increased hours/number of visits allowed/ areas/people served	9%



About one in four food banks experienced a high level of difficulty in implementing public health guidelines and procuring Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). A vast majority of these respondents described the initial adjustment and adaptation in service delivery methods, operations management, and space reorientation. The most important challenge had to do with confusion around regulations, the need to give out constant reminders to staff, volunteers and clients as well as past and potential future challenges with weather.

In the initial stages of the pandemic, the backlog in PPE supply and the associated cost were prohibitive. Food banks drew on their community contacts and workers with local businesses, government, and the public to acquire PPE. Half of the food banks that had trouble with PPE were able to make use of their existing networks and those that were successful in doing so were likely to feel this challenge less severely than others. At least a third of the food banks stated that they had to purchase PPE.

Many recognized this to be an ongoing challenge as programs and services resume to normalcy and PPE donor support runs out. Making sure that everyone has appropriate PPE will be an additional cost for food bank operations.

Similarly, public health concerns led to an increased requirement for packing materials at food banks. Though only 43 percent of food banks saw this as a challenge of some importance, about a third of these food banks had to purchase additional materials, another potential added cost for the long-term. About half of the food banks that experienced this issue were able to capitalize on their existing networks of donors, suppliers, and partners to be able to procure more packing material reducing the severity of this challenge.

### **Lack of funding**

27 percent of food banks attributed a high level of importance to a lack of funding. Food banks that were no longer able to rely on or did not usually rely on community donations experienced a greater challenge with lack of funding. The closure of usual revenue streams like thrift stores and the disruption in in-kind donations was damaging to these food banks. The significant amount of federal, provincial, and municipal government funds in coordination with non-government grants that were distributed, and individual donations helped alleviate short-term funding concerns. About 60 percent of food banks that considered funding to be an extremely important or very important challenge stated that they made use of government or grant funds. The concern for future funding remains and the recognition that government and grant funding could potentially be unsustainable for the longer term as client volumes increase.

For food banks in rural areas, nearly half indicated a lack of funding be less of a challenge. Comments from the survey indicate that an abundance of local support was the primary reason for the financial stability of rural food banks. Notably, some rural food banks reported receiving tremendous support from their local constituents and their municipalities when they needed it most. This range of support took the form of food donations, transportation services, monetary donations, and more.

Because of all of the challenges noted above, food banks needed financial support more than ever during the pandemic. Whether support was for increased food purchases, hiring staff to make up for shortfalls in volunteers, new equipment and PPE for warehouse reconfiguration, funds were critical in the success of food banks' ability to adapt to the pressures of the pandemic.

**“I MADE A TOTAL OF 12 DIFFERENT GRANT APPLICATIONS AND OVER 6 REQUESTS FOR DONATIONS OF ALL KINDS. THAT’S A LOT OF EXTRA ADMINISTRATIVE WORK!”**

**Survey respondent,  
Quebec**

## JUST IN THE NICK OF TIME — THE SIGNIFICANCE OF GOVERNMENT FINANCIAL SUPPORT DURING A CRISIS

**“OUR TIMELINE WAS 2 MONTHS [TO BE ABLE TO STAY OPEN], IF DONATIONS WANED AND FUNDS DRIED UP.”**

**Survey respondent, Ontario**

If it were not for the mobilization of community support and significant financial contributions from new funding partners, lack of funding would have been much more of a significant challenge among the food bank network. Much of this new support came from the Government of Canada, which delivered \$100 million in funding to support food banks and other food security initiatives across the country. For many food banks in larger urban centres and other higher need areas of the country, this funding made the difference between staying open versus shutting down completely during a crucial time.

Nationwide, food banks typically receive the majority of their support from individuals, businesses, and community groups. Before the pandemic, few received government

funding, and those that did rarely received funding for core operational support. Even in “normal” times, both financial and food donations are dependent on the generosity of private donors, and rarely is stable. Increasing this vulnerability is the unpredictability of food bank demand, which can vary widely from week to week and month to month depending on the range of factors that can impact a client’s financial circumstances.

When the COVID-19 crisis hit, these uncertainties and vulnerabilities increased exponentially. These vulnerabilities were particularly acute in larger urban areas and other regions that were more sensitive to labour market impacts of the crisis and associated shutdowns, and who saw larger increases in need during this period. In a couple of notable instances, food banks in these areas mentioned if it was not for these new streams of support, they would not have had the ability to stay open throughout the summer, potentially leaving tens of thousands in their communities without food support.

New government support of food banks was not unique to Canada during this period. Globally, 56 percent of food banks reported that governments in their countries partnered with them to deliver direct food support to communities during the COVID-19 crisis, and nearly half reported that their role as a government partner had changed as a result of the emergency.<sup>4</sup>

# FOOD BANKS IN THE NORTH: TACKLING FOOD INSECURITY FROM THE GROUND UP

## PROFILE – WHITEHORSE FOOD BANK IN YUKON TERRITORY

Food insecurity in Yukon Territory was already a significant issue before COVID-19 hit. When COVID hit, ***“that issue was taken to the next level,”*** recalls Dave Blottner, Executive Director of the Whitehorse Food Bank (WFB). A third of the population was laid off. The local shelter closed their doors. Grocery store shelves were being emptied.

All of a sudden this community-based organization, with a mandate of providing emergency food to people in need, was on the verge of its own emergency. ***“That’s because in addition to our regular clients, we suddenly found ourselves providing emergency food assistance to an area that extended beyond a 700-kilometre radius (of Whitehorse). That’s a lot of people in need and an extensive amount of ground to cover.”***

In addition to having to accommodate the increased need from the surge in demand AND expanded service area, the food bank also had to contend with what thousands of other food banks nationwide were facing – including hiring staff to make up for senior volunteers who were self-quarantining, as well as trying to manage unexpected costs due to the pandemic such as professional cleaning services and transportation costs for home deliveries.

With the infusion of federal money and support from the local community, they were able to sustain their operations and purchase more food. In addition to this, the support enabled them to expand their onsite gardens to the point where they now have 44 garden beds full of fresh vegetables for their clients through the Yukon.

***“This entire situation with COVID has shined a light on just how much the work that we do means to those we serve. We have received several messages of gratitude from families telling us how thankful they were to open boxes of food they could not afford to get otherwise. Some of these people live in some very remote places and then you realize that it’s not just about Whitehorse anymore, but the Yukon as a whole. These are the moments that inspire us to keep going. Because as long as there are people in need, you better believe we’re going to be there to help them the best way we can.”***

**Map of Food Banks in the Northern Territories  
(NU, NWT, YK)**



**“AS THERE IS SUCH A HIGH COST FOR FOOD UP HERE THE MAJORITY OF THIS MONEY WILL GO RIGHT TO FOOD.”**

**Survey respondent,  
Nunavut**

**“GOVERNMENT OF NUNAVUT’S DEPT. OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT & TRANSPORTATION WERE ABLE TO APPROVE FUNDING UNDER COUNTRY FOOD DISTRIBUTION PROGRAM TO KANGIQTUGAAPIK FOOD BANK TO DISTRIBUTE COUNTRY FOOD TO ELDERS AND PUBLIC.”**

**Survey respondent, Nunavut**

Food banks throughout the North face a particularly unique set of challenges that require additional support throughout this period, which include the highest rates of food insecurity in the country. For instance, in Nunavut, 57 percent of households are food insecure, and the majority (52.3 percent) of female led, lone parent households are severely food insecure.<sup>5</sup> Indigenous people face exceptionally high rates of severe food insecurity nationwide<sup>6</sup>, and in the North have been especially impacted by the effects of colonization that forced many from relying on hunting and harvesting traditional food to an increased reliance on store bought goods.<sup>7</sup>

This reliance on store bought goods leaves low-income households, and the food programs that support them, vulnerable to extremely high food prices. For instance, the monthly cost of a nutritious food basket to feed a family of 4 in Sanirajak, Nunavut is approximately \$1,629, compared to \$868 in Ottawa.<sup>8</sup> This high cost also has implications for food banks themselves, who often lack the same level of funding support, infrastructure and personnel that is available to their counterparts in southern regions of Canada. Funding to the North factored in the extremely high cost of food and transportation both which also heavily impact both supply and demand for food banks in those areas.

Nunavut in particular has a number of community-based prenatal nutrition, cooking and land-based programs as part of a range of food security initiatives in the region, with food banks playing a key role in addressing the immediate, shorter-term needs of hunger.<sup>9</sup> However food banks in this region are also integrating programming that address some of the practical barriers faced when accessing food from traditional means. For instance, the Niqinik Nuatsivik Nunavut Food Bank collaborates with a local gas station to

provide jerry cans worth of gas (20L) to food bank clients – in the form of gas chits. The chits can be used to provide hunters with the 'raw materials' to access country food by snowmobile.

While we continue to work on long term solutions such as income security reform, food banks in the North can continue to strengthen their role as a key player in helping to address food insecurity while also being part of an encompassing food security strategy in their communities.<sup>10</sup>



**...FOOD BANKS IN THE NORTH CAN CONTINUE TO STRENGTHEN THEIR ROLE AS A KEY PLAYER IN HELPING TO ADDRESS FOOD INSECURITY WHILE ALSO BEING PART OF AN ENCOMPASSING FOOD SECURITY STRATEGY IN THEIR COMMUNITIES.**

5 Statistics Canada. Table 13-10-0385-01 Household food security by living arrangement  
6 Tarasuk V, Mitchell A. (2020) Household food insecurity in Canada, 2017-18. Toronto: Research to identify policy options to reduce food insecurity (PROOF).  
7 Food Banks Canada, HungerCount 2015. Retrieved from [https://www.foodbanksCanada.ca/getmedia/01e662ba-f1d7-419d-b40c-bcc71a9f943c/HungerCount2015\\_singles.pdf.aspx?ext=.pdf](https://www.foodbanksCanada.ca/getmedia/01e662ba-f1d7-419d-b40c-bcc71a9f943c/HungerCount2015_singles.pdf.aspx?ext=.pdf)  
8 <https://www.nutritionnorthCanada.gc.ca/eng/1548078467819/1548078497301> and [https://www.ottawapublichealth.ca/en/public-health-topics/resources/Documents/2018\\_NFB-Report\\_EN.pdf](https://www.ottawapublichealth.ca/en/public-health-topics/resources/Documents/2018_NFB-Report_EN.pdf)  
9 [https://www.nunavutfoodsecurity.ca/History\\_Establishment](https://www.nunavutfoodsecurity.ca/History_Establishment)  
10 It is important to note the concept of "food sovereignty" when speaking of increasing access to food in the North, as it incorporates "Inuit knowledge, language, culture continuity and community self-sufficiency" in regards to food management. See Qikiqtani Inuit Association, "Food Sovereignty and Harvesting," 2019, <https://www.qia.ca/wpcontent/uploads/2019/03/Food-Sovereignty-and-Harvesting.pdf>.

## Adaptations, Innovation and New Partnerships

Food banks proved that they are innovative and can adapt quickly as the needs of their communities shift rapidly, and can quickly engage their community connections.

Food banks expanded services to accommodate more people as required including expanding their hours and days of service, removing limits on number of visits or other limits on access to services and serving greater geographical areas. Food banks pivoted their program to serve groups like homeless populations and students that relied on school meal programs as well as seniors requiring home deliveries. Some offered gift cards when low on food or when unable to accommodate people in their space. Others added more cleaning products to their hampers. They used social media and other online platforms to expand outreach while on lockdown. These changes were often done in conjunction with other community partners such as local governments, community organizations and local businesses.

Percentage of food banks that provided food support to an emergency program during the pandemic outside of agencies it usually supports or shares food with (eg. school program, social housing unit or social services agency, neighbouring food banks)	47%
Percentage of food banks that centralized operations with any other hunger-relief or social service agencies in their community during the pandemic	21%

## Non-profit networks

The pandemic forced organizations working on food insecurity issues to forge more extensive relationships. Nearly half of food banks reported providing food support to another emergency program during the pandemic, and one-fifth centralized operations with other hunger-relief or social service agencies in their community. This included food banks connecting with other breakfast and school meal programs to provide hampers to beneficiaries of those programs or supporting other local community organizations that had to close during lockdown. For example, in Renfrew County, Ontario, the 12 food banks in the region organized to share strategies for developing a plan for future collaboration.



## Municipalities and public health

Even before the pandemic many food banks had relationships with their local municipalities and public health units, and these relationships became especially important during the early stages of the pandemic. Some examples include:

- In Lac du Bonnet, Manitoba, the food bank worked with local public health to identify food insecure populations and were assisted by public health to deliver hampers.
- The City of Leduc loaned their drivers to the food bank for deliveries Regina Food Bank connected with school boards to support students and families that no longer had the support of school nutrition programs.
- The City of Toronto supported Daily Bread Food Bank and North York Harvest to set up additional pop-up locations, including in public library locations.
- The City of Hamilton worked with municipal partners to find a storage facility for its food bank.

Food banks also had to cover for the closure of other non-food related community programs, particularly mental health, and addiction related services, which led to increased calls and visits. Being the only open emergency program in some communities, they had to find ways to help more clients navigate services.

## Private businesses

Local businesses experiencing a reduction in their customers and food banks were able to leverage this slump by making use of excess services and equipment. Businesses loaned food banks freezer space, storage space and vehicles for delivery. Food banks had to connect with different suppliers to procure food and PPE and were able to make special arrangements in some instances.

In its COVID-19 Pulse Survey summary that highlighted challenges and opportunities faced by food banks worldwide, the Global Food Banking Network perfectly summarized why food banks as a system were able to adapt to these unique challenges:

***Food banks have proven to be invaluable to relief efforts worldwide. As food requests rise from cut-off, disadvantaged or quarantined communities, the pre-existing transport, inventory, and logistics infrastructure of local food banks may be deployed rapidly and effectively to assist impoverished people isolated due to closed schools, public support agencies or overwhelmed health systems. Food banks are uniquely positioned to do the hard relief and recovery work because of their rooted community ties, strong partnerships, agility, and flexibility.***<sup>11</sup>

Throughout this crisis, food banks have been able to provide immediate, daily relief, while will also be a central force in helping to pull people together for sustainable long-term progress. They have helped to personify the spirit in which Canada has responded to the pandemic, with the power and purpose of community.

# WHEN A SOCIAL SAFETY NET TEARS APART: THE MARCH SURGE

## PROFILE – SOS DÉPANNAGE MOISSON GRANBY, QUEBEC

**With one year to go before retirement, Norman Dunn, the Director General for SOS Dépannage Moisson Granby, was starting to finally ease up on his hectic work schedule.**

*“Here I was, getting ready to retire and then the pandemic hit,”* recounts Norman. *“I will remember that day for the rest of my life. As the aftermath started hitting communities across Canada, businesses and restaurants started shutting their doors and we knew it was only a matter of time before we felt the impact (of those closures) at Moisson Granby.”*

The impact Norman anticipated was immediate. Before the pandemic, Moisson Granby typically served an average of 10 families per day. Overnight, that number jumped by 500 percent.

*“60 percent of the people who came to our doors in the first month (of the pandemic) were first-time visitors,”* explains Norman. *“With so many in need of food, it didn’t take long to realize that new internal structures needed to be put in place. Plus we had to do it all with a drastically reduced staff.”*

Being on solid financial footing before the pandemic helped the organization pivot quickly to the reality of the new circumstances. *“When you’re dealing with the unknown,*

*which is what the pandemic was in the beginning, you have no choice but to act without hesitation,”* says Norman. *“So we immediately went out and bought more food, plus we purchased five new refrigerators and freezers to increase our capacity to store everything. I’m happy to say that we were able to get everything up and running quickly (in under week) to ensure that nobody went away empty handed. Not only that, but we were able to guarantee enough fresh food portions for each family member.”*

Funding from the federal and provincial government, the provincial food bank association, Banques alimentaires du Québec, as well as an outpouring of support from the local community enabled the food bank to continue to manage the ongoing demand in the following months.

*“In the beginning I knew nothing about the pandemic,”* admits Norman. *“But that didn’t stop me from reading and watching TV to become better informed. While I had to learn how to handle this particular challenge, this isn’t the first crisis we’ve been faced with. Back in 1998, the great ice storm of Quebec closed our location for a month. Yet we were able to adapt in the moment by transforming the local arena into a giant, temporary food bank. So when COVID-19 happened, I channelled everything I learned in ‘98 and then took it the next level.”*

Eventually Norman still plans to retire. Ultimately, he also has a vision of a Canada where food banks are not necessary



*Small Contributions. Big Impacts.*



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in the first place. *“I always listen to the people we help—regardless of their situation. So I guess that would be my ultimate legacy for whoever comes after me. To remember these are human beings. They deserve our kindness and our respect. But we must also never begin to normalize poverty. A food bank is not normal in a country like Canada and it should never be. That’s why we all must do our part to work towards a future where food banks are only stories told of the past.”*

**“WE SAW AN IMMEDIATE SPIKE [IN MID-MARCH] OF ALMOST 50 PERCENT IN TWO WEEKS.”**

Survey respondent, Ontario

The sudden surge in need seen by food banks in late March to early April gave a hint of how many in our country are close to the edge of experiencing hunger and poverty. While the half of food banks reported an overall decrease during the first four months of the pandemic, the first few weeks showed a different story, and gave a glimpse as to what might have been if supports like the CERB hadn’t been provided.

When examining the rate of increase for March compared to the previous year, the majority (52 percent) of food banks reported an increase in visits.<sup>12</sup> Over one quarter saw an increase of over 25 percent in visits during this month, one in six saw increases of over 50 percent, and 8 percent saw their usage double. While these increases stabilized over the following months there was a brief period of time in late March where there was a gap between the time when lockdowns began and emergency income benefits arrived. What occurred during this period illustrated the surges in need that can occur when there is a sudden shock to the economy.

Rate of change by month of visits for March 2020 compared to March 2019

	Visits
No change or decrease	47.8
Above 0 to 25%	23.7
26 to 50%	12.0
51 to 100%	8.6
Over 100%	7.9

For instance, a food bank in Whistler, B.C. went from seeing its typical 55 people in the week of March 9, 2020 to 306 on April 1st, an increase of over 450 percent. While the most common rate of increase for food banks in March was up to 25 percent over the previous year, there likely would have been much larger surges in food bank use throughout this period if it had not been for the lockdown and movement restrictions in place, closures, and fear that kept many indoors.

**“WE HAD TO STOP RUNNING OUR 25+ PROGRAMS THAT USUALLY SUPPORT THE COMMUNITY IN A VARIETY OF WAYS AND WE WERE ONLY ABLE TO OFFER OUR FOOD BANK & OUTREACH SERVICES. OUR CLIENTS WHO WOULD RECEIVE FOOD THROUGH SCHOOL LUNCH HAD TO COME TO THE FOOD BANK. WE SAW A LOT OF IMMIGRANT POPULATIONS THAT NEVER USED TO ACCESS SERVICE ALL OF A SUDDEN COMING TO THE FOOD BANK. THE ENTRY LEVEL, HOSPITALITY JOB HOLDERS WERE ALL ACCESSING THE FOOD BANK DUE TO TOURISM INDUSTRY SHUTTING DOWN.”**

Survey respondent, British Columbia

<sup>12</sup> Some people will have used a food bank hamper program once a month and other people may have used the hamper program more than once a month. Visits counts each of these persons, and each person in their household, once for each time they were served over a month.

**“CALLS FOR FOOD ASSISTANCE INCREASED 307 PERCENT FROM PRIOR TO THE PANDEMIC TO AFTER THE STATE OF EMERGENCY. THERE WAS A 9 PERCENT DECREASE IN THE NUMBER OF HAMPERS PROVIDED COMPARED TO 2019 IN THE MONTH OF MARCH. THIS MAY BE DUE TO FAMILIES SHELTERING AT HOME DUE TO STAY AT HOME ORDERS”.**

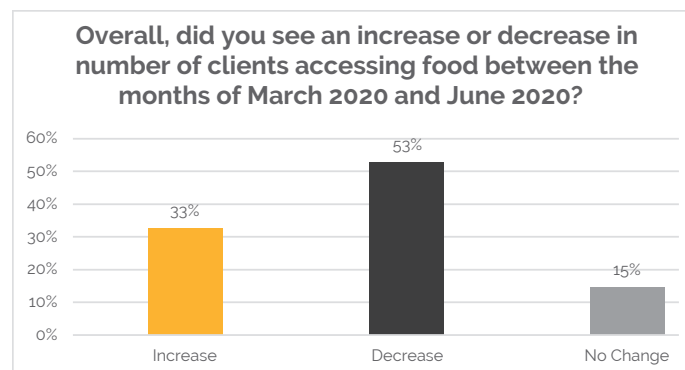
Survey respondent, Ontario

As unemployment rates skyrocketed from 7.8 percent in March to 13 percent in April, and an unprecedented loss of 3 million jobs would be lost during that period<sup>13</sup>, the limitations in our social safety net as it existed came into bold, mainstream focus. This early spike paints a concerning picture of what we could see in the months to come if unemployment rates remain high, and the temporary supports put in place end and more folks turn to food banks for help.

## **FACTORS THAT IMPACTED RATES OF FOOD BANK USAGE IN THE EARLY STAGES OF THE PANDEMIC**

Half of food banks reported a decrease throughout this period, and the other half saw increases or no overall change.

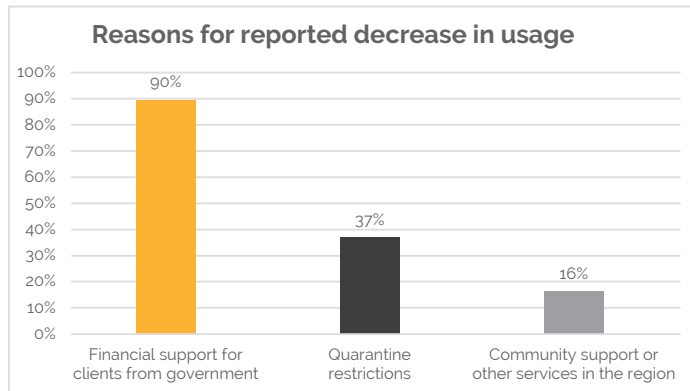
53 percent reported a decrease in overall food bank usage from March 2020 to June 2020, 33 percent saw an increase, and 15 percent reported no change. Regardless of whether food banks saw an increase or decrease throughout this period, there were various factors that impacted both demand (client usage) and supply (available service).



**“WE THINK IT WAS A COMBINATION OF CERB, THE COMMUNITY REALLY STEPPING UP WITH DELIVERY MEALS/EXTRA FOOD. WE ALSO THINK THERE WAS SOME INITIAL FEAR TO LEAVE THE HOUSE SO SOME MADE DO WITH WHAT WAS IN THEIR CUPBOARDS.”**

Survey respondent, Ontario

## Key reasons for decrease



\*note: Respondents often listed more than one reason, percentages will not add to 100.

Food bank managers gave numerous reasons to explain what they saw as the main contributors to the decreases, and these responses fell into three general areas: Financial support for clients from the government; restrictions due to quarantine; and increased community support through “pop-up” type initiatives or through other services in the region. In many instances, respondents mentioned a combination of the three.

### New or enhanced income security supports

Of the various reasons food bank coordinators attributed the overall decline in usage to, the most frequently cited reason was increased financial support and other initiatives from various levels of government. Food bank use and food insecurity is closely associated to lack of income. When increased income supports arrived, they helped in a number of ways. Many of those who lost employment income were able to access the CERB as well as increased payments through tax credits such as the Canada Child Benefit. For

**“OUR PARTICIPANTS WHO ARE RELIANT UPON FIXED INCOME REPORTED SIGNIFICANT INCREASES IN MONTHLY INCOME DUE TO FEDERAL AND PROVINCIAL FINANCIAL AID MEASURES, (E.G. CERB, GST CREDIT, CHILD TAX BENEFIT, INCOME ASSISTANCE, DISABILITY, ETC.)”**

**Survey respondent, British Columbia**

those on fixed incomes such as provincial social assistance, there was increased support either through “top-ups” to provincial social assistance rates, Canada Child Benefits or GST credits, or through the CERB for those who were eligible. While the amount of additional support for those on fixed incomes varied by province, the extra income would have enabled longer-term clients who were accessing the food bank before the pandemic to be able to afford to buy their own food.

While these benefits have been crucial in reducing the need for food banks in the short term, there will inevitably be more people struggling to afford food as that support ends. Whether it’s through new income support programs targeted to those most in need, or increasing payments through existing income support programs, continued support will be necessary to ensure people can afford to eat throughout the course pandemic and the economic recovery beyond.

### Lockdown restrictions

The second most frequently cited reason for the decrease was attributed to the restrictions of movement due to the lockdown – either officially enforced such as those imposed on indigenous reserves, or those following public health guidelines during the early stages of the pandemic, or fear of contracting the virus. The fear may have been particularly

pertinent for those who are seniors or have a disability, who were a growing demographic of people accessing food banks before the pandemic. In the wider population, there is an association between chronic ill health and severe food insecurity.<sup>14</sup> Food bankers are keenly aware of this vulnerability, which is why many quickly adapted their service model and conducted home deliveries when lockdowns were in order.

**“PEOPLE WERE STAYING HOME OUT OF FEAR. THE FIRST NATION RESERVE WAS IN LOCKDOWN, WHICH IS A BIG PORTION OF OUR CLIENTS.”**

Survey respondent, British Columbia

**“MANY OF OUR CLIENTS ARE ELDERLY AND/OR HAVE HEALTH ISSUES. THEY WERE AFRAID TO COME TO THE FOOD BANK. MANY HAD NO WAY TO GET HERE, AS THEIR NEIGHBOURS WOULDN'T DRIVE THEM. SOME THOUGHT WE WERE CLOSED.”**

Survey respondent, Ontario

Two thirds of food banks surveyed stated that they had initiated home deliveries of some kind after the pandemic hit. Whether this involved delivering hampers to high-risk individuals in private vehicles of food bank staff or volunteers, responding to delivery needs on an ad-hoc basis or formally instituting home delivery programs depended on the size and the resources of the food bank.

At least 30 percent of food banks offering home delivery services were able to connect with external partners including city governments, not-for-profit volunteer initiatives and other organizations to provide deliveries. Others described recruiting additional staff or volunteers, making use of personnel from cancelled programs, or just simply stretching existing resources as much as possible. Many food banks temporarily found support from those that were laid off due to the pandemic to volunteer their time and vehicles for delivery.

While some food banks have ended home delivery models, some many will continue home deliveries throughout the pandemic or as a core service going forward. However, as lockdown restrictions eased, some food banks already began to see an increase in usage. With the ease in restrictions and appropriate protocols in place, we will likely see more people in need of help accessing food banks than otherwise would have occurred in earlier stages of the pandemic.



**THE THIRD MOST COMMONLY CITED REASON RESPONDENTS ATTRIBUTED TO A DECREASE WAS “POP UP” COMMUNITY PROGRAMS.**

14 Valerie Tarasuk, Andrew Mitchell, Lindsay McLaren, Lynn McIntyre, Chronic Physical and Mental Health Conditions among Adults May Increase Vulnerability to Household Food Insecurity, The Journal of Nutrition, Volume 143, Issue 11, November 2013, Pages 1785–1793, <https://doi.org/10.3945/jn.113.178483>

### **“Pop up” community food programs**

The third most commonly cited reason respondents attributed to a decrease was “pop up” community programs. These programs were either started by private individuals helping those in need in their communities, other community agencies providing access to food even though it wasn't part of their general mandate, and food banks partnering with other local organizations to help households access food through different channels (such as youth shelters, public libraries, and schools). There were also more pop up food programs that emerged within Indigenous reserves to support residents there as many reserves went into lockdown. These initiatives influenced numbers because clients who would have normally accessed their local food bank may not have needed to due to the support of these other individuals or organizations.

**“MANY GROUPS STEPPED UP AND DELIVERED FOOD TO PEOPLE. WE SUPPORTED THESE AGENCIES WITH FOOD THAT WE DID WEIGH BEFORE DONATING TO THE OTHER ORGANIZATIONS. WE SAW ACTUAL CLIENTS TO THE FOOD BANK DECREASE BUT FOOD DISTRIBUTED TO THE COMMUNITY THROUGH THE HAMPER PROGRAM AND OTHER CHARITY ORGANIZATIONS INCREASED.”**

Survey respondent, Saskatchewan

It is also important to note that for some food banks, while their client numbers were down, they were actually moving equal or more pounds of food to other agencies. Individuals served through these other agencies were not captured in the client usage numbers, therefore the drop in the rate of use was likely not as significant as what food banks were able to record during this period.

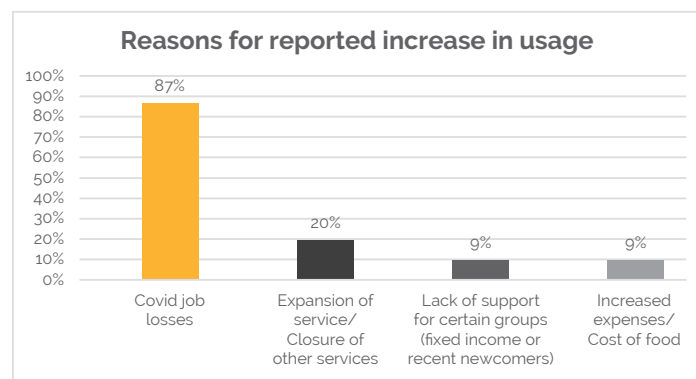
While these pop up programs have been helpful, many may cease if availability of volunteers decrease and other non-profits resume their core activities as appropriate protocols are put into place. As a result, local food banks will need to ensure that those served by these programs will continue to have access to food.

### **One third of food banks reported an overall increase throughout the entire period of March to June 2020**

Many food banks struggled with increased client need while also handling the stresses of operating during a pandemic. Covid-19 related job losses impacted some areas much more than others.



## Key reasons mentioned for an increase



\*note: Respondents often listed more than one reason, percentages will not add to 100.

Food bankers most frequently mentioned COVID-19-related job losses as the reason for increased usage. Other reasons mentioned included: clients being redirected to food banks in other areas due to closure of their local food bank, and/or expansion of service catchment areas due to increased local need; certain demographics such as those receiving fixed income supports such as provincial social assistance who were not able to access additional benefits; and increased expenses related to the pandemic such as sanitation as well as rising costs of food chipping away at limited budgets. As before, often mentioned were combinations of two or more of various reasons.

### COVID-19-related job losses

Of the one-third of food banks that reported an overall increase in use from March to June, the most commonly cited reason was attributed to job losses related to COVID-19.

**“WE SAW ROUGHLY A 35 PERCENT INCREASE. MANY OF THOSE WERE NEW CLIENTS WHO WERE COMING DUE TO ISSUES ASSOCIATED WITH THE PANDEMIC, JOB LOSS, UNPAID SICK LEAVE DUE TO COVID. ANECDOTALLY MANY OF OUR CLIENTS WEREN’T ELIGIBLE FOR CERB. ADDITIONALLY SEVERAL OF OUR SITES RECEIVED A FAIR AMOUNT OF PRESS, THIS ATTENTION LIKELY BROUGHT IN NEW CLIENTS WHO WERE ALREADY IN NEED BUT DIDN’T KNOW WE WERE THERE. WE HAVE ALSO SEEN CLIENTS COMING FROM OUTSIDE OUR CATCHMENT, ESPECIALLY TO THE NORTH DUE TO LACK OF SERVICES IN THEIR COMMUNITIES. I ALSO THINK THAT PEOPLE WHO MAY HAVE BEEN IN NEED BEFORE MAY HAVE FELT MORE COMFORTABLE ACCESSING SUPPORT DURING A CRISIS, FELT THAT THERE WAS LESS STIGMA. SOME OF OUR POP UP PROGRAMS WERE RUN OUT OF PUBLIC LIBRARY SPACES, I THINK THIS MAY HAVE ALSO REDUCED STIGMA.”**

**Survey respondent, Ontario**

**“[RAIL], MINES AND SMALL BUSINESS LAID OFF PEOPLE IN AND AROUND OUR AREA. PEOPLE HAD TO COME TO THE FOODBANK TO RECEIVE FOOD.”**

**Survey respondent, Saskatchewan**

Food banks located in areas that employed large numbers of people in sectors hit especially hard by the pandemic, such as tourism, transportation or hospitality, were more likely to have seen an increase throughout this period. This includes urban centres with populations of 100,000 or more, where those who lost their jobs also had to contend with high housing costs – and benefits such as the CERB were not enough to fully cover those costs in addition to food. In Toronto for example, food banks saw a growth of 25

percent overall and a 200 percent increase in new clients, driven in large part by COVID-19-related job losses, high cost of housing, and emergency benefits such as the CERB not being able to completely cover their basic needs.<sup>15</sup>

The pandemic demonstrated a prime example of the impact of an “economic shock” – a sudden, unexpected drop in household income – can have on food insecurity and food bank use. In early May, Statistics Canada conducted a web panel survey which showed food insecurity among Canadians increased from 10.5 percent pre-pandemic to 14.6 percent during the preceding 30 days prior to the data collection period<sup>16</sup>. Of important note, higher rates were reported for those who had been absent from work **due** to COVID-19 (28.4 percent), versus those that were not working during that period for reasons unrelated to COVID-19 (16.8 percent) and those who were working (10.7 percent).

**THE DEFINITION OF “FOOD INSECURITY” IN CANADA ENCOMPASSES A RANGE OF EXPERIENCES WHICH INCLUDE WORRYING ABOUT RUNNING OUT OF FOOD, REDUCING FOOD INTAKE, AND GOING DAYS WITHOUT FOOD, DUE TO LACK OF MONEY.**

Source: Tarasuk, V, Mitchell, A, Dachner, N. (2014). Household food insecurity in Canada, 2012. Toronto: Research to identify policy options to reduce food

Those who suddenly found themselves without employment income, and did not have assets or large amounts of savings they could draw upon, may have been more likely to have had to sacrifice food until emergency income benefits became available in order to pay for other expenses.

Past research has demonstrated that those with higher household assets<sup>17</sup>, including those who own rather than rent<sup>18</sup> may have more of a buffer that prevents such economic shocks from impacting the levels of food insecurity in their households, compared to those with fewer assets or those who rent rather than own.

Food bankers nationwide are very aware of the pressure of housing costs has on their clients' ability to afford food, and that many have to choose between eating and paying rent. According to last year's HungerCount report, 70 percent of food bank clients live in private rental market housing, and this year due to the pandemic many new clients were likely struggling to manage rent payments due to a sudden drop in income. In all of the provinces before the pandemic, the lowest income group was paying well over 50 percent of their income for the cost of rent and utilities<sup>19</sup>. Spending this portion of income on housing is considered a “crisis” level, leaving little left over for other basic needs such as food, as well as leaving them at risk of homelessness.<sup>20</sup>

15 Daily Bread Food Bank, 2020: Hunger Lives Here: Risks and Challenges Faced by Food Bank Clients During COVID-19. <https://www.dailybread.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/DB-COVID-Impact-Report-2020-Final-Web.pdf>

16 Canadian Perspectives Survey Series 2 (May 2020). Food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic, May 2020. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/45-28-0001/2020001/article/00039-eng.htm>

17 Guo B. Household assets and food security: evidence from the survey of program dynamics. *J Fam Econ Iss.* 2011;32:98–110.

18 McIntyre L, Wu X, Fleisch V, Emery J. Homeowner versus non-homeowner differences in household food insecurity in Canada. *J Housing Built Environ.* 2015;31:349–66.

19 Canadian Rental Housing Index - COST. Retrieved from [http://rentalhousingindex.ca/en/#cost\\_prov](http://rentalhousingindex.ca/en/#cost_prov).

20 News Release: Families Feeling the Impact as Rental Housing Affordability Worsens Across Canada - BC Non-Profit Housing Association. (2019). Retrieved from <https://bcnpha.ca/news/news-release-families-feeling-the-impact-as-rental-housing-affordability-worsens-across-canada/>

With the top end of the lowest income threshold ranging from an annual income of approximately \$20,000 to \$33,000, and the CERB annual payments for a single person amounting to an equivalent of \$24,000 a year, we fear many more could be in this precarious position as the CERB ends and rent freezes/eviction moratoriums cease.

#### **Expansion of service/closure of other services**

Another reason mentioned for an increase was due to expansion of services (such as home delivery) to better reach those in need, or increased usage due to clients needing support due to the closure of other programs in the community. An often-mentioned reason for increased usage or service was due to food banks supporting families who were not receiving the usual supports from school food programs due to schools being closed. This transfer of support was particularly important during this time as Statistics Canada's web panel survey found that rates of food insecurity was higher for households with children (19.2 percent) compared to households without children (12.2 percent).<sup>21</sup>

**“WE OFFERED FRESH FOOD BOXES (NEW PROGRAM) IN CONJUNCTION WITH ANOTHER CHARITY. ALSO, WE COMBINED A WALK-IN, APPOINTMENTS AND DELIVERIES AS A WAY TO REACH OUT TO OUR CLIENTELE. WEEKLY PHONE CALLS TO SHUT-INS, ELDERLY AND INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES THAT WERE IMMUNE COMPROMISED.”**

**Survey respondent, Ontario**

**“WE EXPERIENCED AN INCREASE OF CLIENTS, PEOPLE WERE WORRIED THAT WE WERE GOING TO CLOSE. ALL THE OTHER SOCIAL SERVICES IN TOWN CLOSED SO WE HAD A LOT OF CLIENTS REQUESTING OTHER RESOURCES.”**

**Survey respondent, British Columbia**

**“OUR BREAKFAST BOX PROGRAM BECAME POPULAR AS CHILDREN WHO TYPICALLY WOULD ACCESS THE BREAKFAST PROGRAM IN THEIR SCHOOL NO LONGER HAD THAT OPTION. REQUEST FOR CHILDREN'S SNACKS INCREASED.”**

**Survey respondent, New Brunswick**

**“WITH ALL SCHOOLS, AND CHURCHES CLOSED UNTIL RECENTLY, WE TRIED TO PICK UP THE SLACK AND OFFER FOOD TO A WIDER BASE IN THE COMMUNITY”**

**Survey respondent, Ontario**

In most cases, food banks that experienced issues with high client volumes adjusted to this increase in food demand by expanding their hours of service, increasing frequency of permitted visits, and expanding catchment areas. They were able to work with community partners and local governments to make sure that additional clients were facilitated.

#### **Vulnerable groups hit hard by the pandemic, such as those on fixed income and recent newcomers**

Food banks seeing increases often mentioned “ongoing need” as the main reason. This may refer to those receiving fixed incomes, such as single person households on very low incomes receiving provincial social assistance, or seniors



whose pensions have not kept up with rapidly rising costs of living. It also includes others such as recent newcomers who are either not eligible for certain income benefits, or otherwise have challenges accessing all the benefits they are entitled to due to lack of awareness, challenges navigating the application process or language barriers.

**“THOSE ON SOCIAL ASSISTANCE AND DISABILITY DIDN’T SEE THE FINANCIAL SUPPORT UNTIL LATER, FOOD COSTS AND AVAILABILITY INCREASED DRAMATICALLY”**

Survey respondent, British Columbia

**“... WE HAVE SERVED A HIGH NUMBER OF MIGRANT WORKERS. WE ALSO INCREASED THE AMOUNT OF TIME THAT WE SERVED THE HOMELESS THAT LIVE IN TENTS IN OUR AREA. MANY NEW AGENCIES CALLED FOR HELP AS WELL INCLUDING ORGANIZATIONS SERVING SENIORS. WE ALSO HAVE A LOT OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS THAT WE SERVED.”**

Survey respondent, Ontario

### **Singles receiving provincial social assistance as their main source of income**

Single person households can be particularly vulnerable to economic shocks as they rely on a single income source and are unable to pool expenses. Pre-pandemic, food banks have seen a notable rise in the proportion of single adult households accessing hampers in Canada.<sup>22</sup> **As a proportion of new clients, single person households shot up at a rate of 36 percent from February 2020 to June.**

Many single adults that access food banks rely on provincial social assistance as their main source of income. Most social assistance programs in Canada can be divided into two general categories: general welfare – which is commonly intended as short-term assistance for those out of work and have no other means of financial support; and the disability portion of social assistance, which is for individuals who have disabilities or other medical conditions that make regular employment less likely. Statistics Canada notes that “among the 6.2 million Canadians aged 15 and older with disabilities in 2017, 1.3 million (21 percent) reported that they lived alone.”<sup>23</sup>

**“IN THE MONTH OF MAY, WE HAD VERY LOW REQUESTS, MAINLY FROM SINGLE INDIVIDUALS WITH ON-GOING NEEDS WHO OPTED NOT TO ACCESS CERB.”**

Survey respondent, Alberta

**“OUR AREA SUFFERED A MAJOR CLOSURE FROM THE LUMBER INDUSTRY IN LATE SUMMER 2019, AND WE WERE STILL SEEING INCREASES FROM THAT EVENT. THERE WAS SOME JOB LOSS FROM COVID-19 AND SOME DID NOT QUALIFY OR APPLY FOR CERB–NOT TRUSTING IT WOULDN’T BE TAKEN BACK.”**

Survey respondent, British Columbia

**Incomes over time - General welfare, rates for single person households (2018 Constant Dollars)**

	1989	2003	2018	Real % change 1989-2018
NL	\$6,768	\$10,559	\$11,383	68.19%
PEI	\$12,502	\$7,989	\$10,445	-16.45%
NS	\$10,609	\$6,742	\$7,437	-29.90%
NB	\$5,139	\$4,390	\$7,126	38.67%
QC	\$6,392	\$8,772	\$9,320	45.81%
ON	\$11,333	\$8,875	\$9,646	-14.89%
MB	\$10,857	\$7,225	\$9,756	-10.14%
SK	\$8,790	\$8,063	\$8,883	1.06%
AB	\$8,689	\$6,540	\$8,106	-6.71%
BC	\$9,782	\$8,365	\$9,042	-7.56%
Canada (average)	\$9,086	\$7,752	\$9,114	0.31%

The incomes provided by either program have rapidly eroded with inflation. The charts below outline the rates of maximum provincial social assistance incomes for a single person household receiving provincial social assistance for each province pre-pandemic. **Nationally, the average real dollar value of the general welfare portion of provincial social assistance is about the same as it was compared to 30 years ago.** Additionally, there is a great deal of variation within the country as to the extent to which incomes have either fell or exceeded rates 30 years ago – from falling nearly 30 percent during this time period (Nova Scotia), to increasing by nearly 70 percent in Newfoundland.<sup>24</sup> **For those receiving the disability portion of provincial social assistance, the real value of their income has actually declined by nearly 10 percent compared to 30 years ago.**

**Incomes over time - Disability portion of provincial social assistance, rates for single person households (2018 Constant Dollars)**

	1989	2003	2018	Real % change 1989-2018
NL	\$13,508	\$12,557	\$11,583	-14.25%
PEI	\$14,530	\$10,446	\$11,208	-22.86%
NS	\$13,925	\$11,450	\$10,268	-26.26%
NB	\$13,262	\$10,278	\$9,839	-25.81%
QC	\$11,392	\$12,608	\$13,651	19.84%
ON	\$16,307	\$15,270	\$14,954	-8.30%
MB	\$11,795	\$10,844	\$12,403	5.16%
SK	\$14,246	\$11,566	\$11,422	-19.82%
AB	\$10,716	\$10,050	\$10,301	-3.87%
BC	\$13,451	\$12,736	\$14,802	10.04%
Canada (average)	\$13,313	\$11,781	\$12,043	-9.54%

Source: adapted from Prince, M. J. (2015). Entrenched Residualism. In P.-M. Daigneault & D. Beland (Eds.), *Welfare Reform in Canada: Provincial Social Assistance in Comparative Perspective* (pp. 289–304). Toronto, ON: University of Toronto table 16.3, with income data from Maytree, *Welfare in Canada, 2018*. Alberta's maximum does not include their Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH) program, which differs from other programs because recipients are given a flat rate regardless of household size. In 2018 that rate was \$19,786.

Regardless of the extent to which has either surpassed or declined with inflation, social assistance rates in every province fall below Canada's official poverty line, especially for single adults receiving general welfare, whose incomes are about half of the official poverty line.<sup>25</sup> As a result, those on social assistance are far more likely to experience severe food insecurity.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> This increase in rate may be partly attributed to a concerted effort by that province to bring up the social assistance rates as part of their post 2008 recession poverty reduction strategy.

<sup>25</sup> Maytree Foundation, "Welfare in Canada, 2019"

<sup>26</sup> Tarasuk V, Mitchell A. (2020) Household food insecurity in Canada, 2017-18. Toronto: Research to identify policy options to reduce food insecurity (PROOF), pg. 11. Retrieved from <https://proof.utoronto.ca/>

While some food banks spoke of a decline in usage due to single person households accessing the CERB, food banks that did not see a decline in usage noted that their users were not eligible for the CERB and continued to access the food bank as per usual. Where clients did choose to access the CERB, food banks were concerned that would make them ineligible for future provincial social assistance payments, lead to large tax bills or claw backs in the future. **The rapid increase of this demographic group could be a canary in the coalmine indicating future needs, in particular when the CERB runs out, and job recoveries and provincial social assistance rates remain stagnant.**

### Seniors

Seniors generally rely on fixed incomes and are less impacted to job losses, but they can be vulnerable to rising costs of essentials. The rate of growth of seniors accessing food banks in Canada is higher than other age groups and higher than the rate of growth for the senior population.<sup>27</sup> Overcrowding at grocery stores, shortage of supplies and the increasing cost of food placed seniors in a uniquely vulnerable position as a high-risk group. Data shows that the proportion of senior clients went from 6.8 percent to 8.6 percent, representing a 26 percent rise in June compared to March 2019. Several food banks from across the country commented on seeing more seniors compared to other demographics attributing it to a lack of government support for seniors and people on disability. Although, some food banks also ascribed seeing fewer seniors due to fear of exposure, transportation issues, and, in some instances, expanded community food support for seniors and high-risk individuals, these issues also speak to food insecurity amongst seniors. The inability to access food banks or purchase supplies entails that seniors could be experiencing food insecurity without accessing help.

**“...(SENIORS’) ACCESS TO TRANSPORTATION TO GET GROCERIES WAS SEVERELY CUT AND THEIR ABILITY TO STAND IN LINES AND THE FEAR OF GETTING OR TRANSMITTING ANYTHING HAS BEEN ENORMOUS.”**

Survey respondent, British Columbia

### Recent Newcomers

Statistics Canada's Labour Force Survey results show that “recent immigrants were more likely than Canadian-born workers to move out of employment in March and April mainly because of their shorter job tenure and overrepresentation in lower-wage jobs.”<sup>28</sup> Recent immigrants were thus more likely to have lost their income and be food insecure.

Additionally, migrant and undocumented workers, as well as international students were not intended to be covered by the CERB. The Migrant Workers Alliance for Change estimates that there are about 1.8 million migrants and undocumented people in Canada working in several different sectors.<sup>29</sup> The precarity of migrant farm and its relationship to food insecurity has been a subject of research since the start of the growing season this year.<sup>30</sup>

**“SOME (CLIENTS) RECEIVED EXTRA GOVERNMENT SUPPORT (BUT WE SAW AN) INCREASE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND IMMIGRANT, REFUGEE POPULATIONS.”**

Survey respondent, Ontario

27 HungerCount 2019

28 <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/45-28-0001/2020001/article/00070-eng.htm>

29 <https://www.globenewswire.com/news-release/2020/04/16/2017550/0/en/Essential-Undocumented-Migrant-Workers-Fear-For-Their-Future-Call-for-Income-Supports.html>

30 [http://proof.utoronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Cole\\_PROOFconference.pdf](http://proof.utoronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Cole_PROOFconference.pdf)

The availability of information pertaining to newcomers accessing food banks varies, and identification of one's status as a newcomer is often not asked so as not to be a barrier to accessing services. There is also a higher concentration of newcomers accessing food banks within larger urban centres, so it is difficult to identify overall trends from the existing sample of food banks. However a noticeable trend seen from food banks serving a large number of newcomers and recording this data is that there was no decline in the usage rates of this subgroup as there was for other subgroups over the course of March to June.

### **Increased expenses, cost of food**

Those who had been living with low income or who had lost their jobs due to the pandemic were hit particularly hard by the rising cost of food during the pandemic. Supply chain disruptions and other challenges brought about by the pandemic impacted food prices that increased nearly 3 percent in the first half of this year while general inflation stayed frozen.<sup>31</sup> In addition, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) such as face masks and hand sanitizers also strained limited budgets in the early stages of the pandemic. As the economic outlook was already poor in some parts of the country before COVID-19 crisis, such as in parts of Saskatchewan and Alberta, there was already an upward trend in food bank use as people who lost their jobs were struggling with these increasing costs.

**“MANY CLIENTS LAID OFF DUE TO COVID CLOSURES AND COST OF FOOD WENT UP.”**

Survey respondent, Alberta

**“... GREATER NEED FOR FOOD AS MONEY WAS ALSO NEEDED TO BUY SAFETY EQUIPMENT AND SANITIZING PRODUCTS”**

Survey respondent, Nova Scotia

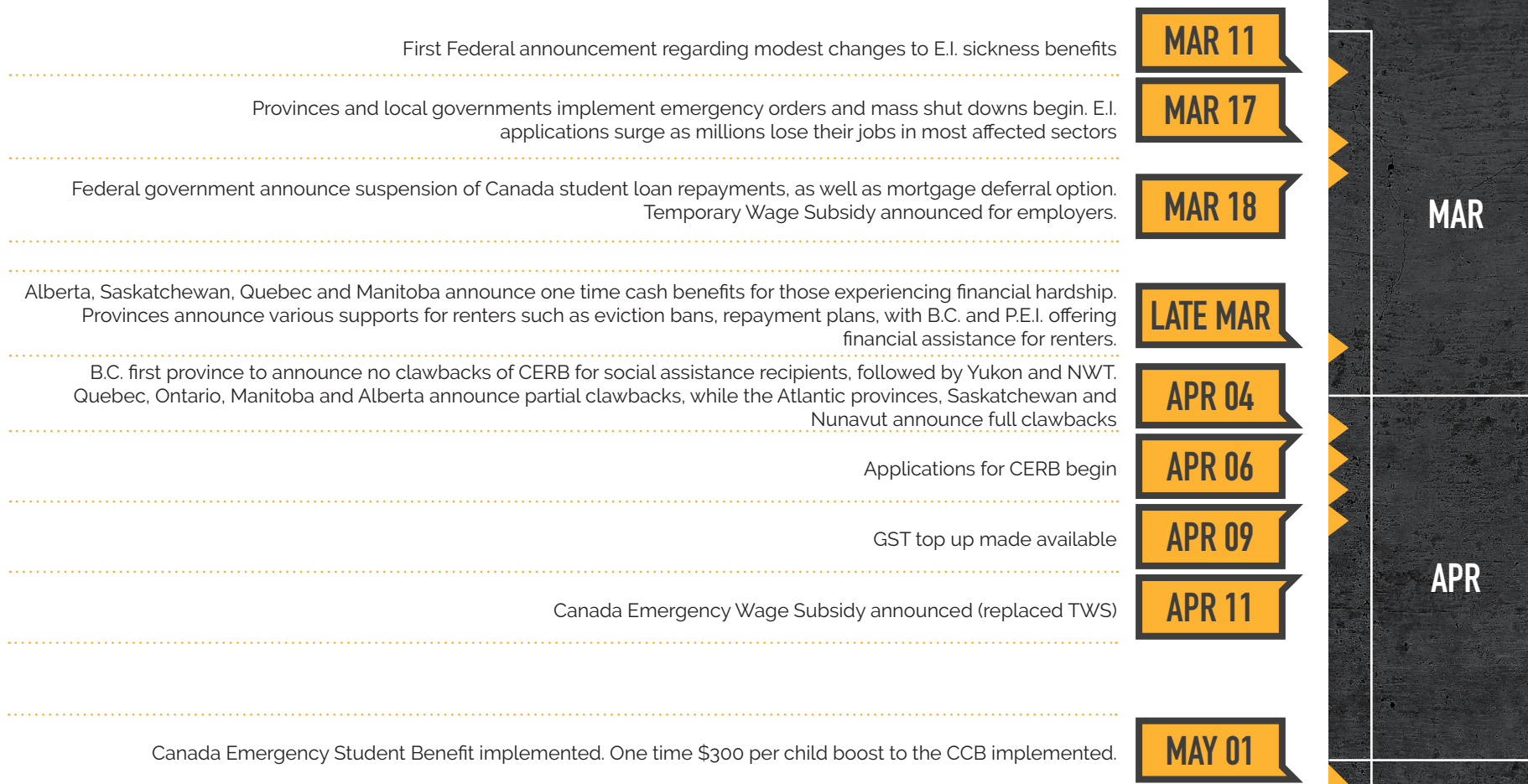
## **THE ROLE OF SOCIAL POLICY IN “FLATTENING THE CURVE” IN FOOD BANK USE IN THE EARLY STAGES OF THE PANDEMIC**

Beginning from late March until May, a wide range of initiatives, from both at the federal and provincial level, were implemented to assist those negatively impacted financially by COVID-19 crisis. These initiatives ranged from housing related initiatives such as mortgage deferrals and eviction bans, top-ups to existing benefits such as the GST and Canada Child Benefit, to new support programs such as the CERB, the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy and Canada Emergency Student Benefit.

**“THE EXPECTED TIDAL WAVE OF PEOPLE NEEDING HELP WITH FOOD SUFFICIENCY DID NOT MATERIALIZE. ANECDOTALLY, WE’VE ATTRIBUTED THIS TO THE CERB AND OTHER GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS.”**

Survey respondent, British Columbia

## Key events and social policy initiatives implemented during the early stages of the pandemic



Past studies conducted pre-pandemic have demonstrated the relationship between increased income levels and reduced food insecurity. More specifically, some of these studies have shown that specific income security initiatives were strongly correlated to reduced food insecurity in the regions they were implemented<sup>32</sup>. When looking at the circumstances of low income, single person households

receiving fixed incomes such as provincial social assistance or workers compensation, their rate of food insecurity was cut by half when they moved to the minimum income

<sup>32</sup> Brown EM, Tarasuk V. *Money speaks: Reductions in severe food insecurity follow the Canada Child Benefit*. Preventive Medicine. 2019 Dec 1;129:105876; Tarasuk V, Li N, Dachner N, Mitchell A. *Household food insecurity in Ontario during a period of poverty reduction, 2005-2014*. Can Public Policy. 2019;45(1):93-104; Loopstra R, Dachner N, Tarasuk V. *An exploration of the unprecedented decline in the prevalence of household food insecurity in Newfoundland and Labrador, 2007-2012*. Can Pub Pol. 2015;41(3):191-206.

<sup>33</sup> Dutton. (2016). *Food Insecurity in Poor Canadian Seniors is Greatly Reduced when Guaranteed Annual Income Kicks in*. Canadian Public Policy, 42(3), September 2016, pp. 274-286.

standard guaranteed by seniors' pensions (approximately \$18,000 per year).<sup>33</sup> Given that the CERB would have brought working age, single person households just above the income threshold available to seniors, this income benefit may have been the single most important factor in reducing the need for food banks among this population group. When people have enough money to pay for essentials like housing and utilities and food, even during bad economic times, they do not need to rely on food banks.

As shown by the input of those working the front lines at food banks, reduced food bank use during a period of a global pandemic was not likely due to any one specific income security initiative, especially during a time of lockdowns, restrictions of movement and levels of new community support. However the insights from survey respondents demonstrate the potential of the impact of social policy initiatives on food bank use when implemented on a large scale. Further study is needed to explore the extent to which any particular benefit or combination thereof, had any specific correlation to either food insecurity or food bank use during this unique time in history.



## GOVERNMENT SUPPORTS THAT HAD THE LARGEST IMPACT ON FOOD BANK DEMAND

Insights from those working on the front lines of food banks were helpful to get a further idea of the potential impact of government benefits or initiative. Food bankers were clear in what benefits they saw as having the largest impact on keeping numbers at food banks down.

The three where the majority of respondents felt had “moderate” to “large impact” were the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), the Canada Child Benefit (CCB) increase, and increases to provincial social assistance payments.

	Moderate to large impact
Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB)	64%
Canada Child Benefit increase (CCB)	58%
Provincial social assistance increase	52%
Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS) Increase	47%
Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy (CEWS)	42%
Rent freeze/Rental subsidy	40%
Mortgage deferral/Bill deferrals	36%
Student Benefit	32%

Note: numbers will not add up to 100 due to multiple response options

## The Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB)

64 percent of respondents felt that the CERB had the largest impact on client demand in regard to government support. Many observed that the amounts given through CERB was significantly more than what low income workers accessing E.I. or those receiving provincial social assistance who qualified for the CERB would receive with their usual payments.

**“THE CERB HELPED PEOPLE BECAUSE IT WAS EASY TO ACCESS AND WAS A FINANCIAL BENEFIT TO THEM (MORE \$ THAN EI, ETC).”**

Survey respondent, Alberta

The CERB was a benefit signed into legislation on March 18, 2020, that would entitle those aged 15 years or older a taxable benefit of \$2000 per month, to a maximum of 6 months, as long as they had earned a minimum of \$5,000 in employed earnings in the previous year. An essential feature of this benefit that was the unprecedented ease and speed of access to the funds, much of this attributable to the reduction of administrative complexity and requirements of the application process – a “trust but verify” approach.<sup>34</sup>

The level of income given, the rate of speed in which it was given, and wide eligibility were all equally important factors. Being able to access the funds quickly likely prevented a further surge in demand of new clients beyond March and April, especially for those with limited assets or savings.

In regards to the amount of income given, the \$2,000 per month would be more than \$500 dollars more a month than average E.I. amounts in most cities across Canada.<sup>35</sup> The wide eligibility which included more part-time, contract, seasonal and self employed workers encompassed far more working Canadians than the current E.I. system would. This wide eligibility would also include those who are receiving provincial social assistance as well as employment income. For those receiving provincial social assistance in the “general welfare” category, the average monthly amount of income nationwide is approximately \$760 a month.<sup>36</sup>

While there were many supports announced, the ease of access for the CERB, and the amounts provided likely mean that the CERB was a key reason for keeping food bank numbers stable over the previous months. This is critical in the effective design of upcoming income supports and social policy to support the recovery.

## The Canada Child Benefit increase

58 percent of respondents felt the increase to the Canada Child Benefit as having an impact on reducing client need in their community. The Canada Child Benefit was created in 2016 as a non-taxable benefit indexed to inflation, where in 2019 eligible families could receive up to approximately \$541 a month per child under 6, and approximately \$457 a month per child between 6 and 17 years of age. The Canada Child Benefit follows a “basic income” type model of income support in that it is a universal, income tested benefit delivered directly to middle and lower income families with children, and administered through the tax system. It

34 Jennifer Robson, 2020. “Radical Incrementalism and Trust in the Citizen: Income Security in Canada in the Time of COVID-19” in *Canadian Public Policy*, July 2020, 46(S1), pp. S1–S18. <https://utpjournals.press/doi/full/10.3138/cpp.2020-080>

35 David Macdonald, “Unemployment may hit 70-year high, but new EI replacement will help”: <https://behindthenumbers.ca/2020/03/26/unemployment-may-hit-70-year-high-but-new-ei-replacement-will-help/>

36 From Maytree Foundation, “Welfare in Canada, 2019”, <https://maytree.com/welfare-in-canada/canada/>. Added calculations by authors.

## “INCREASE IN CHILD TAX BENEFITS HELPED CURB THE FOOD BANK USAGE.”

Survey respondent, Newfoundland

is “progressive”, in that it is targeted primarily to lower and middle income households, and the amount that families get decreases when their amount of annual reported income from other sources (such as employment) rises.

In May the federal government added a one time increase of \$300 per child to this benefit. Families would receive this benefit automatically without having to apply, contingent on their previous years income and if they filed a tax return. Before the pandemic, approximately one third of clients accessing food banks were children under 18, and many of their families would have likely been eligible and have received the benefit.

Food Banks Canada advocated heavily for the Canada Child Benefit prior to its implementation because of the worrying number of families with children that rely on food banks every month. In recent years, the number of children needing food banks has begun to trend downwards, potentially speaking to the effectiveness of this benefit in raising incomes and reducing the need for food banks. While further study would be needed to link these two trends, Food Banks Canada will be monitoring the change in food bank use among children to ensure it continues in the right direction.

### Provincial social assistance increases

52 percent of respondents felt increases to provincial social assistance had a significant impact. Provincial social assistance is the main source of income for nearly 60 percent of those who access food banks nationwide, and any increase to the amount of income received would likely reduce the need for food banks.

Not all provinces increased the payment amounts for their social assistance recipients, and for those who did, there was a wide variation in the amount of the increase, how it was delivered, and duration - such as a one-time top up or distributed over several months. For instance, Nova Scotia topped up their payments by \$50 per person, and the payment was automatically added to their monthly amount when it was administered in March. Ontario increased payments by \$100 for single people and \$200 for families, however receipt of the benefit was discretionary, subject to approval of caseworker and not always guaranteed. These administrative requirements, embedded within most provincial social assistance programs, could delay or prevent support. This was the case in Toronto, where one in three food bank clients receiving social assistance did not receive the increase due to their application being denied, difficulties reaching their caseworker, or not even being aware of the benefit.<sup>37</sup> British Columbia implemented the most significant change, with a \$300 increase per household per month until December.



Regardless of whether or not provinces increased social assistance payments and to what extent, what was likely impactful were increases to the refundable tax credits that people receiving social assistance are also eligible for, such as the Canada Child Benefit and the GST credit. The GST credit increase, similar to the Canada Child Benefit, was a one-time top up targeted to those with low income, and delivered through the tax system, with eligibility based on the previous years tax return. Maximum amounts for the GST increases included \$443 for single people, \$580 for couples, and \$153 for each child (single parents received an increase of \$290 for the first eligible child). More significant is that the GST credit is one of the very few federal tax credits available to working age, single person households without children. In addition to the Canada Child Benefit, the increase to the GST credit was often specifically highlighted by survey respondents as significantly reducing the need for their services.

## JUNE: A CONCERNING CHANGE IN DIRECTION

When asked about their experience on the front lines during the month of June, many food bankers observed that client usage was heading back up again. This trend was attributed to some of the temporary benefits and initiatives such as eviction moratoriums wrapping up, further job losses, and more people emerging from lockdown as more provinces entered stage 3 of the pandemic.

This upward trend demonstrates that overall, food bank use is heading back to the state that it was before the pandemic,

**“OUR NUMBERS ARE CLIMBING AGAIN WITH PAST CLIENTS RETURNING AND NEW TO THE FOOD BANK CLIENTS. STORE PRICES HAVE INCREASED. BUSINESSES CLOSING, PEOPLE LAID OFF.”**

Survey respondent, Alberta

**“IN JUNE WE NOTICED AN INCREASE. MORE NEW FAMILIES REGISTERED AND MANY PREVIOUS CLIENTS RETURNED.”**

Survey respondent, New Brunswick

with both longer-term and newer clients needing help from their local food bank as some temporary benefits wind up and high unemployment rates remain.

### The calm before the storm?

As shown in the report, the CERB was a crucial component in helping prevent large-scale surges in food bank use. What was also clear however is that many still fell through the cracks, especially those on fixed incomes, newcomers and others not able to access federal supports, and those living in urban centres who had to contend with the very high cost of basic needs such as housing. It will take more than one revamped income program to ensure a Canada where no one goes hungry. As suggested by the Maytree Foundation, “One string is not a safety net – it’s a tightrope.”<sup>38</sup> Other services and supports that impact people’s ability to afford food, such as housing costs, medical needs, and affordable childcare, are also needed to fill the gaps in our safety net.

Looking ahead, food banks are wary and anxious about the possibility of more and more people needing their support as temporary government supports wind down. A key concern is what happens to the approximately half a million workers receiving CERB who will not be eligible for further benefits, even under the revamped E.I. system<sup>39</sup>. Combine this with the lifting of eviction moratoriums, people's savings dwindling months into the pandemic, potential future lockdowns, and provincial governments clawing back social assistance for those who received CERB will all likely contribute to difficult months and potentially years, ahead for many Canadians left with no other choice but to turn to their local food bank.

**"I BELIEVE THAT THE SUPPORTS PLAYED A LARGE ROLE IN WHY OUR NUMBERS HAVE BEEN DOWN, HOWEVER, I BELIEVE THAT WE WILL SEE PEOPLE IN WORSE SITUATIONS AFTER THE SUPPORTS STOP."**

Survey respondent, Ontario



# SECTION

# 03

POLICY **RECOMMENDATIONS**

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

If there is one thing that is clear in this report, and throughout the first few months of the pandemic, it is that good social policies can have a deep impact on reducing food insecurity when they address its root causes – low incomes and poverty.

As the data shows, the quick introduction of the CERB and other supports early on in the pandemic effectively 'flattened the curve' of food bank use, and allowed Canadians to weather the economic storm caused by the economic fallout of the pandemic. These new programs allowed Canadians to have sufficient incomes so that they could buy enough food to feed themselves and their families.

In a country such as Canada, we know that food is only a small part of household food insecurity. The pandemic and the subsequent policies put in place by the federal government gives us clear proof to back up what Food Banks Canada and the food banking network has been saying for years – only sound public policies that raise people's incomes and lift them out of poverty can truly address food insecurity in the long term.

The fact that the CERB and other supports had such a deep impact in mitigating the potentially devastating consequences of the pandemic should be applauded and used as a building block in the long term.

Unfortunately, many of the programs introduced at the beginning of the pandemic were only for a temporary basis and have now come to an end. This leaves many Canadians, and food banks, wary of the months and years ahead as

the economic uncertainty has not gone away, even if many support programs have.

As the country starts to slowly map out what our post-pandemic society will look like, it is especially important to learn from the policies that were successful in helping Canadians support themselves during difficult times.

It is also important to learn who fell through the cracks during this period, so as to provide a more encompassing set of supports and initiatives targeted to those most in need. This includes exploring in more detail why some demographics were economically impacted more negatively than others.

For instance, most visible minority groups had higher shares reporting a strong or moderate negative financial impact of COVID-19 than white participants, even after taking into consideration their differences in job loss, immigration status, pre-pandemic employment status, and other demographic characteristics.<sup>40</sup>

By learning and building upon those policies, governments can help build the foundation of a social safety net that provides a minimum floor of income and supports that leaves no Canadian behind.

To that end, we believe that implementing the following policy recommendations in the coming months can build a social safety net that fills the gaps in our current broken system and that raises the incomes and supports of all Canadians so that we can finally reduce the need for food banks for good.

40 Feng Hou, Kristyn Frank and Christoph Schimmele (2020). Economic impact of COVID-19 among visible minority groups. Retrieved from <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/45-28-0001/2020001/article/00042-eng.htm?fbclid=IwARoSYKs79cv0SowfFTMwar3NEZONkNgHReQoeNe2llzOmlGSU7W3NY8owYA>.

# 1



*Policy Recommendation 1*

## A PATH FORWARD WHERE NO CANADIAN IS LEFT BEHIND (EI REFORM AND A MINIMUM INCOME FLOOR)

For years, food banks across the country have known that their services can only do so much. While they do everything possible to help their community members during difficult times, they are also the first ones to argue that only government policies can address the root causes of food insecurity food bank use – which are poverty and low incomes.

To put it simply, as this report illustrates, when sound social policies are put in place – food bank use goes down.

Unfortunately, much of that progress appears to have only been temporary as the government winds down widely effective programs such as the CERB and various one-time benefit boosts, in favour of lesser alternatives. Yet, while not perfect, it is still important to learn from the social policy lessons of the first few months of the pandemic and use them as a foundation in the creation of a social safety net where no one falls through the cracks.

As the CERB has come to an end, it is important to start building what is next. The changes to the Employment Insurance (EI) system are long overdue, and a big step in the right direction. However, far too many Canadians will be left behind.

It is estimated that 482,000 Canadians will not qualify to transition from the CERB to any of the new EI programs and will be far worse than they were under the CERB.<sup>41</sup>

This group of people will likely face some very difficult times ahead where they may have no other choice but to turn towards our current system of provincial social assistance – a grossly inadequate system that has been broken for many years.

**TO PUT IT SIMPLY,  
AS THIS REPORT  
ILLUSTRATES, WHEN  
SOUND SOCIAL  
POLICIES ARE PUT IN  
PLACE – FOOD BANK  
USE GOES DOWN.**

<sup>41</sup> Macdonald, David [2020]. *Transitioning from CERB to EI could leave millions worse off*. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. <https://behindthenumbers.ca/2020/09/15/transitioning-from-cerb-to-ei-could-leave-millions-worse-off/>

Under our current system of social assistance, one must be virtually penniless before being able to apply for support.<sup>42</sup> Once approved for the program, the average yearly welfare income for a single person in 2018 was only slightly over \$9,114, approximately \$10,000 below the poverty line.<sup>43</sup> And, if one tries to work their way out of welfare, their benefits (cash and non-cash) are clawed back with punitive rates that disincentivize work.

This is a system that has not evolved since the 1990s and one that keeps people mired in a cycle of poverty that is extremely difficult to escape – as is demonstrated by the fact that nearly 60 percent of those currently helped by food banks are either on social assistance or disability supports.

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## WE RECOMMEND:

### In the short term

- **Make the temporary Employment Insurance program into a permanent program to reduce uncertainty in the lives of workers already affected by the pandemic and in the difficult years of recovery ahead.**
- **To extend the maximum duration of Employment Insurance benefits so that Canadians aren't forced into our broken and grossly inadequate system of provincial social assistance once their EI benefits run out.**
- **Allow all low-income households to have access to the non-cash benefits that are currently only available to those on social assistance (such as childcare subsidies, affordable housing supplements, drug and dental insurance).**

Simply put, if there is anything the early months of the pandemic has taught us, it is that Canada needs to work towards a new Minimum Income Floor program to replace our current failed approach at supporting those who can't work.

This means a new approach that provides every Canadian a minimum income floor where they can lift themselves up and move ahead – not an approach that keeps people down and holds them back.

The approach taken by the government during the first few months of the pandemic gives a glimpse of what is possible with sound policies – now it's time to use those lessons to build a Canada where no one is left behind.

### In the longer term:

- **Fund and develop, in coordination with the provinces and territories, multiple Minimum Income Floor pilot projects of various types across the country in various provinces and territories (in rural and urban communities).**
- **Accumulate and analyze the data from these pilot projects over multiple years to determine the type of Minimum Income Floor that is best suited for Canada, and that accounts for Canada's regional differences.**



# 2



*Policy Recommendation 2*

## BETTER SUPPORTS FOR LOW INCOME SINGLE ADULTS

Over the last few years, Food Banks Canada's yearly HungerCount report has raised the issue that single working-age adults continue to increase year over year as a percentage of people needing the help from a food bank.

Over the last decade, the percent of single people using food banks has increased significantly, having grown from 38 percent of households helped in 2010 to almost half of all households helped (48 percent) in 2019.<sup>44</sup>

As this report highlights, the data is clear that not only did the pandemic support this fact, but it also seems to have exacerbated the issue by sending even more single adults to seek help from their local food bank. As a proportion of new clients from February to June of this year, single person households seeking help for the first time shot up at a rate of 36 percent over only a matter of months – more than any other demographic in Canada.

Looking at the staggering economic statistics for this group, it doesn't take long to figure out why the food banks have seen this jump. Using the Market Basket Measure, the official poverty measure in Canada, the figure is just over 1 in 10 Canadians live on or below the poverty line. If we look only at unattached (i.e. single) working-age people, the figure jumps to 33 percent: one in every three single adults lives in poverty.<sup>45</sup>

This group alone represents a low-income population of 1.3 million people. These are Canadians who live in deep poverty, with average incomes that are 50 percent below the poverty line. This means these individuals are often struggling to survive on about \$10,000 per year.

Given these statistics, it is hardly surprising that close to one in five single adults experiences food insecurity and that so

**...AS A PROPORTION OF NEW CLIENTS FROM FEBRUARY TO JUNE OF THIS YEAR, SINGLE PERSON HOUSEHOLDS SEEKING HELP FOR THE FIRST TIME SHOT UP AT A RATE OF 36 PERCENT OVER ONLY A MATTER OF MONTHS...**

<sup>44</sup> HungerCount 2019, Food Banks Canada.

<sup>45</sup> Food Banks Canada (2016). Nowhere to Turn, Toronto: Food Banks Canada.

many need support from a food bank to make ends meet.<sup>46</sup>

This is a population that, from a government program perspective, has few places to turn and seems to have been largely forgotten by federal and provincial governments. Many within this group have mental health issues that are exacerbated by poverty and low income.

As mentioned in the HungerCount 2019 report, single person households that are food insecure experience higher levels of mental health issues than other households.<sup>47</sup> Many have mental health issues that go untreated for lack of supports available to them, are stuck in a cycle of inadequate social assistance or disability-related supports, or have lost a job and have nowhere to turn for new training and education programs to re-enter the workforce – all of these issues now heightened during a pandemic.

For decades, governments have focused policies on specific subsets of the populations such as families and seniors, yet have routinely overlooked working-age single adults as a group that requires targeted action. Something

about how this is a group that risks being forgotten in any recovery programs

From an optimistic lens, Food Banks Canada is encouraged by the recent announcements by the federal government to expand and modernize the antiquated Employment Insurance (EI) program. The previous program did not recognize many new forms of informal employment that many single adults are employed with low paying wages.

This is why we believe that with new improvements to the Canada Workers Benefit, the expansion of EI, and new training and education opportunities through the EI program (all recommendations made in previous HungerCount reports), we are hopeful that at least some policy changes will help low-income single adults reduce their need for food banks.

For those who are unable to work, a large number are receiving social assistance but cannot climb out of poverty due to the grossly inadequate supports and strict conditions that come with these programs.

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## WE RECOMMEND:

- **Make single, low-income adults a priority consideration in all future poverty reduction and recovery policy measures to ensure that this vulnerable population is no longer left behind.**
- **Develop new mental health measures as part of future health accords with the provinces and territories that include a specific focus on the needs of single, working-age adults.**
- **To implement our top recommendation (see recommendation 1) to address the high levels of poverty amongst singles with no attachment to the labour force.**



# 3



*Policy Recommendation 3*

## NEW SUPPORTS FOR RENTERS LIVING WITH LOW INCOMES

Even before the pandemic, food banks have been reporting every year that the high cost of housing is one of the main reasons why people walk through their doors looking for support.

In 2019, 70 percent of all food bank clients lived in private rental market housing, and this number has been relatively stable for years.

Within that group, the vast majority are people living within the lowest income group and are paying well over 50 percent of their income for the cost of rent and utilities.<sup>48</sup> Spending this portion of income on housing is considered a “crisis” level, leaving little left over for other basic needs such as food, as well as leaving them at risk of homelessness.<sup>49</sup>

It is true that we were encouraged to see the federal government introduce a new National Housing Strategy in 2017, something that Food Banks Canada had advocated for over many years.

As part of the strategy, the federal government committed to spending around \$20 billion dollars (equally matched by the provinces and territories for a total of \$40 billion) over the next twelve years with the ultimate goal of removing 530,000 households from housing need and reducing the amount of chronically homeless people by half by 2030.<sup>50</sup>

Those were positive developments and sound government policy – yet very little, if anything, has been done since the strategy’s announcement to help those who currently need the support of food banks due to their high housing costs.

**IN 2019, 70 PERCENT OF ALL FOOD BANK CLIENTS LIVED IN PRIVATE RENTAL MARKET HOUSING, AND THIS NUMBER HAS BEEN RELATIVELY STABLE FOR YEARS.**

<sup>48</sup> [http://rentalhousingindex.ca/en/#affordability\\_prov](http://rentalhousingindex.ca/en/#affordability_prov)

<sup>49</sup> News Release: Families Feeling the Impact as Rental Housing Affordability Worsens Across Canada - BC Non-Profit Housing Association. (2019). Retrieved from <https://bcnpha.ca/news/news-release-families-feeling-the-impact-as-rental-housing-affordability-worsens-across-canada/>

<sup>50</sup> Government of Canada [2017]. A Place to Call Home – Canada’s First National Housing Strategy, retrieved from [www.placetocalhome.ca](http://www.placetocalhome.ca)

Without a doubt, the pandemic and its repercussions has only amplified a problem that was already urgent across the country.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, we believe that the CERB and other pandemic supports, combined with local/provincial moratoriums on evictions and deferred payments, have stemmed the tide of renters having to seek help from their food banks, but we expect that to change. Further, in many areas with high housing costs, food banks use went up rather than down during the early months of the pandemic.

Since government supports have been wound down, and payments have come due, food banks have seen an increase in new clients needing support due to the high costs of housing.

Without immediate government action to support renters, we fear this trend will only get worse over the months and years ahead.

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## WE RECOMMEND:

- Immediately implement a national rent support program based on an expanded version of the Canada Housing Benefit so that Canadians struggling to afford their rent can access this important rental support as the rest of the National Housing Strategy takes effect.
- Significantly increase the amount that the federal government plans to invest in the previously announced Canada Housing Benefit so that all low-income people become eligible for the benefit (remove any cap limit on how many eligible citizens can apply).
- Introduce new investments and address an important omission of the National Housing Strategy, to build supportive housing for people with mental and physical health disabilities, particularly for low-income and marginalized populations.<sup>51</sup>



# 4



Policy Recommendation 4

## IMMEDIATELY JUMPSTART PLANS TO INVEST IN THE CREATION OF AFFORDABLE EARLY LEARNING AND CHILDCARE FOR ALL

In September's Speech from the Throne, Food Banks Canada was delighted to hear that *"the Government will make a significant, long-term, sustained investment to create a Canada-wide early learning and childcare system."*<sup>52</sup>

This is great news, and an announcement that affordable childcare advocates, such as our network, had been hoping to hear for many years.

While this is a big step forward, there is a concern that there is no timeline to implement a system that is urgently needed across the country, now more than ever.

While the lack of affordable childcare has been a driver of food bank use for years, as previous HungerCount reports have highlighted, the effects of the pandemic has deepened an already urgent crisis.

In 2019, and over the last decade, children have made up just over 20 percent of the country's general population – yet they represent almost 35 percent of those seeking help from a food bank. This means that hundreds of thousands of children rely on food banks each month in Canada. These numbers are not only staggering – they are unacceptable.

Childcare has become so expensive across Canada that many families with moderate to low incomes are struggling. In Toronto in 2018, the average childcare costs per child was above \$20,000 per year and most cities across the country are similarly expensive, even in provinces with subsidized daycare plans.<sup>53</sup>

The federal government has made some significant investments in supporting families with the Canada Child Benefit and we are encouraged to see a slight decrease

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ARE SIMILARLY  
EXPENSIVE,...**

52 Government of Canada [2020]. Speech from the Throne, September 23, 2020. [file:///C:/Users/Philippe%20Ozga/Downloads/SFT\\_2020\\_EN\\_WEB%20\(1\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/Philippe%20Ozga/Downloads/SFT_2020_EN_WEB%20(1).pdf)

53 David Macdonald and Martha Friendly [2019]. *Developmental Milestones – Child care fees in Canada's big cities 2018*. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA).

in food bank use amongst children since its introduction. However, while some progress has been made - it is clear that drastically reducing the cost of childcare is a key piece needed to truly reduce the need for food banks for so many children.

In addition, the economic ramifications of the pandemic have been especially difficult for women. During the first six months of the pandemic, women's participation in the Canadian workforce, or the share of the working-age population that is working or looking for work, fell to 55 percent, a level not seen since the mid 1980's.<sup>54</sup>

As women are more highly represented in service jobs and sectors hardest hit by the pandemic, they are also struggling

to make it back into the workforce as many of these sectors have not recovered, nor can they find affordable childcare even when a job becomes available.

Simply put, until women and families can afford to put their children in early learning and childcare spaces that are safe and affordable, they will continue to face the difficult choice of participating and helping in the country's economic recovery, or staying home because of high childcare costs.

Not only do decisions such as this affect whether or not a family needs the support from a food bank, but it will also carry a cost for the country's recovery as a whole.

## WE RECOMMEND:

- **Immediate action to fast-track the government's commitment to develop a national early learning and childcare.**
- **The plan should include a significant increase in current federal investment levels towards early learning and childcare, and set measurable targets and goals that increase the amount of accessible, affordable and publicly-funded quality childcare in every province and territory in Canada within a 6 month timeframe to reflect the urgency of the situation.**
- **A central focus of federal investment should be on building the necessary infrastructure needed to physically create more childcare spaces.**
- **The plan should outline affordability benchmarks that each province must respect to qualify for federal support and funding to effectively create national standards of quality and affordability for early learning and childcare in every part of the country.**

4

# 5



*Policy Recommendation 5*

## ENHANCE MEASURES TO REDUCE NORTHERN FOOD INSECURITY

Northern food insecurity remains a significant concern for Food Banks Canada and will likely worsen with the effects of the pandemic over the coming months and years, unless some of minimum income reforms mentioned in this report are enacted.

While consecutive federal governments have attempted to address this problem with various targeted programs and initiatives - it is clear that the current approach is failing.

Food Banks Canada has worked over the last few years to suggest ways to improve the Nutrition North program and northern food insecurity in general. We are encouraged that the federal government has adopted one of our recommendations from our 2019 HungerCount report and now includes charities in the Nutrition North program on a pilot basis.

However, we remain concerned that food costs in the North remain largely unchanged since the beginning of the Nutrition North program in 2011. For instance, in Iqaluit, Nunavut, the cost of a nutritious food basket to feed a family of four in March 2018 was approximately \$1,721.56, while in Ottawa, it would cost about \$868.<sup>55</sup>

Recent data released by Statistics Canada shows that the Nutrition North subsidy hasn't had the impact on food costs that many had hoped for when the program was first introduced almost a decade ago.

As shown in the most recent numbers released by Nutrition North Canada, the average cost of the Revised Northern Food Basket in March 2018 was actually higher by over 2 percent

**...IN IQUALUIT,  
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OTTAWA, IT WOULD  
COST ABOUT \$868...**

<sup>55</sup> Government of Canada [2019]. Cost of the Revised Northern Food Basket in 2017-2018, Nutrition North Canada. Retrieved from <https://www.nutritionnorthcanada.gc.ca/eng/1548078467819/1548078497301>. and Ottawa Public Health (2018). Nutritious Food Basket. Retrieved from [https://www.ottawapublichealth.ca/en/public-health-topics/resources/Documents/2018\\_NFB-Report\\_EN.pdf](https://www.ottawapublichealth.ca/en/public-health-topics/resources/Documents/2018_NFB-Report_EN.pdf)

since March of the previous year, and only 1 percent lower than in March 2011, prior to the launch of the Nutrition North program.<sup>56</sup>

Measures announced by the program in 2018, such as new supports for traditional hunting and gathering programs (a measure which Food Banks Canada has advocated for), as well as a new Inuit to Crown working group to address future challenges, are welcomed – yet are likely insufficient to address the multiple challenges facing the north, especially in light of a pandemic that has already affected supply chain issues in food reaching northern communities.

With household food insecurity levels that remain unacceptably high in the territories, the cost of food barely changing since 2011, and social assistance income that is decreasing when inflation is taken into account, it is time for the federal government, in collaboration with the territories, to review their food security strategies in the north.

Food banks with ties to northern communities across the country are doing what they can to send food to northern and remote areas but they must pay full shipping costs as

they are currently not eligible for Nutrition North subsidies that would reduce these costs.

Organizations such as Food Banks Canada, the RFDA in Thunder Bay, Winnipeg Harvest, the Ottawa Food Bank and the Community Food Sharing Association in Newfoundland (just to name a few) are doing what they can to support struggling northern communities, but it is very difficult to stretch scarce financial resources towards high shipping costs.

Federal funding that flowed through Food Banks Canada during the early months of the pandemic helped many northern food banks purchase food over the summer months, but there remains a great concern for the months and years ahead, for what was already a precarious situation.

Ultimately, food prices and food-driven solutions can only do so much. The federal government must also review its entire approach towards the long-term root causes of food insecurity in the north if significant progress is to be achieved.

## WE RECOMMEND:

- **That the federal government immediately start working towards a Minimum Income Floor (see recommendation 1) and move away from a broken social assistance system that keeps far too many northern Canadians in a cycle of poverty and food insecurity.**
- **That the federal government, in collaboration with the newly formed Inuit to Crown Working Group, initiate a comprehensive review of Nutrition North Canada to determine why the program is only minimally achieving its objectives of reducing the cost of food in the North.**

5

# SECTION

# 04

**METHODOLOGY AND  
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

# METHODOLOGY

This year Food Banks Canada replaced its traditional HungerCount report with **Food Banks and the COVID-19 crisis: A snapshot**. Data collection for the HungerCount usually takes place in March and had to be suspended in 2020 to allow food banks to focus on responding to the crisis. This survey attempted to gain a greater understanding of food bank usage trends for hamper programs between the months of February and June to understand the impact of COVID-19 on food banks. It also sought a greater understanding of the experience food banks have had operating under the constraints of a global pandemic. While previous **HungerCount** reports provided a total, complete count of food bank use throughout Canada, this report instead reports on trends seen over a four-month period by a large **sample** of food banks within the network. To see the most recent HungerCount report's findings, **click here**.

## Data Collection

Within the food bank network there are 10 provincial organizations, 650 provincial affiliates, over 2,500 agencies included in these affiliates, 4 direct affiliates in the 3 territories. There are also independent food banks operating outside the network that are included in the survey. The response rate among affiliates was approximately 70 percent.

The survey was administered through an online link that was shared with affiliate food banks through provincial associations. Non-affiliated food banks were directly sent the survey link. The questionnaire consisted of questions about usage rates between the months of February and June. Additional questions pertained to the challenges food

bank continues to face as well as the impact of government policy in communities and consisted of open and closed questions.

An online program called Link2Feed that is used by the food bank network of Feed Ontario, Feed Nova Scotia and approximately 128 food banks in other provinces. In addition, non-affiliated Salvation Army Food Banks also use Link2Feed. These food banks had the option of providing usage rate data through the online system and were only required to complete the second set of questions through the link. Their usage rate data was integrated with the rest of their questionnaire where applicable.



Respondents	Affiliates	Agencies of Affiliates*	Non-Affiliates	Agencies Represented in Surveys**
Total	463	320	170	1,308

\*In Quebec, agencies of affiliates were the main respondents to the survey.

\*\*Some food bank—"hubs"—distribute food to community agencies like food pantries, shelters, and after school programs and report for these agencies. These agencies are not individually surveyed but are represented in the data.



## Limitations

Many food banks were shifting and adapting to rapid changes in their communities in the month of March leading to data collection disruptions. This survey asked for condensed client information knowing that some food banks may not have had the capacity to maintain client records while coping with the pressures of increased demand and food shortages, in addition to maintaining physical distancing. The survey did not include questions relating to individual and household demographics, however, the analysis relied upon data collected by food banks using Link2Feed around these variables.

The purpose of this survey was to understand trends in usage rates between the months of February and June. This survey was sent out in July and closed in August. Food Banks Canada looked to get responses from as many food banks as possible.

Due to a more limited sample size than usual, data was not disaggregated provincially as it is done for other years.



## Analyzing the Data

**SURVEY DATA ARE ENTERED INTO A DATABASE, CLEANED TO ENSURE A ROBUST ANALYSIS INCLUDING FILTERING OF RESULTS TO INCLUDE ONLY FOOD BANK HAMPER PROGRAMS, AND REMOVING ANY OUTLIERS TO ENSURE RESPONSES DID NOT INAPPROPRIATELY ALTER THE OVERALL RESULTS.**

We recognize that error exists in any data collection process. The analysis performed by Food Banks Canada staff used Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

Due to the limitations mentioned above, Food Banks Canada retrieved data from only a sample of food banks and did not report on visits as a whole number this year. The analysis aimed to identify national trends and changes from March of 2019 to the relevant months of this year.

Responses to open questions were treated as qualitative data and categorized and coded using a conventional content analysis method. Coding categories were derived from the textual responses.

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*To everyone who continues to provide support, thank you*





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