



ONTARIO  
ASSOCIATION OF  
FOOD BANKS

COMBATING  
HUNGER

A SNAPSHOT OF HUNGER IN ONTARIO IN 2011

DECEMBER 2011



The Ontario Association of Food Banks (OAFB) is a network of 20 regional food banks and over 100 community food banks representing over 1,100 hunger relief programs across the province, from Windsor to Ottawa, and Niagara Falls to Thunder Bay, working towards a hunger-free Ontario. We nurture communities by providing food, funding, and solutions to reduce hunger in the province.

Every year, the OAFB secures and moves eight million pounds of food, including one million litres of fresh milk, directly to member food banks in Ontario, through paid and donated transport providers. We coordinate numerous regional and province-wide food drive activities with grocery and other corporate partners. In addition, we work with local farmers, farmers' markets and food banks to increase the sales and donations of fresh local foods in Ontario.

Together with its partners, the OAFB is working every day to assist Ontarians in need of emergency food relief.



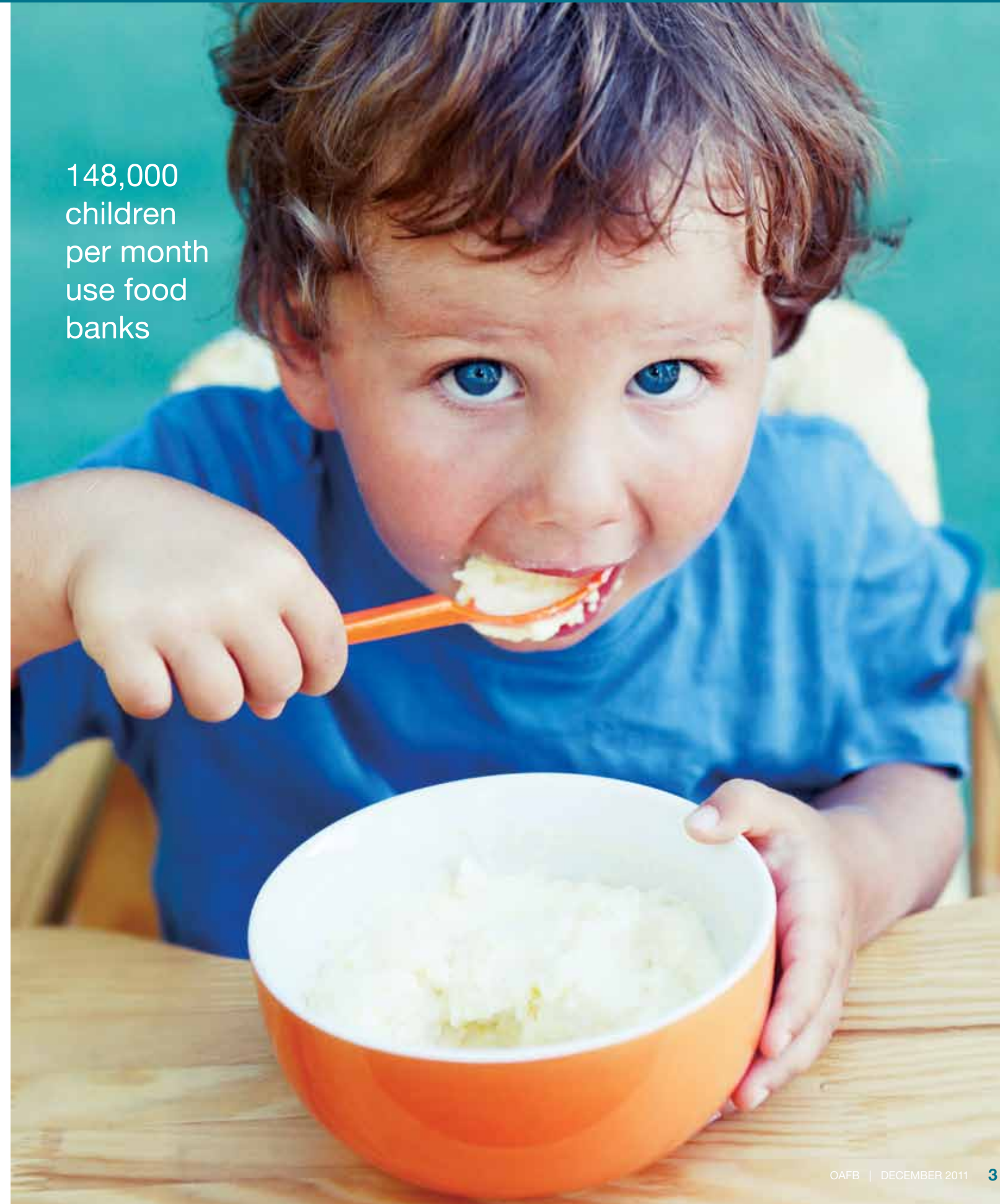
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Ontario Association of Food Banks  
555 Bloor St. W., 2nd Floor  
Toronto, ON M5S 1Y6  
Tel: 416.656.4100  
oafb.ca

Charitable Registration Number: 88526 0968 RR0001

148,000  
children  
per month  
use food  
banks



## A Snapshot of Hunger in Ontario

As Ontario and the rest of Canada continue to rebound from the economic recession of 2008 with comparative success to other nations, there is one startling and impactful area that continues to lag behind with little progress. The number of hungry Ontarians expectedly grew with the economic crisis, but today has failed to decline to pre-2008 levels despite the slowly recovering economy and a nation-wide unemployment rate at its lowest since December 2008.<sup>1</sup>

In March of 2011, we saw 395 000 Ontarians a month turning to food banks for assistance, which is 26% higher than before the economic downturn.<sup>2</sup> This is almost 3% of the population of Ontario, a figure that has remained consistent since 2009. This means that almost 1 in 33 Ontarians goes hungry each month; of this group 38% are children under the age of 18, a figure that has remained disturbingly high since 2001.

It might be assumed that since the percentage of Ontarians being forced to turn to food banks for assistance has remained relatively constant since the beginning of the recession, that hunger is an isolated problem, affecting one unfortunate portion of the population for an extended period of time – this is not the case.

### Hunger in Ontario is pervasive and knows no limits.

It encompasses all different groups of the population including, but not limited to, women, children and youth, immigrants and refugees, aboriginals, seniors, and post-secondary students. Ten percent, equating more than 15,000 households that were served in 2011, were using food banks for the first time, which is virtually unchanged from 2010.<sup>3</sup>

The next logical question to ask is why, in a recovering economy, do so many new households need to use food banks for the first time? The answer is not a simple one, but an understanding can be gained by examining the current cost of living and statistical measures such as the consumer price index (CPI).

The CPI indicates the changes in consumer prices faced by Canadians<sup>4</sup> by tracking the prices of what is known as a “basket” of goods over time. These are common goods and services purchased by the typical Canadian such as food, shelter, clothing and transportation. Shelter requires a significant portion of the average low-income Ontarian’s resources and is considered “the core household expense”, making it the most primary need. This need often forces people with low incomes to make compromises in other areas such as food in order to have a place to live.<sup>5</sup>



39% of food bank users are single adults

In 2010, the average low-income, single person in Ontario spent \$550 of their \$641 income on rent, leaving only \$91 for all other expenses. Such numbers make it almost impossible to purchase sufficient, never mind nutritious food, when a basket on its own was worth an estimated \$220.<sup>6</sup>

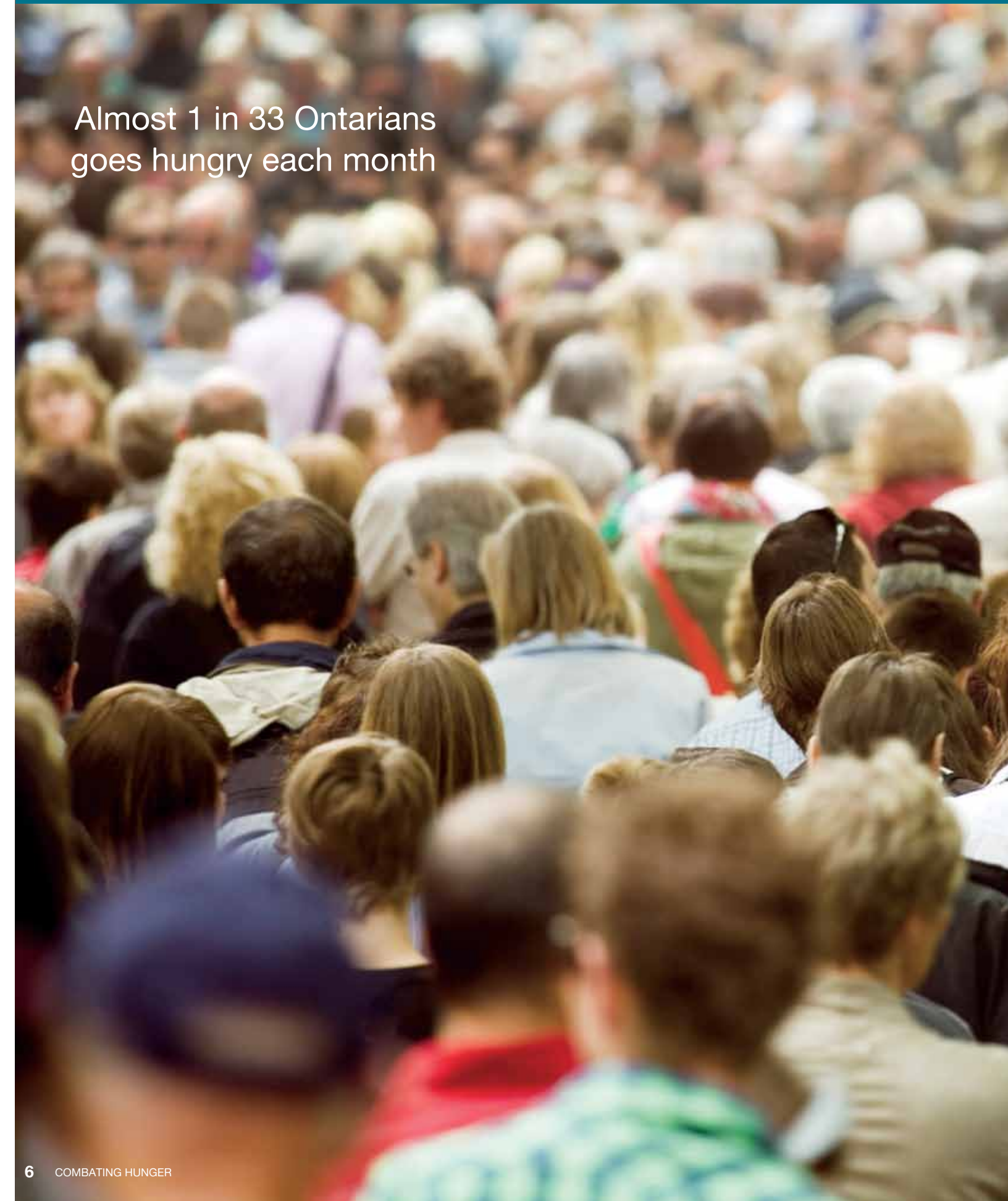
These estimates are reflected in food bank usage in Ontario as 39% of the people using food banks are single and 45% rely on social assistance as their source of income.<sup>7</sup> Individuals who are faced with the unenviable choice of having a roof over their

heads or eating, understandably choose the former at the expense of the latter.

**This situation will only become worse as the price of both food and shelter continue to rise.** The price of food in Ontario increased by an average of 3% from 2006 to 2010,<sup>8</sup> and increased nationally by 4.4% in the last year.<sup>9</sup> Comparatively, shelter has increased in Ontario by an average of 2.2%<sup>8</sup> from 2006 to 2010, with most recently a national increase of 1.8% in the last year.<sup>10</sup>



Almost 1 in 33 Ontarians goes hungry each month



The preceding discussion is illustrative of how heavily food banks were leaned upon in 2011. When individuals have to make the choice between food and shelter, they opt for shelter and turn to food

other less nutritious foods are becoming comparatively more affordable. From 2007 to 2009, the prices of low calorie, nutritious foods increased by 19.5% while the prices of higher-calorie “junk”

## Hunger in Ontario is pervasive and knows no limits.

banks across the province for emergency food support. With this in mind, it should come as little surprise that food banks across Ontario struggled to meet this high demand. Despite the diligent and exhaustive work by employees and volunteers in coordination with local farmers and donors, 15% of food banks reported running out of food in March of 2011 in comparison to only 9% in 2008. To fill this gap, 50% reported having to purchase more food than usual in order to keep up with the hunger problem in Ontario.<sup>11</sup>

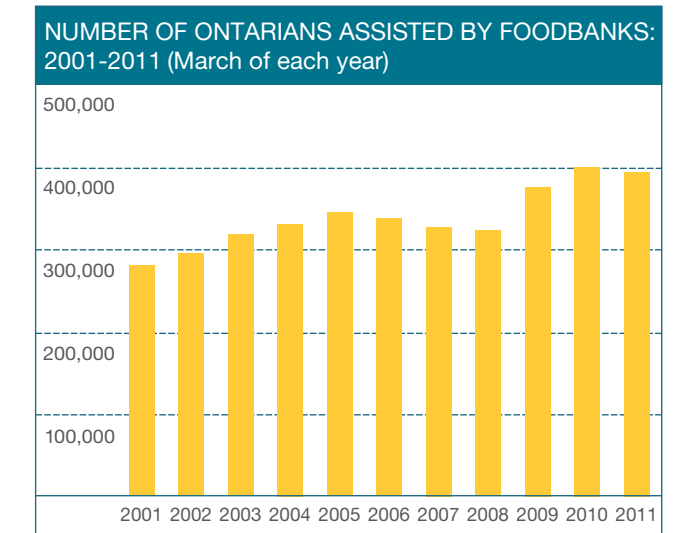
foods actually decreased by an average 1.8%.<sup>14</sup> To put this in perspective, in 2009, US\$1 would buy 1815 calories worth of sugar but only 75 calories worth of fresh broccoli.<sup>15</sup>

These prices make it almost impossible for lower income households to eat the types of foods needed in a healthy diet and this is indeed reflected in the types of foods that Canadians purchase. Furthermore, while lower income families eat almost equivalent proportions from the four food groups as defined by Health Canada’s Food Guide as do families in other income classes, the types of foods within these income groups are very different.<sup>6</sup>

### Effects of Hunger on Ontario

Perhaps the most troubling part of the figures cited in this report is that they are symptomatic of a health and nutrition problem that is self-perpetuating, which can have long-term negative effects within the province. The ability to follow a healthy and nutritious diet is dependent upon sufficient financial resources and access to these types of foods.<sup>12</sup> As previously noted, the current CPI indicates that the price of food is increasing.

While this is a general assessment, prices for many of the important food staples, such as bread, milk and eggs have recently been increasing at levels much higher than the rate of inflation.<sup>13</sup> While nutritious foods like these are increasing in price,



Source: Food Banks Canada (2011). HungerCount 2011.



Lower income families tend to eat the unhealthier options within each group; foods that are denser in carbohydrates, sodium, sugar and fat as they are the cheaper alternative. Given a lower income and hungry stomachs, these food choices are often the only option and made with best intentions. These high calorie foods are able to initially quell hunger but can also lead to spikes in blood sugar followed by a crash, causing hunger to return quickly. Conversely, foods high in protein and fibre satiate hunger for much longer periods of time while providing a much greater source of nutrients that keep people healthier.

This problem then becomes self-perpetuating because of the importance of food and nutrition to our physical development and performance. Improper nutrition

### This situation will only become worse as the price of both food and shelter continue to rise.

and constant blood sugar peaks and valleys impair cognitive performance, which could reduce productivity on the job. This can make it extremely challenging for individuals with low-level, low-paying jobs to advance in the workplace past the jobs that are forcing them to eat this way in the first place.


Unfortunately, this heavy consumption of unhealthy foods can even lead to problems in childhood development, making this an issue that is perpetuated at not only the individual level but the generational level as well. Even as early as during pregnancy, nutrition plays a critical role in the health of both the mother and the child. A recent study showed that pregnant

women living in food insecure households were at an increased risk of greater weight gain and pregnancy complications, including gestational diabetes.

This has implications for both the mother and the child, and places the child at a higher risk for diabetes later in life.<sup>5</sup> Once born, hunger in a child's developing years can also stunt growth and development, which can have long-term health consequences. It should also be noted that similar to an adult's reliance on proper nutrition for performance in the workplace, children require proper nutrition to perform to the best of their abilities in school. Inadequate access to nutritious food can thus severely impact the potential future quality of life for a child, making it extremely difficult for them to

ever escape the cycle of hunger into which they were born. **Hunger will not simply disappear with the emergence of a new generation; it will persist until its root causes are properly addressed.**

Related to this is the growing number of dependent seniors in Ontario; we are home to an aging population of baby boomers who will soon be retiring and leaving the workforce. This not only results in a reduction in government revenue through lower levels of income tax, but it also will place a greater strain on Ontario's social services as these people begin to collect pensions and require other government-supported forms of care as indicated above.<sup>16</sup>



More than 15,000 households turned to food banks for the first time

Improving province-wide nutrition and reducing hunger provides an excellent opportunity to curtail future social expenditure.

Despite the potentially high costs of providing nutritious food for Ontarians in need, it becomes clear that the long term costs and ramifications of not doing so are far greater. This includes both the social and financial costs of hunger. As has been

demonstrated, there is no reason to predict that such costs will diminish over time. To the contrary, they are likely to increase as the population grows, healthy food becomes more expensive, and the wages and costs of health care continue to rise. Hunger is a problem that can no longer afford to be bandaged. Ontario must make a choice to seek changes that will reduce the prevalence of hunger across the province.



## Recommendations for Change

Change is needed now more than ever in order to stop forcing low-income Ontarians to make choices between basic necessities. This change must impact those in need by providing proper health and nutrition for all Ontarians and, furthermore, supporting key partners in the fight against hunger. Outlined below are recommendations that, if implemented, could have a domino effect, creating a positive impact across all areas of need including food and shelter.

### Food Bank Donation Tax Credit

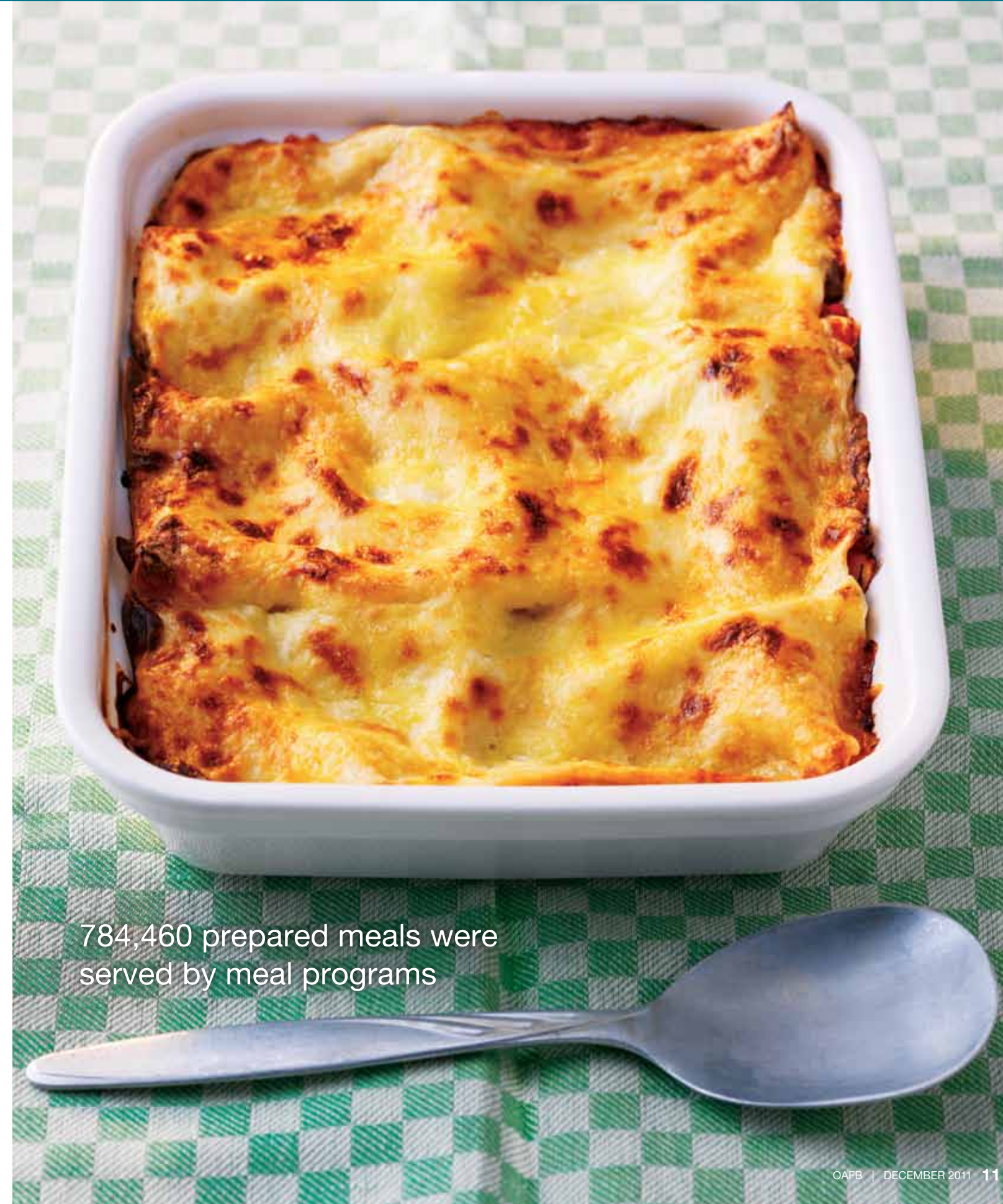
One solution would be to use the resources that can be found in our own backyard. Ontario's farmers are world leaders in environmental initiatives, and in providing high-quality, nutritious food to Ontarians.<sup>17</sup> By focusing on local support and working with Ontario's farmers as well as practicing sustainable agriculture, we would be able to provide Ontario's food banks with the nutritious produce that their clients so desperately need. The Ontario Association of Food Banks and its members have worked diligently over the past three years with generous farmers throughout the province to provide fresh, healthy

local produce to individuals in need. Through their own goodwill, farmers have incurred all associated costs without any receiving any provincial compensation or tax incentives. Thus, farmers are helping to alleviate the burden placed on food banks by providing much-needed fresh produce.

Providing Ontario farmers with a Food Bank Donation Tax Credit would not only encourage donations of fresh produce, but also reduce the amount that is unused or tilled back into their fields. In 2010, 'A Bill to Fight Hunger with Local Food' was brought forward, which proposed that farmers who donate their unsold, excess produce would be granted a significant tax credit. However, despite all-party support, the bill unfortunately did not progress past its second reading. Re-introducing and passing this bill into law will not only provide proper compensation for Ontario farmers, but will also provide food banks across Ontario with much-needed nutritious produce. The proposed tax credit would represent 25% of the wholesale value of the donated agricultural products that can be carried forward and deducted in the following five years. This incremental change would not only help to improve the health of food


FOOD BANK USAGE IN ONTARIO (March of each year)	2011	2010	2009	2008	2001
Individuals assisted by food banks	395,106	402,056	374,230	314,258	278,543
% Change, 2001-2011	41.8%				
% Change, 2008-2011	25.7%				
% Change, 2010-2011	-1.7%				
% Food banks reporting an increase	42.3%	73.6%	76.2%	-	-
% Assisted who are under 18 years of age	37.5%	37.1%	37.6%	37.6%	41.2%
Households assisted by food banks	157,973	160,402	148,660	137,491	115,930
% Households assisted for the first time	10.0%	10.4%	-	-	-
% Provincial population assisted	2.97%	3.06%	2.90%	2.40%	2.37%

Source: Food Banks Canada (2011). HungerCount 2011.



784,460 prepared meals were served by meal programs





Half the food banks in Ontario had to purchase more food than usual

bank clients, but also provide farmers with the recognition they deserve for their key role in the health of all Ontarians.

### Housing Benefit

The choice between having shelter or food is one of the largest issues facing individuals who use food banks in Ontario. There is a desperate need for changing the dynamics of such a choice. Affordable housing needs to be at the forefront of change in Ontario. With the average food bank client spending 72% of their income on housing,<sup>18</sup> they are left with very little leverage for other necessities such as nutritious food. In addition to the fixed and usually non-negotiable cost of housing, the average house-

hold income is decreasing as years pass, making it increasingly difficult to make ends meet. With 73% of food bank clients' income coming from social assistance and disability-related income support,<sup>19</sup> it becomes clear that change is needed to ensure that low-income Ontarians can afford life's basic necessities. Low incomes, high housing costs, and rising food prices are forcing too many Ontarians to choose between necessities.

### Access to Affordable, Nutritious Food

Nutritious food and proper shelter are essential to improving quality of life; the lack of both is a harsh reality for too many Ontarians. Low income and poor health continue to be closely intertwined, negatively affecting productivity, educational attainment, and children's future potential income.

## Ontario must make a choice to seek changes that will reduce the prevalence of hunger across the province.

Having access to affordable, nutritious food will allow many more Ontarians to be fully productive and able to provide their families with the necessities they deserve. With the rising cost of food, however, acquiring nutritious meals is becoming increasingly difficult.

The recommended solution is to work with the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) to be able to call on all food producers and processors in Ontario, to donate a fixed percentage of their product annually to food banks. Not only will this be a home-grown solution, but these essential partnerships will ensure that food banks have the resources they need to fill the nutritional gap facing hungry Ontarians.

A recommended change is to implement an Ontario Housing Benefit for low-income tenants. Based on their rent and income level, the housing benefit would be a new form of income assistance that serves to ease the housing burden cost by helping to pay part of the gap between rent and 30% of income,



## Next Steps

**What the OAFB will do.** We will continue to take advantage of every opportunity to be the voice of the food bank community in Ontario, raising awareness of hunger-related issues and trying to influence public policy to improve the lives of Ontarians who are forced to turn to food banks for emergency food.

This will be done in three key ways:

1. We will lobby to have the Food Bank Donation Tax Credit for Farmers passed into law by the Ontario Legislature as soon as possible.
2. We will work with other organizations and support their work being done towards realizing an Ontario Housing Benefit for low-income tenants.
3. We will strengthen our partnerships with Ontario's food producers and processor groups to provide food banks an additional source of nutritious food for those they serve. The OAFB would like to see more agricultural producers follow the lead of Ontario's dairy industry, whose Food Bank Milk Donation Program currently provides regular monthly fluid milk donations to about 90 food banks across the province.

**What our provincial government should do.** The Ontario government knows that in order to reduce poverty in our province, action needs to be taken now. The findings in this report highlight the urgency to find and implement long-term sustainable solutions to the root causes of hunger – solutions that will improve the lives of Ontarians who are struggling every day to make ends meet.

**What you can do.** Continue to support your local food bank and the OAFB's vision of a hunger-free Ontario in any way you can. There is a food bank in virtually every community across the province that can always use donations of food, funds, and volunteer time. Talk to your friends, families, colleagues and elected officials about the need for change right now to help reduce hunger in Ontario.



## Endnotes

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- <sup>17</sup> Caring for the Land, 2007. We are the farmers of Ontario. <http://www.caringfortheland.com>
- <sup>18</sup> Daily Bread Food Bank, 2011. Support the Call for an Ontario Housing Benefit! <http://www.dailybread.ca/learning-centre/housing-benefit/>
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Working towards a hunger-free Ontario.



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