

Hunger Report 2020

**THE IMPACT OF COVID-19
ON FOOD BANK USE IN ONTARIO**





About Feed Ontario

Feed Ontario is a network of 1,200 direct and affiliate food banks and hunger-relief agencies across the province that are united in their work to prevent and address hunger and poverty.

Through emergency food support, innovative programming, and a commitment to researching and recommending solutions to poverty, the provincial food bank network works tirelessly to improve the health and well-being of the adults, children, and families it serves.

With the onset of COVID-19, our network faced a number of new challenges, including a surge in demand for emergency food support, supply chain issues and delays, and having to reorganize operations in real-time to ensure the safety of staff, volunteers, and visitors on-site.

Despite all of these challenges, we also saw extraordinary innovation, strength of community, and the resilience of hundreds of hunger-relief organizations that were determined to continue providing essential food support and services to those in need.

To support this incredible effort, Feed Ontario developed and launched its Emergency Food Box Program, delivering over 400,000 food boxes through the provincial food bank network and to communities in need across the province.

However, Feed Ontario and the food bank network's experience in helping communities manage and overcome crises tells us that the impact of this pandemic will continue to be felt for years to come.

While our network will continue to work hard to meet the increasing demand for our services, this effort cannot replace a strong social safety net or significant investments into solutions that ultimately eradicate hunger and poverty.

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About This Report

Feed Ontario's Hunger Report provides an analysis of the data gathered by the Ontario food bank network through the Link2Feed client intake system. Traditionally, the report discusses food bank use between April 1st and March 31st annually, in order to understand the complex issues that impact people living in poverty and how different public policy changes and economic circumstances impact low-income Ontarians year over year.

While COVID-19 has undeniably impacted our province, the extent to which individuals or families have been, or are being, impacted — particularly low-income and vulnerable people — differs greatly. In recognizing the importance of understanding this impact, the provincial food bank network has continued to collect real-time data to help identify the different ways in which Ontarians accessing food banks have been impacted by the pandemic and the new world that surrounds us.

The 2020 Hunger Report provides analysis of the data gathered by Feed Ontario's network of 130 direct member food banks and 1,100 affiliate agencies leading up to the onset of the global pandemic (April 1st, 2019 —March 31st, 2020).

This report also includes a special feature on the impact of COVID-19 on food banks between March 17th, 2020 when the state of emergency was first declared, and September 2020. This portion of the report analyzes data collected by 71 direct member food banks and 339 affiliate agencies.

Feed Ontario would like to thank Food Banks Canada for all of its support in developing the COVID-19 Snapshot survey and the essential resources it provides to the Canadian food bank network. We would also like to thank our direct and affiliate members for their hard work in surveying visitors to the food bank, and for the invaluable and essential role that they continue to play in providing immediate hunger-relief while advocating for solutions to poverty.

Finally, Feed Ontario would like to thank all of the individuals that participated in the visitor surveys for sharing the stories and information that has informed this report.

To learn more about Feed Ontario and the provincial food bank network, please visit **www.feedontario.ca**

Executive Summary

Between April 1st, 2019 and March 31st, 2020, Ontario's food banks were accessed by 537,575 individuals that visited more than 3.2 million times throughout the year. This is a 5.3 percent increase in the number of unique individuals over the previous year, and a 7.8 percent increase in the last two years. The primary reason that an adult or family may need to access a food bank is that they do not have sufficient income to afford all of their necessities, like rent, heat, hydro, transportation, and food, in a given month.

Feed Ontario's data shows that the primary drivers of continued growth in food bank use are an inadequate social safety net, precarious employment, and unaffordable housing. While the

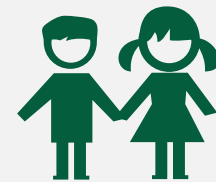
provincial food bank network does not collect data pertaining to race, Feed Ontario also recognizes that Black and Indigenous people are disproportionately impacted by poverty and food insecurity, as well as the role that systemic racism and inequality plays in creating barriers to opportunities that are otherwise accessible to most Canadians.

With the onset of COVID-19 and the declaration of a state of emergency in Ontario on March 17th, 2020, food banks saw an almost immediate surge in demand as hundreds of thousands of people in the province faced extensive job losses and closures. This led to the rapid development and execution of a number of new hunger-relief programs and services across the province, which have continued



537,575

individuals accessed a food bank in Ontario in 2019-20



33%

of food bank visitors were children



3,282,514

visits were made to food banks in Ontario in 2019-20

throughout the duration of the pandemic.

While government intervention through the development of a number of provincial and federal benefits and income support programs helped to flatten surging food bank use in many areas of the province, food bank use continued to remain high in a number of communities, particularly where the cost of living is higher than the provincial average. Across the province, all food banks reported a significant increase in the number of first-time users accessing their services within the first four months of the pandemic.

Perhaps most staggering is that 1 out of 2 survey respondents reported that they are worried about facing eviction or defaulting on their mortgage in the coming months.

In surveying close to 200 food bank visitors throughout the month of September, it became apparent that COVID-19 has made it increasingly more difficult for low-income people and families to close the gap between income and expenses. Many survey respondents reported incurring increased debt to help pay for monthly necessities, as well as choosing to go without food in

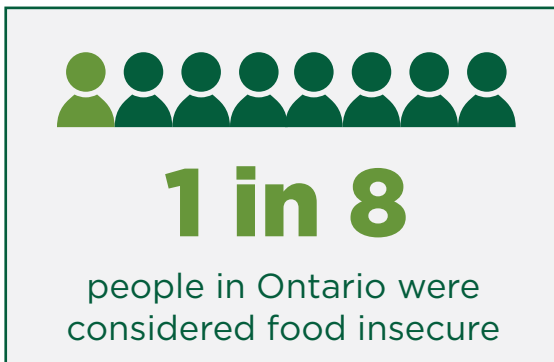
order to pay the bills. Perhaps most staggering is that 1 out of 2 survey respondents reported that they are worried about facing eviction or defaulting on their mortgage in the coming months.

In order to continue mitigating the impact of COVID-19 and to reduce poverty in our province, Feed Ontario recommends that the provincial government take immediate action to establish a minimum income floor and supports that ensure no Ontarian is left behind. There are a number of ways that this can be achieved including: the provision of immediate income support for low-income Ontarians impacted by COVID-19 for the duration of the pandemic; aligning Ontario's social assistance rates with the national standard set by CERB; and investing in a strong workforce through the development of quality jobs that ensure Ontarians are able to earn enough income to afford today's cost of living.

Feed Ontario believes that its vision of ending hunger and poverty is shared by all levels of government, and that there has never been a greater need for collective action than there is today.

The Role Food Banks Play

Food insecurity is defined as insufficient access to safe, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food that meets the dietary needs of the individual or household. As of 2018, over 13 percent of households in Ontario were considered food insecure, representing 1,719,300 people or 1 out of every 8 Ontarians.¹ This is a staggering number that predates the COVID-19 pandemic and reflects the concerning trend that more and more Ontarians are struggling to secure the food that they need to live a healthy life.



It is often misunderstood that the solution to food insecurity is more food and that providing immediate, emergency access to this food is addressing the problem. However, what this perspective fails to recognize is that food insecurity is not driven by a lack of food, but rather because people in food insecure households do not have sufficient income for all of their basic necessities — including rent,

heat, hydro, transportation, and food — in a given month. Food insecurity in this province is driven by poverty and the only solution to this problem is ensuring that every Ontarian is able to access the income needed to meet today's cost of living.

Food banks provide an immediate, emergency response to people and families that have been unable to afford sufficient food. While food banks are not a solution to food insecurity, they work tirelessly to provide nutritious food support and programming that helps to alleviate hunger and increase access to income. This includes financial support programs, like rent relief or utility assistance, accredited training programs, child care and health services, as well as assisting visitors with filing their taxes or obtaining government supports and subsidies. Further, food banks advocate on behalf of those they serve at the municipal, provincial, and federal level for income based solutions to poverty.

Food banks are currently playing an essential role in Ontario, but equally know that the solution to food insecurity lies in strong public policies that ensure people and families are able to access the income they need to overcome barriers and move out of poverty.



Food Bank Use

in Ontario

While food banks are not a solution to food insecurity, there is a relationship between the number of food insecure households in Ontario and the number of people that are accessing food banks.

In the same way that food insecurity has continued on an upward trajectory, so too has food bank use in our province. Over the last two years alone, Ontario's food banks have seen a 7.8 percent increase in the number of people accessing support, and an 11.8 percent increase in the number of visits being made to their services.

Between April 1st, 2019 and March 31st, 2020, Ontario's food banks

were accessed by 537,575 adults and children who visited 3,282,514 times.

While there are a number of complex circumstances that might result in someone needing to access a food bank, Ontario's food bank data shows that an inadequate social safety net, precarious employment, and unaffordable housing are the primary drivers of this growing trend.

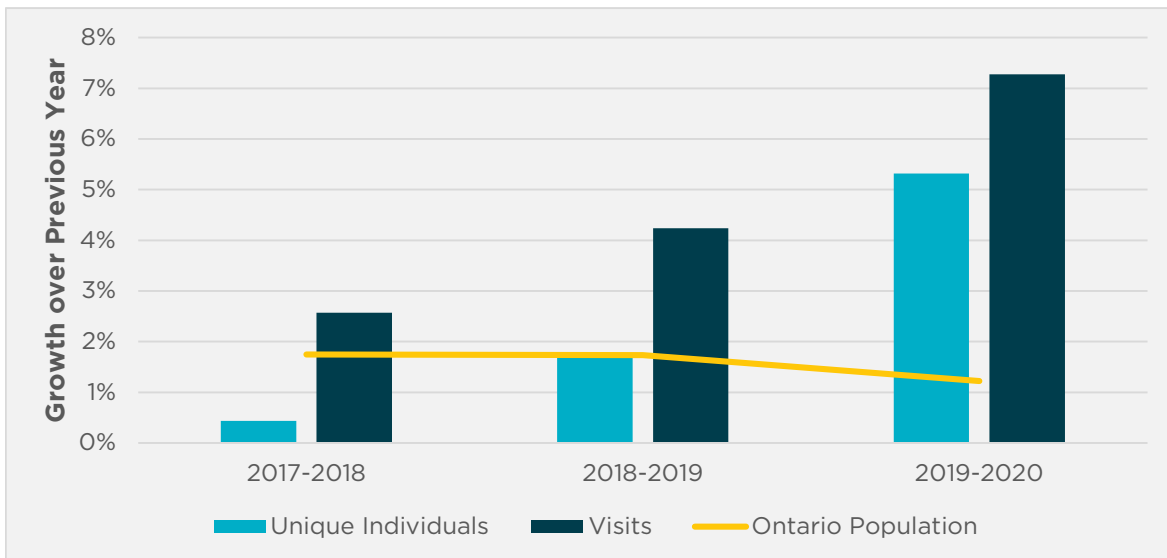


FIGURE 1.1 FOOD BANK USE IN ONTARIO IS GROWING SIGNIFICANTLY FASTER THAN THE GENERAL POPULATION | ONTARIO FOOD BANK USE GROWTH (UNIQUE INDIVIDUALS AND VISITS) VERSUS POPULATION GROWTH OF ONTARIO²

Inadequate Social Safety Net

Over 65.7 percent of food bank users were social assistance recipients, with 32.6 percent citing Ontario Works and 33.2 percent citing the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) as their primary source of income. In understanding that food bank use is driven by insufficient access to income, it is unsurprising that social assistance recipients represent the majority,

or two out of three households, of those that access food banks in Ontario.

As illustrated in Figure 1.2, both of Ontario's social assistance programs provide significantly less than the Low Income Measure. Further, as neither program has been maintained alongside inflation since 2018, the gap between the support provided and the income needed for basic necessities, like housing, hydro, personal care items, and food, has only continued to grow.

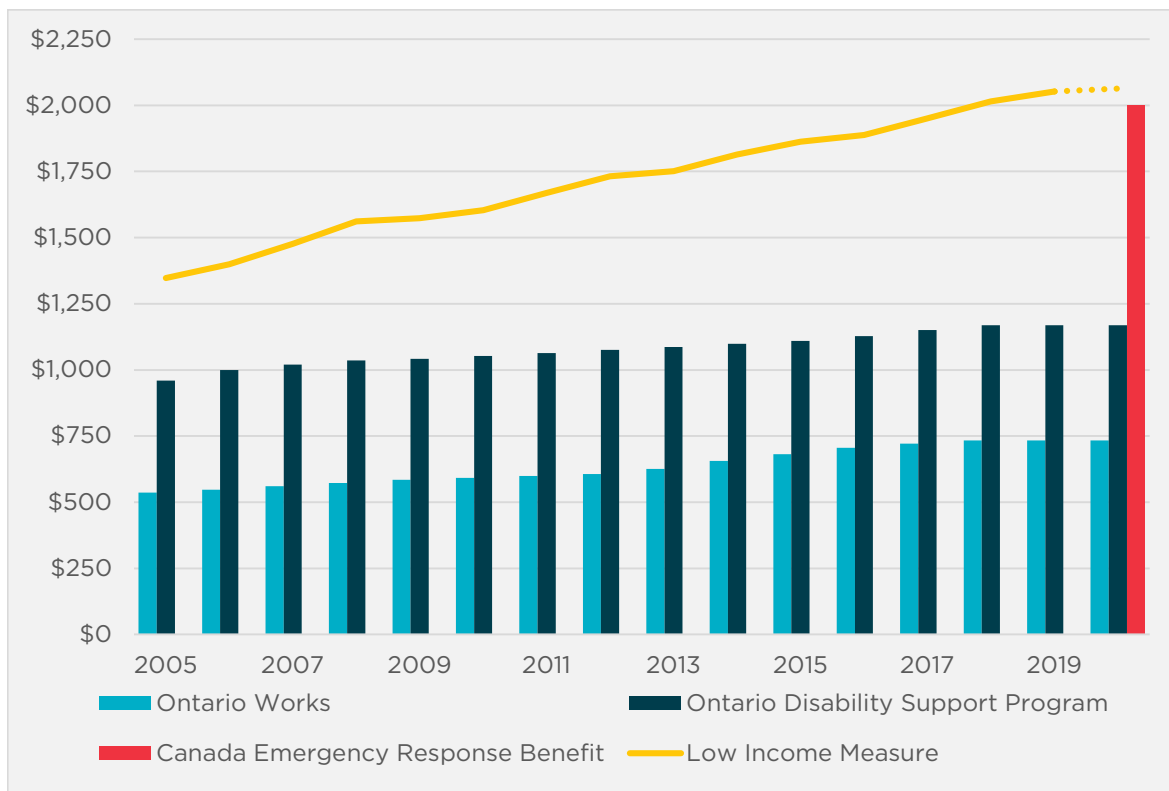


FIGURE 1.2 SOCIAL ASSISTANCE HAS CONTINUED TO FALL FURTHER BELOW THE LOW INCOME MEASURE (LIM) | ONTARIO WORKS, ODSP RATES^{3,4,5} VERSUS THE LIM⁶ AND THE CANADA EMERGENCY RESPONSE BENEFIT (CERB) RATE⁷.

Precarious Employment

As revealed in the 2019 Hunger Report, food banks have seen an increasing number of adults with employment accessing their services. Leading up to March 2020, this trend continued with an eight percent increase in the last year alone, and a 44 percent increase over the last four years. This continuing trend is largely the result of a rise in casual, contract, and part-time employment, which makes it difficult for waged workers to secure sufficient income each month, changes to Ontario's labour laws, including the removal of paid sick days, and the inadequate support and accessibility of worker support programs, like Employment Insurance (EI) and WSIB.

Unaffordable Housing

Ontario's lack of affordable housing continued to be a significant barrier for low-income individuals and families. Over 86 percent of food bank users were rental or social housing tenants who spent the majority of their monthly income on rent. As a fixed expense and non-negotiable cost, paying



Over the last 4 years, the proportion of employed adults accessing a food bank has grown by

44%

rent is often prioritized above any other expense, with many food bank users choosing to reduce the amount of food they purchase — or even go without — in order to ensure this bill is paid. As shared by a visitor recently, “Food is the last item I spend money on. I always make sure we have a roof over our heads and utilities first.”

In addition to rising rental rates and housing costs, a new trend has started to emerge. Over the last year, Ontario's food banks have seen a 27 percent increase in the proportion of people that live in precarious housing, such as an emergency shelter or ‘couch surfing’ between friends and family. This is very concerning and arguably reflects the growing housing and homelessness crisis in Ontario.

Systemic Racism and Inequalities

In our past effort to balance data collection with barriers to service, Feed Ontario has not collected data pertaining to race, immigration, or refugee status in our province. We do however know that racialized communities are disproportionately impacted by food insecurity, with the highest rates of food insecurity in the country being found amongst households that identified as Black (28.9 percent) or Indigenous (28.2 percent), compared to non-racialized households (11.1 percent).⁸

This is further exemplified in Ontario where, according to the Chiefs of Ontario and the First Nations Information Governance Centre, 48 percent of First Nations adults living on reserves are food insecure, compared to 13.3 percent of people not living on reserves.⁹

The high rate of representation of Black and Indigenous people in poverty and food insecure households is the result of systemic racism in Canada and reflects the inequalities and barriers that racialized people face in accessing opportunities, benefits, health care, and social services that are otherwise easily accessible to most Canadians.¹⁰

Feed Ontario recognizes the connection between race and food insecurity, and that more work needs to be done to develop anti-racist policies and practices that address the systemic inequalities faced by Indigenous, Black, and racialized communities in Ontario.



Black and Indigenous households are nearly

3 times

more likely to be food insecure than non-racialized households

Demographics of Food Bank Use in Ontario

FIGURE 1.3 HOUSING TYPE

Private Rental	71.4%
Social Rental Housing	14.9%
Own Home	4.7%
With Family/ Friends	4.0%
Emergency Shelter	2.0%
Rooming House	1.4%
On the Street	0.8%
Band Owned	0.4%
Group Home/ Youth Shelter	0.3%

FIGURE 1.4 HOUSEHOLD COMPOSITION

Single Person	51.2%
Single Parent Families	19.2%
Two Parent Families	14.8%
Couples, No Children	6.9%
Other	7.8%

FIGURE 1.5 AGES

0 - 2 Years	5.1%
3 - 5 Years	5.7%
6 - 11 Years	12.1%
12 - 17 Years	10.0%
18 - 30 Years	19.0%
31 - 44 Years	20.5%
45 - 64 Years	21.8%
65+ Years	5.7%

FIGURE 1.6 REASON FOR VISIT

Delayed Wages	30.3%
Unexpected Expense	12.6%
Unemployed/ Recently Lost Job	9.7%
Relocation (Immigration/ Moving)	9.2%
Cost of Food	7.7%
Benefit/ Social Assistance Changes	6.4%
Cost of Housing	5.0%
Low Wages/ Not Enough Hours	4.9%
Sickness/ Medical Expense	5.4%
Cost of Utilities	3.2%
Debt	2.1%
Natural Disaster	2.3%
Family Breakup	1.4%

FIGURE 1.7 PRIMARY SOURCE OF INCOME

Disability Related Benefits (ODSP)	33.2%
Social Assistance (OW)	32.6%
Other	12.7%
Employment	10.8%
Old Age Pension	7.8%
Employment Insurance	2.0%
Student Loan	0.7%
Canada Child Benefit	0.3%



Feature:
The Impact of
COVID-19



Photo credit: Daily Bread Food Bank

This has been a year like no other. With the onset of COVID-19, people across Ontario and Canada have been faced with extensive job losses, closures, and increased stress as we continue to face the uncertainty of how long this pandemic will last and to what extent it will impact our economy and the long-term health and well-being of Canadians in the years that follow.

Food banks were some of the first agencies to see the immediate impact of COVID-19. When the Government of Ontario first declared the State of Emergency on March 17th, 2020 and the widespread closure of thousands of businesses and employers across the province, food banks saw a rapid surge in demand as hundreds of thousands of people were now without the means to acquire sufficient income for their basic needs, like rent, hydro, transportation, and food.

The surge in demand that food banks worked to meet varied significantly across the province. In the GTA, for example, the Daily Bread Food Bank saw close to 20,000 people accessing their services on a weekly basis, a near 25 percent increase over the previous year.¹¹ The Mississauga Food Bank reported a sharp increase in the number of first-time users, with a 120 percent increase in the number of people accessing food banks in the community for the very first

time, compared to the same period during the previous year.¹² Outside of the GTA, the Ottawa Food Bank reported an increase of over 400 percent in calls from people needing food support; and the Unemployed Help Centre in Windsor reported seeing double the number of households accessing their services compared to the weeks leading up to the pandemic.¹³

Food banks saw a rapid surge in demand as hundreds of thousands of people were now without the means to acquire sufficient income for their basic needs, like rent, hydro, transportation, and food.

Increasing demands on food banks were not limited to urban centres. In equal measure, food banks in smaller cities and rural communities across the province saw sharp increases, particularly during the first few weeks of the pandemic.

The Salvation Army in Owen Sound, for example, reported seeing over 400 people in the first nine days of the pandemic, a number that is closer to the number of people the agency would typically serve in an entire month.¹⁴ Community Care West Niagara in Lincoln reported a 20 percent increase in the number of people accessing their services,¹⁵ and the Sudbury Food Bank reported increased demand, with one of its agencies seeing a staggering 150 percent increase in the number of people accessing emergency food support each day.¹⁶

In alignment with this surging need, data from 211 Ontario showed that information on food programming and services increased 1,307 percent between the first week of March and second week of April (see Figure 2.1). Further, as an identified need, access to food and meal support grew from the ninth most common reason that people contacted 211 Ontario to the number one reason in the first two months of the pandemic.¹⁷

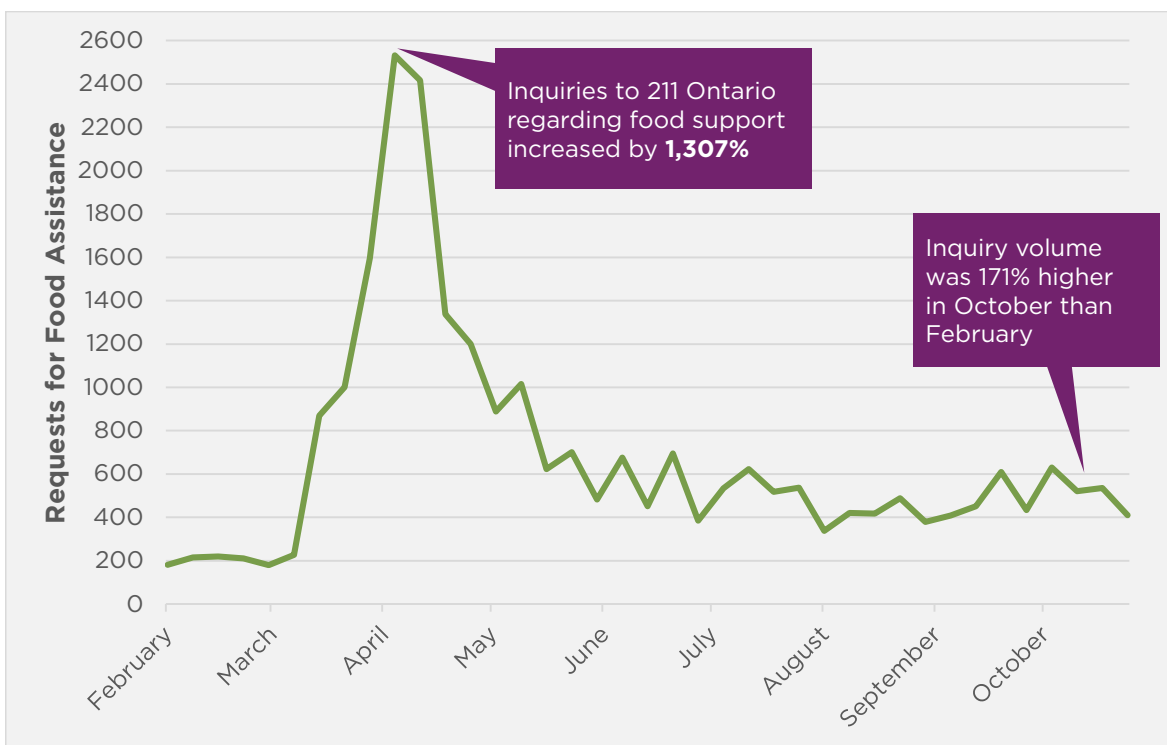


FIGURE 2.1 INQUIRIES TO 211 ONTARIO FOR INFORMATION ON FOOD SUPPORT EXPLODED DURING THE FIRST SIX WEEKS OF THE PANDEMIC. WITH THE INTRODUCTION OF CERB, INQUIRIES DECREASED SIGNIFICANTLY, THOUGH IT STILL REMAINS 171 PERCENT HIGHER THAN FEBRUARY 2020. | 211 ONTARIO REQUESTS, FOOD NEEDS, WEEKLY, FEBRUARY - OCTOBER 2020¹⁸

I. Government Response and Food Bank Use

In an effort to both flatten the curve of COVID-19 cases and reduce the devastating impact that widespread closures were having on household finances, the provincial and federal governments quickly developed and rolled out a number of new benefits and income supports. Perhaps the most significant was the development of the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), which provided employed Canadians who had to stop working due to reasons related to COVID-19 with up to \$2,000 per month. According to Employment and Social Development Canada, the government received over 966,000 applications for CERB on the very first day that Canadians could apply.¹⁹ In addition to this benefit, the Government of Canada also added top-ups to existing income supports, including Old Age Security (OAS), the Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS), the Canada Child Benefit (CCB), and the GST/HST credit.

At the provincial level, the Government of Ontario also made significant investments to further help families in need. This included temporary top-ups to payments made to low-income senior citizens through the Ontario Guaranteed Annual Income System (GAINS),²⁰

the provision of an emergency benefit of \$100 for individuals or \$200 for families who are receiving social assistance,²¹ and a one-time payment of up to \$250 per child for families with children. In addition to these income supports, the Government of Ontario implemented a number of temporary cost-saving measures to help Ontarians balance a reduced income against their ongoing monthly expenses. This included the suspension of Ontario student loan repayments, reduced electricity rates,²² and a moratorium on evictions in order to prevent landlords from evicting tenants who were unable to pay their rent due to or during COVID-19.²³

By quickly enacting these income supports and benefits, both the provincial and federal governments effectively intervened in what could have been a financially catastrophic situation for millions of Canadian people and families. Alongside flattening the curve of COVID-19 in the spring, these supports helped — in some cases — to flatten the skyrocketing curve of food bank use in communities across Ontario. By September 2020, 80 percent of the 410 direct and affiliate hunger-relief agencies surveyed reported seeing a decreased need and food bank use numbers that were comparable or even lower than pre-pandemic numbers.

While this may seem initially

positive, the lowered food bank use numbers cannot be exclusively attributed to CERB or the other income support benefits. Alongside government intervention, many communities saw the rapid development of new pop-up food banks and meal programs, community initiatives that provided grocery gift cards to families in need through local schools, as well as other supports that helped to address an emergency need for

food but that is not represented in the provincial food bank network data. What this means is that lowered numbers are not always representative of a decrease in need, but rather a redistribution of community support services that fall outside of our network's data collection and surveying. Further, it has been anecdotally reported that in some cases, lowered food bank use numbers are because many individuals, particularly senior

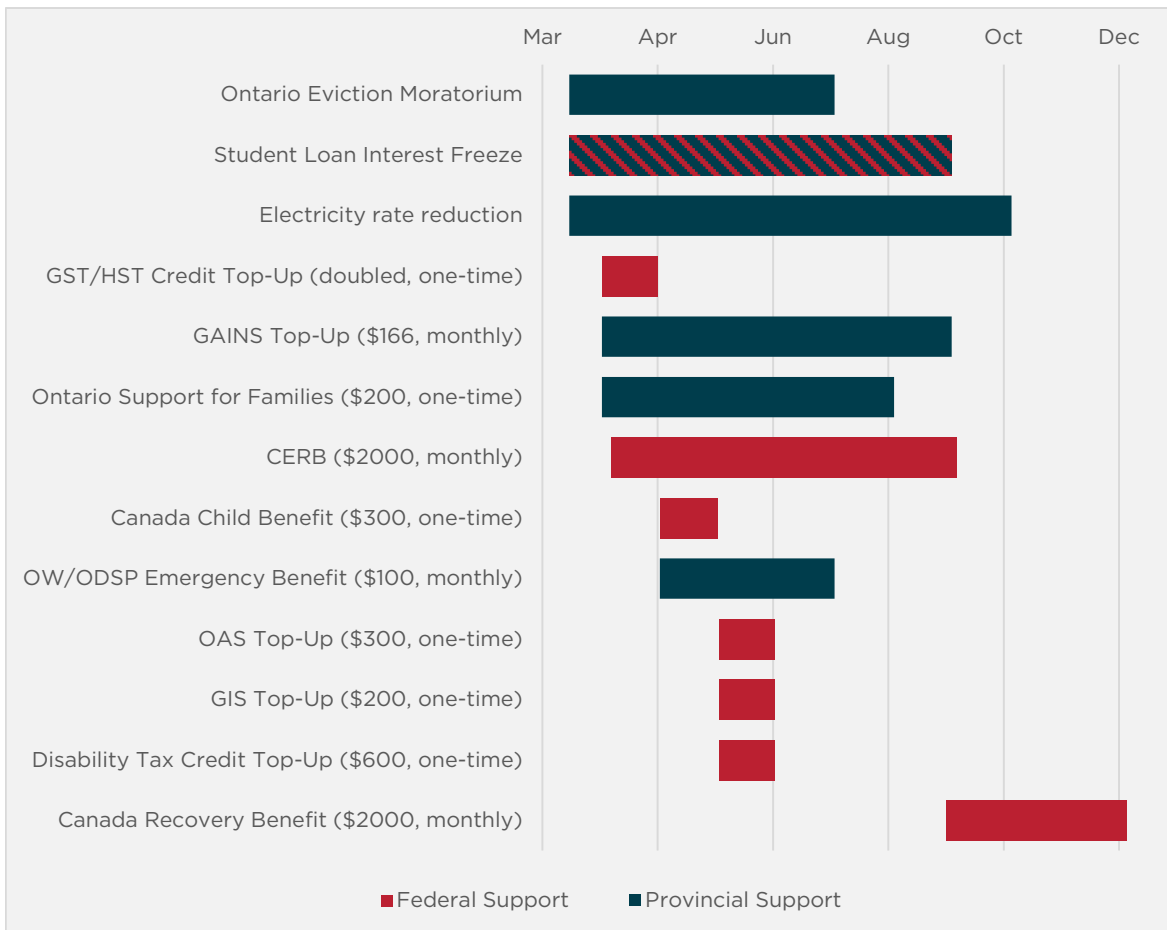


FIGURE 2.2 GOVERNMENT INTERVENTION HELPED REDUCE THE NEED FOR FOOD BANKS; HOWEVER, MOST SUPPORT BENEFITS HAVE NOW ENDED | SELECTED FEDERAL AND PROVINCIAL COVID-19 BENEFITS AND SUPPORTS PROVIDED BETWEEN MARCH 2020 - DECEMBER 2020

citizens, were too afraid to leave their homes in order to access community services, like food banks, that they would otherwise rely on. As shared by one survey respondent, “My biggest challenge has been the psychological effects. Fear and worries. COVID-19 has been very traumatic.”

In addition to the complex reasons that food bank use decreased in some communities, it is also important to recognize that 20 percent of food banks surveyed reported a continued surge in demand that ranged from a five percent to a 54 percent increase in the number of people accessing their services on an ongoing basis since the start of the pandemic. Even with all of the provincial and federal income support benefits in place, thousands of Ontarians impacted by COVID-19 were unable to afford all of their most basic necessities in a given month, including food. Similar to the reasons for a decrease

in demand, understanding why ongoing surges in use following the rollout of substantial provincial and federal support benefits continued is complex. There are however two key contributors that stand out.

The first is that despite the myriad of provincial and federal benefits developed or expanded upon, not everyone impacted by COVID-19 was able to access, or was eligible for, this support. For example, in order to qualify for CERB, recipients could not have earned more than \$1,000 in employment income for 14 or more consecutive days within the four-week benefit period of their claim.²⁴ As a result, workers whose hours were reduced but whose monthly income remained above \$1,000 were ineligible for this benefit. It has been estimated that as many as 16 percent of unemployed Canadians were unable to access CERB for financial support.²⁵ Similarly, in order to access the province’s

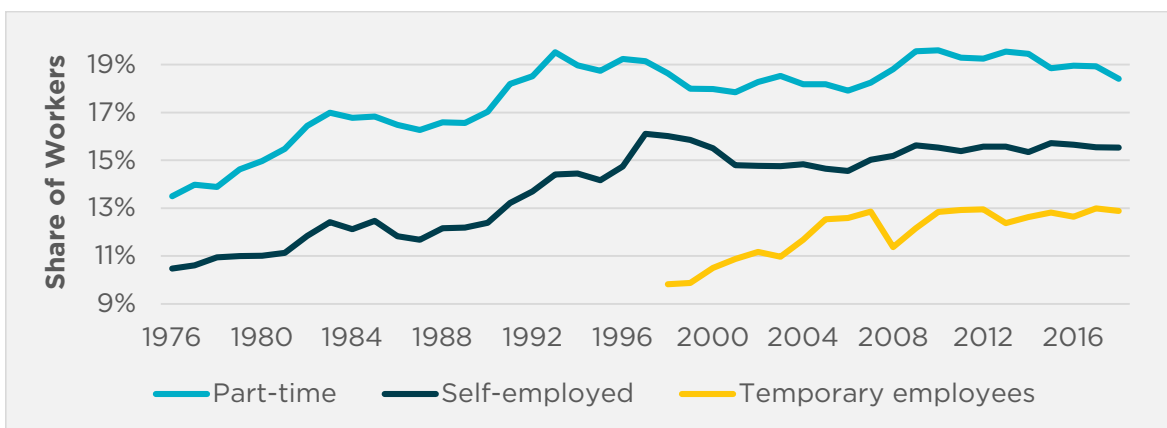


FIGURE 2.3 THE RISE IN PRECARIOUS WORK HAS MEANT THAT MANY WORKERS WERE NOT ELIGIBLE FOR CERB | PART-TIME²⁶, SELF-EMPLOYED²⁷, AND TEMPORARY WORKERS²⁸ AS A PERCENTAGE OF ALL WORKERS

social assistance top-up, program recipients were required to contact their caseworker to determine eligibility for the benefit, which created a number of significant barriers for recipients needing this additional support. In a survey conducted by the Daily Bread Food Bank, it was found that one in three social assistance recipients did not receive the emergency benefits available to them because they were unable to reach their caseworker, were denied the benefit, or simply did not know that it existed.²⁹



Between March and June, first-time food bank users increased by

26.5%

The second is that the overall extent of the support that CERB provided varied greatly depending on the recipient's previous income and their ongoing cost of living. As previously stated, CERB provided \$2,000 per month, which is equivalent to \$12 per hour for full-time work, or 40 hours per week. In Ontario, where the minimum

wage is \$14 per hour, this meant that minimum wage workers who lost their jobs or the majority of their hours were now receiving 14 percent less income than before.³⁰ For workers that made more than minimum wage, this income loss was even greater. What makes this particularly challenging for minimum wage workers is that the positions they typically occupy are most often precarious, part-time, or contract positions that do not provide paid-sick days or health benefits. As a result, minimum and low-wage workers are more likely to live paycheck to paycheck and, consequently, less likely to have savings to help supplement any shortfall between their usual monthly income and fixed expenses.³¹

In areas of the province where the cost of living is substantially higher than the provincial average, the extent to which CERB's support could be stretched was even more limited. In Burlington, for example, where the average cost of a one-bedroom lease is now \$1,942 per month,³² CERB recipients would be left with just \$58 to pay for utilities, transportation, and all other necessary expenses. With this in mind, it is perhaps then unsurprising that Ontario's food banks saw an overall 26.5 percent increase in the number of first-time users, meaning adults and families that had never accessed a food bank before, within the first four months of the pandemic.

II. The Impact on Vulnerable Ontarians

In September 2020, food banks in Burlington, Cornwall, Kanata, Orillia, and Windsor surveyed close to 200 of their visitors on how COVID-19 impacted their daily lives. While the circumstances that brought each individual to the food bank varied significantly, every participant spoke to how much harder the challenges they already faced had become since the start of the pandemic. As stated by one participant, “Everything is hard. Paying rent is hard, going to the doctor is hard, accessing groceries and food are hard. Everything is so much harder now.”

Closing the gap between income and expenses was one of the

most significant challenges for survey participants, with over 93 percent borrowing money from friends and family, accessing a pay day loan, or using credit to help pay for monthly necessities.

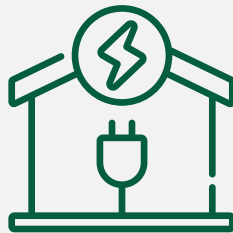
“Everything is hard. Paying rent is hard, going to the doctor is hard, accessing groceries and food are hard. Everything is so much harder now.”

It also led to many individuals having to make difficult choices between which bills to pay and what necessities to buy, with food often being one of the first items that participants would go without in order to pay for other expenses. Most often, the top three expenses that caused a participant to miss a meal were rent (22 percent), utilities

Most Common Expenses That Caused A Survey Respondent To Miss A Meal



22%
rent



18%
utilities



14%
phone/internet

(18 percent) and phone/internet (14 percent). As one participant shared, “Prices have gone up. My hydro bill has almost doubled since last year this time. Choosing to pay bills and put food last has been happening for me.”



48%

of food bank survey respondents are worried about facing eviction or defaulting on their mortgage in the coming months

What makes this particularly concerning is that as the pandemic continues, it will progressively put more stress on low-income and vulnerable people as they continue to run out of savings, incur larger debts, and work to stretch every dollar even further. Not only will this contribute to increased stress and anxiety, but

it will make it even more difficult to for individuals to get back on their feet when COVID-19 is over. The likelihood of this progression is reflected in the survey results, which showed that while the majority of respondents had found a way to pay their full rent since the start of the pandemic, over 48 percent are now worried about facing eviction or defaulting on their mortgage in the coming months. Further, 28 percent believed that they would be unable to continue paying utilities within the next two to six months. As one respondent shared, “I didn’t immediately qualify for CERB and had to wait a month and a half for reevaluation of the benefit. I lived off savings until then, but now I can’t get caught up.”

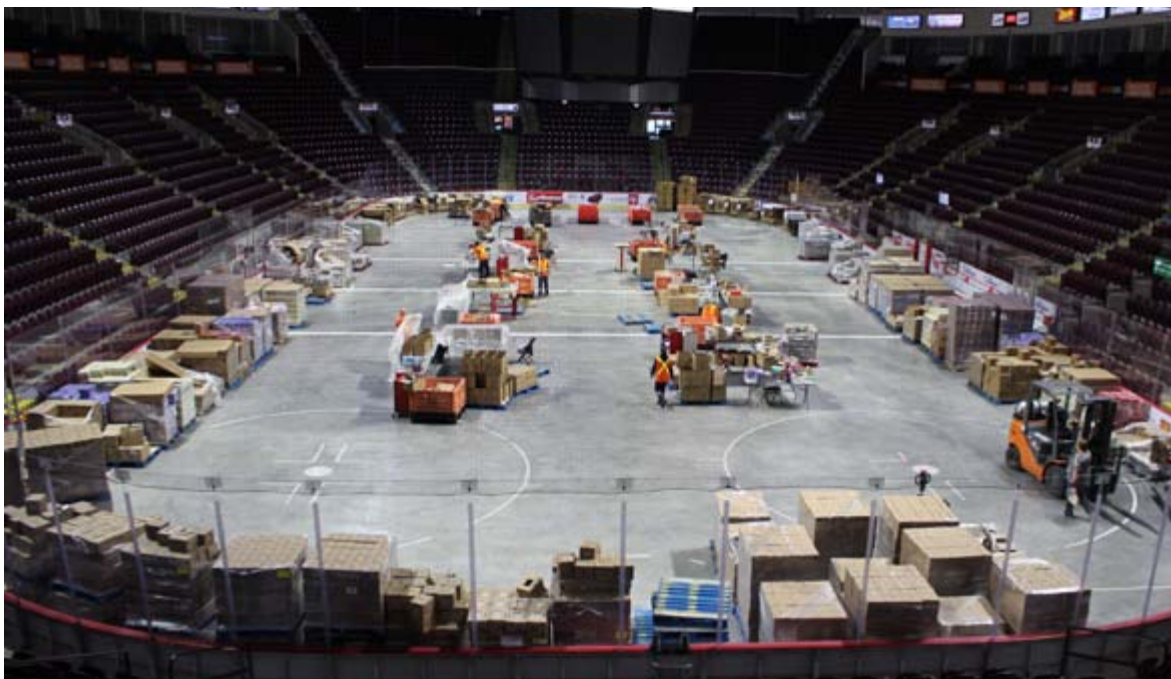
Undoubtedly, CERB and the income support measures that the provincial and federal government implemented prevented a catastrophic outcome for many Canadians; however, for many people it still did not prevent having to make difficult choices between household expenses and other necessities. In recognizing this unprecedented need, food banks worked tirelessly to quickly modify their services and implement new programming to meet the demand in their communities and address the new challenges created by COVID-19.

III. Food Bank Response

With the emergence of COVID-19, food banks, like so many organizations, were faced with a number of significant challenges. There was a surge in demand for emergency food support, as people and families lost their jobs; food shortages at food banks, as many communities and grocery stores faced supply chain delays and food drives and events were cancelled; and labour shortages, as the volunteers that food banks rely on to sort food, pack boxes, and register visitors were no longer able to come into

work. However, within all of these challenges, we saw the strength of community and the resilience of hundreds of organizations that were determined to continue providing essential food support and service to those in need.

Some examples of this include rapidly developing new ways that people could access emergency food support at the food bank, including changing from a grocery store model of service to an appointment model or drive-thru, curbside pick-up, home delivery, or even redesigning a complete distribution network in partnership with local libraries or other social service organizations. To help support this incredible effort,



The WFCU Arena, converted into a depot for food hampers by the Windsor and Essex County Food Bank Association (Windsor)

Feed Ontario developed its COVID-19 Emergency Food Box Program, which centralized a number of the usual processes that are needed to operate a food bank,

However, within all of these challenges, we saw the strength of community and the resilience of hundreds of organizations that were determined to continue providing essential food support and service to those in need.

and provided a single solution to many of the food and labour shortages that food banks were facing.

With the support of the Government of Ontario and the Government of Canada, as well as donations from corporate partners and caring individuals across the province, Feed Ontario was able to successfully pack and distribute over 400,000 emergency food boxes for families in need during the height of the pandemic. This was nothing short of remarkable and a testament to the strength and resilience of the provincial food bank network, and what can be accomplished when we work together.

The following stories were submitted by food banks across Ontario on how COVID-19 impacted their community and how they worked locally to ensure continued service to those in need.



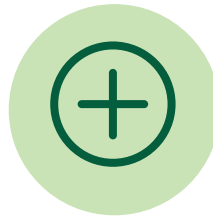
Workers assembling Feed Ontario's Emergency Food Boxes for distribution to food banks across the province

How did food banks respond to COVID-19?



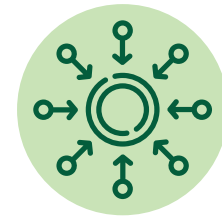
81%

implemented a new emergency food support program



56%

provided food support to a new agency or service



21%

centralized their operations with another social service agency



80%

moved from a shopping model to a hamper model



77%

increased the amount of food provided to reduce the number of visits



41%

began operating as an appointment model food bank



64%

initiated a home delivery service



21%

offered delivery or takeout meals



21%

started a drive-thru service

Manitoulin Family Resources



Manitoulin Family Resources provides programming in the areas of Violence Against Women Prevention, Children’s Services, as well as a Food Bank and Thrift Store. Our food bank serves the communities of Manitoulin Island and normally supports 300-330 individuals per month. All of this programming is done with the most dedicated group of volunteers, under the part-time supervision provided by the Food Security Program Coordinator, Linda Gilchrist. These programs are in the heart, and part of the heart, of Manitoulin Island.

On March 11, 2020, the thrift store did not open. Out of concern for community safety, the decision was made to close the store and determine our course of action. As the province announced the need for those over 70 to self-isolate, we had to acknowledge the vulnerability of our volunteers in this

age group, and requested they stay home. The food bank continued to operate on a skeleton crew of three, and the store remained closed.

While the initial days of the pandemic were very quiet for food bank requests, it caused concern that we were not even receiving requests from some of our regular visitors. As most agencies had staff working remotely, Linda began to try to reach out to agencies to remind them that we were here, we were open, and available to help those in need. As COVID numbers increased in the province, several of our local Indigenous communities went into “lockdown” for the protection of their members. We continued to reach out to community leaders and workers and encouraged them to let us know if we could be of assistance.

Referrals began to increase, sometimes high, sometimes low, but then came a day where a worker called with 700 names of those in need. It was a turning point. Instead of sending individual baskets, we prepared pallets for pick up, which were delivered and distributed to households. Our building, which housed the food bank and thrift store was repurposed to be one large food bank, as the space was needed for the amounts of food that we were processing, and to allow for physical distancing of our three individuals meeting the needs of many.

For three consecutive months, our food bank provided food to over 1000 individuals, with the highest month being over 1500. As restrictions have eased in the province, we have seen a drop from those high numbers. Some have speculated that individuals have had financial stability due in large part to CERB, but as CERB evolves and COVID numbers have again started to rise at a faster rate than the earlier wave, we are attempting to prepare for what will come.

Referrals began to increase, sometimes high, sometimes low, but then came a day where a worker called with 700 names of those in need. It was a turning point.

The prepackaged food boxes through Feed Ontario were an incredible boon during our high numbers, and the federal grant dollars have allowed us to expand our capacity with commercial grade freezers and coolers in order to accept the food donations.

Our thrift store has remained closed. This has been a loss of income for us of approximately \$1000 per week, as well as also a loss to the community, as it is where many people make reasonable household purchases, buy their children's clothing, and get other much-needed items.

We've since been very fortunate to receive funding through the federal Emergency Community Supports Fund to hire a temporary staff person for the remainder of this fiscal year. Their job will be to deliver thrift store items and food to those out in community in need. If people can't come to us, we will go to them. This will also allow us to create a safe environment to again accept community donations, with appropriate health and safety measures, and help them find their new homes.

Finally, our additional staff person will assist us in adapting our Christmas Campaign and our Christmas Basket assembly and pick up to be COVID-Secure. We know Christmas will come, and we know we will find a way to deliver it. This year saw food banks deemed essential, and the needs of those who are vulnerable must be met. Through the support of our communities, the Food Bank Networks, and Feed Ontario, we will both face, and overcome, these challenges.

Ottawa Food Bank



When the pandemic reached Ottawa in March, we knew our organization's role would be vast and ever evolving. Another thing we knew is that we could not face this challenge alone.

Thankfully, we haven't had to, as we have an amazing network of emergency food programs across the city that were all equally committed to working hard and adapting their operations to ensure vulnerable members of their communities get through these extraordinary times.

Our network of member agencies immediately stepped up and responded with several solutions. Most of them adapted their flow of service to keep themselves, their volunteers, and their clients

safe. Some programs switched to an appointment-based service and shifted to a prepacked hamper system to reduce as many touchpoints as possible. These frontline heroes have worked incredibly hard to ensure families and individuals what they need.

Without this network, 112 programs strong, there would be so many in our city who would go without. We value the relationships we have with our member agencies and are truly honoured to work with them through this trying time.

A concern that became increasingly prevalent was that we needed to reach the families and individuals who were self-isolating.

A concern that became increasingly prevalent was that we needed to reach the families and individuals who were self-isolating. For years we have known the lack of home delivery is a gap in the system and is something we needed to examine. This crisis quickly elevated that need. Thanks to our incredible member agency partners at the Salvation Army Booth Centre, who were ready to mobilize with their own vehicles, we were able to develop a plan to quickly start a home delivery program.

The Salvation Army helped with filling that gap with this vital

service for the first 6 weeks after the pandemic struck Ottawa. After that period, the United Muslims Organizations of Ottawa-Gatineau helped us continue our program for 18 weeks. We cannot thank both these organizations enough for their support and cooperation. We learned a lot of their processes to help us move forward.

Since then, we have fine-tuned the process to pilot a delivery program of our own. Between March and September 2020, we have made over 1,000 deliveries to nearly 500 households. We are successfully reaching some of Ottawa's most vulnerable in their time of need.

A key component in our daily operations at the Ottawa Food Bank and to the success of home delivery is confidentiality and preserving dignity for food bank clients. As such, when we deliver directly to someone's home, it is in an unmarked vehicle with non-branded boxes.

We know that asking for help from a food bank can be hard. We know that getting to a food bank when faced with additional barriers such as mobility, age, and/or health can feel impossible. With the help of our incredible member agencies we are pleased to now be in a place where we can further help the Ottawa community by addressing this need and making food insecurity a little less daunting.

The Mississauga Food Bank



Sometimes, nutritious food is out of reach—and not just because of the cost. For people living with mobility issues, disability, or serious illness, just getting to the store can be impossible, let alone struggling with heavy grocery bags.

In October 2019, The Mississauga Food Bank launched its *Food Bank 2 Home* delivery program to break down these barriers. For the first time, volunteers were able to deliver nutritious food directly to vulnerable neighbours' doors.

When *Food Bank 2 Home* first launched, it served 42 households. Since then, the program has exploded, growing to serve 800 households during the height of COVID-19 pandemic. *Food Bank*

2 Home has been a crucial part of The Mississauga Food Banks' response to the pandemic; it helped keep up with the surging hunger in the community while keeping vulnerable neighbours safe at home.

Neighbours like Grace, a single mother of three young children. Grace was just able to make ends meet until the province shut down at the peak of the first wave of the pandemic.

As a result of the pandemic, I had to stop working when child care shut down. Being the only adult at home with my three young children made going to my local food bank impossible. This program has changed my life.

In the blink of an eye, schools closed and Grace was left with nowhere to turn for child care. As a result, she was forced to leave her part-time job to stay home with her kids. Just like that, she could no longer afford to keep a roof over their heads and food on their table.

Getting to the food bank—without a car, and with three little ones in tow—was impossible. That's when Grace found out about *Food Bank 2 Home*. She connected with The Mississauga Food Bank team.

Within a few days, a smiling volunteer arrived at her doorstep with bags full of healthy and nutritious food. For Grace and hundreds of other vulnerable neighbours, *Food Bank 2 Home* doesn't just deliver food. It provides precious peace of mind.

"I really needed help. I wasn't able to keep up with my family's expenses; I'm a single mother and was looking for support. As a result of the pandemic, I had to stop working when child care shut down. Being the only adult at home with my three young children made going to my local food bank impossible. This program has changed my life. It's been a great help and relief for my family. Now I know my children are getting the healthy food they need."

Since March, The Mississauga Food Bank's *Food Bank 2 Home* delivery program distributed food for over 364,000 meals to over 1,800 hungry children, seniors, families, and neighbours across Mississauga. Thanks to the generosity of our community, the *Food Bank 2 Home* delivery program has met the increasing demand for food from our most vulnerable neighbours. With the support of caring neighbours and hard-working volunteers, The Mississauga Food Bank continues to ensure that no one gets left behind as they work towards creating a Mississauga where no one goes hungry.

Community Care of West Niagara



When Premier Ford announced the lockdown in March, there has been a continuous increase in demand for CCWN's assistance. We adjusted our operation to ensure clients were still able to receive the support they required, while in a safe environment for both clients and staff members. Amongst the news, we had local manufacturers reach out to provide personal protective equipment for both staff and clients during this difficult time.

In August, we started to see an increase of almost 20% in clients. The crisis has required CCWN to rethink how to best serve residents of Lincoln because there is an emerging cohort that requires assistance in order to maintain the resilience of our community. CCWN decided to open a COVID-19 Satellite office in Vineland, which

aims to boost equitable access to agency services for residents who face barriers accessing our main office or may not be aware of the services we provide. This satellite office will work as a triage centre for local clients.

Residents that were once donors were now using the services they once supported.

Residents that were once donors were now using the services they once supported. With our annual food drive this year, we had no idea as to how it would turn out or how much support CCWN would receive due to the pandemic. On September 19th 2020, the residents of Lincoln came together and contributed even more than what we had raised last year! The food collected at this food drive goes to families all year around. This pandemic has required many families, individuals and businesses to adjust to a new "normal". However, even during a pandemic our Lincoln community came together to support one another.

In the coming months, we expect a slight increase in clients when tax season comes. This is what we're preparing for: to assist those who need help. Food might just be the beginning of the conversation, but we are here to help anyone who needs it.



Recommendations

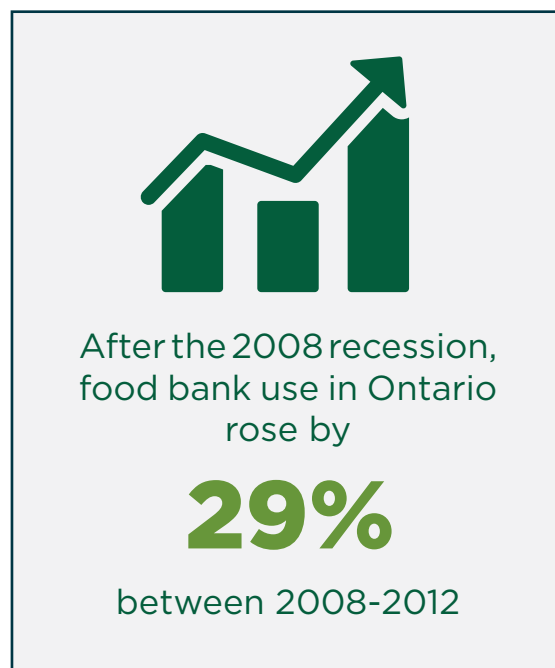
For Change

Individuals, businesses, organizations and the government are tackling new challenges every day in response to COVID-19. Food banks are no exception; but what is of most concern to Feed Ontario and the provincial food bank network is that we believe the worst is yet to come.

The first food banks in Canada were established in 1981 as a stop-gap measure to address the immediate need borne out of the 1981-1983 recession. However, what was intended as a temporary solution has grown into an established network of charities across the country that continue to respond to ongoing needs. In Ontario, this has been largely the result of periodic downturns in the economy and over four decades of austerity measures that have resulted in gaping holes in the province's social safety net. While food banks work extraordinarily hard to provide a diverse range of emergency and support services, they are continually being stretched far beyond their initial purpose of emergency food support in an attempt to fill the gaps in inadequate public policy and government support programs.

COVID-19 has set a similar, yet demonstrably worse, stage as the events that have taken place since the 1980s. It is our belief that the predicted, long-term economic impact of the pandemic will put extreme demands on food banks,

who are already running at capacity to address existing demands in their communities. Without proper social policy and supports in place, the pressure and demand on food banks will only increase in the coming months. This is becoming apparent in preliminary analysis of our fall food bank use data, which shows that the number of visits to Ontario's food banks was already 10 percent higher in September 2020, compared to September 2019. If food bank use continues to rise, the scope of need will far outpace



the capacity of any emergency charitable model to respond.

Hunger and poverty are complex, multifaceted issues that can only be solved by good public policy solutions that ensure Ontarians have access to the income they need for all of their necessities each month. Over the past eight months, we have seen that improved access to income has helped people and families to mitigate the fallout from the pandemic and even reduce the demand on food banks in some regions of the province.

It is essential that we leverage this knowledge and continue to invest

in Ontarians, not only ensuring that everyone can afford their most basic necessities but also to prevent people from falling into poverty. In order to achieve this outcome, Feed Ontario recommends that the Government of Ontario take immediate action to establish a minimum income floor that ensures all Ontarians are able to access the minimum financial resources needed to meet their basic needs.

There are a number of ways that this can be achieved, including the following immediate and extended measures:

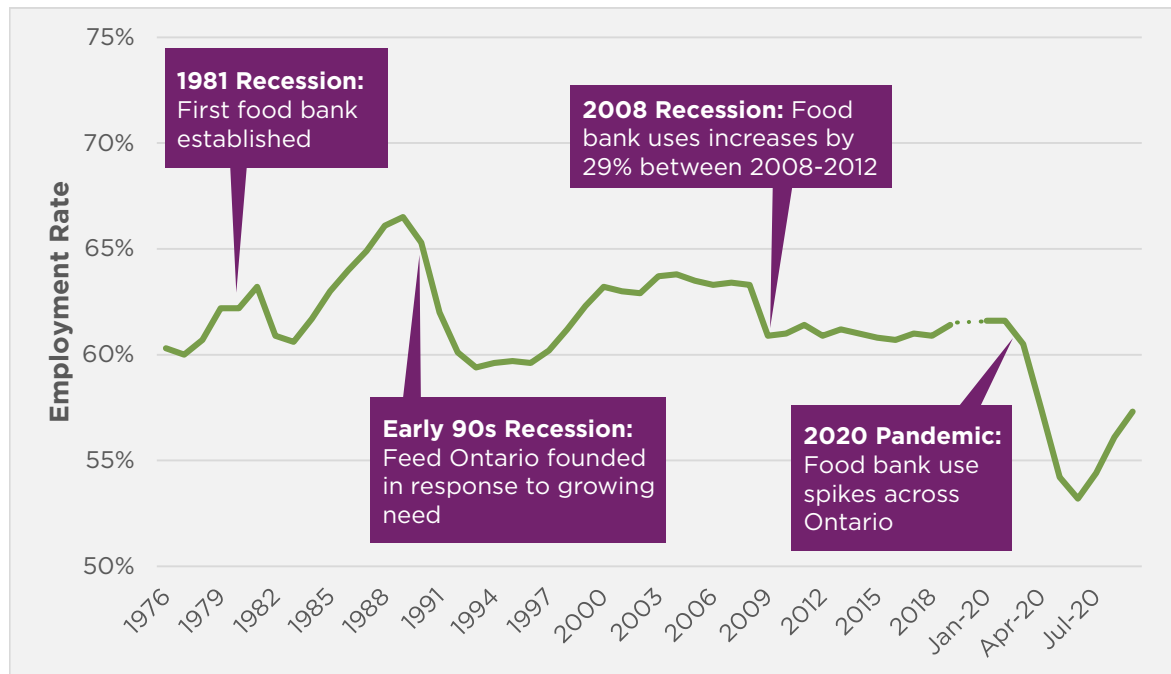


FIGURE 3.1 DROPS IN EMPLOYMENT RATES CORRELATE WITH SPIKES IN FOOD BANK USE | EMPLOYMENT RATES IN ONTARIO, AGE 15-64 (1976-2019 ARE ANNUAL RATES³³, JANUARY-AUGUST 2020 ARE MONTHLY³⁴)

1. Provide immediate income support to those most impacted by COVID-19

Recommendation: Reinstate the Emergency Benefit for Social Assistance Recipients for the duration of the pandemic.

As the province slowly re-opens and initial income support programs wind down, it is imperative that low-income adults and families impacted by COVID-19 are kept top of mind. As the past eight months has shown, continued income supports are essential to ensuring people and families in need do not fall into poverty, or deeper levels of poverty, as a result of the pandemic.

Between May and July 2020, the Ontario government provided eligible social assistance recipients with access to a monthly emergency benefit, \$100 for single individuals and \$200 for families, to assist with additional expenses related to COVID-19. While this benefit may have ended prematurely, the needs of individuals and families as a result of the pandemic remain.

In order to ensure that social assistance recipients, who are already living on an income well below the poverty line, do not fall into deeper levels of poverty, Feed Ontario recommends the

continuation of the Emergency Benefit to help offset new expenses incurred as a result of COVID-19.

Recommendation: Provide immediate rent relief to low-income tenants who are facing large rent arrears or the possibility of eviction due to COVID-19

In Ontario, over 90 percent of food bank users are rental or social housing tenants who spend more than 70 percent of their income on rent. As a fixed expense and non-negotiable cost, many individuals and families have no choice but to go without other necessities like heat, hydro, medicine, or food to keep a roof over their head.

These challenges have been further exacerbated due to COVID-19, with many tenants now facing significant arrears and in jeopardy of losing their home.³⁵ While the moratorium on evictions provided some relief for tenants, the threat of eviction is looming for many Ontarians as the eviction ban has been lifted without proper transitional support in place.

In order to ensure that low-income Ontarians impacted by COVID-19 are not evicted or left homeless as a result of the pandemic, Feed Ontario recommends the development and implementation of an immediate rental relief or subsidy program.

2. Overhaul Ontario’s social assistance programs to ensure that recipients have the resources and means to move out of poverty

**Recommendation:
Align Ontario’s Social Assistance Rates with the national standard set by CERB.**

COVID-19 has further exposed significant gaps in Ontario’s social safety net. With the establishment of the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), the Canadian government has set a standard of what is required for any Canadian to meet their most basic needs - \$2,000 per month or \$500 per week.³⁶ Both Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) and Ontario Works, fall far short of this standard by more than 41 percent and 63 percent, respectively.

To reduce poverty and the need for food banks in Ontario, social assistance recipients need to be able to access sufficient income to afford their basic necessities and establish a foundation that will allow them to move out of poverty.

Feed Ontario recommends that the Government of Ontario align its social assistance rates with CERB or the local Market Basket

Measure. Further, it recommends a number of program improvements to ensure that the support offered by Ontario’s social assistance programs are accessible to those that need them. This includes, but is not limited to: simplifying the rules and eligibility criteria for program applicants and recipients, automatically enrolling recipients for income support top-ups, such as the emergency benefit, or credits, and the elimination of financial penalties and claw backs on earned income.

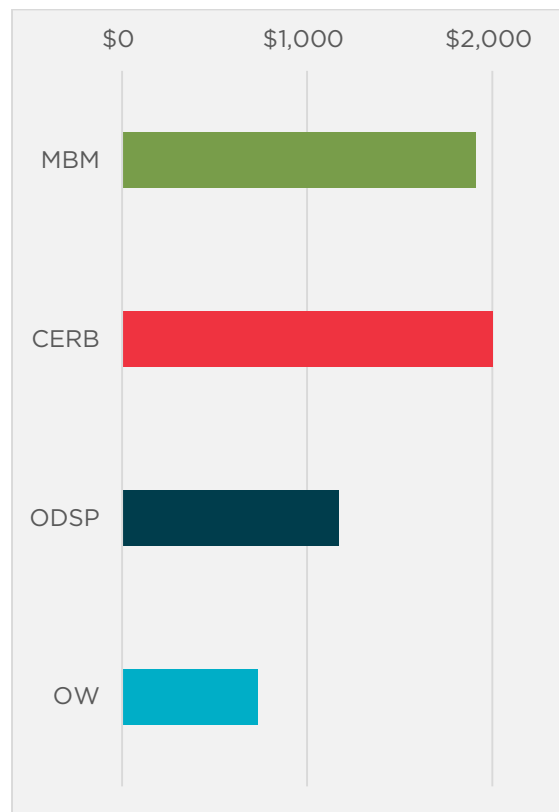


FIGURE 3.2 SOCIAL ASSISTANCE RATES FALL BELOW MARKET BASKET MEASURE (MBM) AND CERB | MBM FOR A SINGLE PERSON³⁷, COMPARED TO RATES FOR THE CERB, ODSP AND ONTARIO WORKS

3. Invest in a strong workforce to ensure that working Ontarians are able to earn enough income to afford today's cost of living

Recommendation:
Develop labour laws and policies that benefit hard-working people, including: the reinstatement of paid sick days, equal pay for equal work, and quality jobs that provide a livable wage.

Ontario has the highest proportion of minimum wage workers in the country. These positions are most often within workplaces and industries that interact directly with the public and that are the least likely to offer employer benefits

or paid sick days to employees or frontline staff.³⁸ Many of these positions are in industries where it is impossible for employees to work from home, such as the food service or retail sectors, and that are disproportionately occupied by women, racialized workers, or people with a disability.³⁹

While many of these workers were recognized as essential throughout the pandemic, they also represent the majority of working Ontarians that have been denied worker protections, like paid sick days, and face ongoing challenges in trying to secure sufficient income every month, despite having a job.

Further, throughout COVID-19, it is most often these workers that have been put in a position of having to choose between their family's

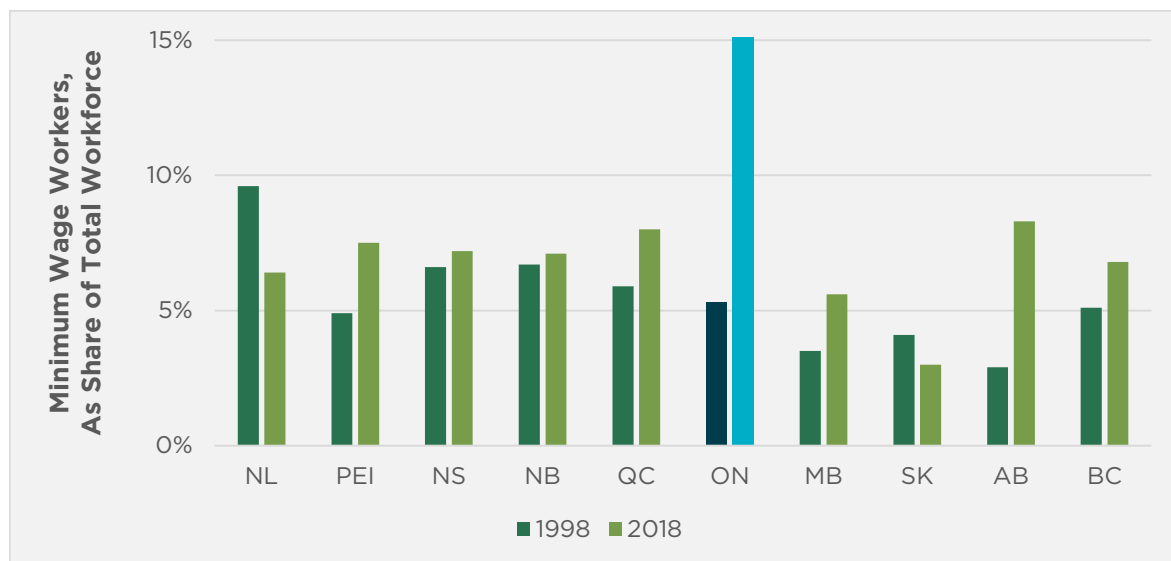


FIGURE 3.3 ONTARIO HAS THE HIGHEST RATE OF MINIMUM WAGE WORKERS IN CANADA | MINIMUM WAGE WORKERS AS PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL WORKFORCE⁴⁰

financial security and their personal health. As Ontarians transition back into the workforce it is essential that they are returning to quality jobs that provide them with a livable wage and that keep workers and the general public healthy and safe.

Feed Ontario recommends that the Government of Ontario invest in developing labour laws for the people. This includes reinstating paid sick days, equal pay for equal work, increasing minimum wage and sustaining it annually alongside inflation, and enhancing the Low-Income Families Tax Credit (LIFT) by expanding its eligibility criteria and support.



Conclusion

Feed Ontario and the food bank network are working tirelessly to meet the province's ongoing need for emergency food support, as well as unpredictable surges in use as the pandemic continues. While provincial and federal support have helped to ensure that food bank doors remain open, this support does not address the need for strong social and public policies that ensure every Ontarian is able to access sufficient income for their basic needs.

Ontarians need access to quality employment, support services that do not perpetuate or deepen poverty, and access to safe, adequate, and affordable housing. By investing in these key solutions, the Government of Ontario will not only reduce poverty and food insecurity, but also build a more equitable and healthy province for the people and families that call it home.

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