



HUNGER REPORT 2023

Why Ontarians can't get ahead



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Letter From the CEO

At what point will Ontario's food bank network collapse?

This is a question that leaders in the food bank sector are asking as we face skyrocketing demand that far exceeds what we saw following the 2008 recession. At that point in time, we thought we had reached the high-water mark in demand for emergency food support. However, this high has been surpassed yet again, with the need for food banks now reaching levels that once seemed unimaginable.

In many ways, the post-recession story was easier to tell, and easier to understand. Massive job losses during the recession led to a spike in food bank use over a few years. As the economy recovered, there was a levelling off and an eventual decline – though food bank use never quite went back down to the pre-recession levels. This level of need became the ‘new normal’ that food banks worked to meet while continuing to advocate for public policies that would reduce demand by improving income security and affordability in the province.

This time, it's not as simple of a story. In 2022, unemployment levels in Ontario returned to pre-pandemic levels, yet we've seen food bank use explode. This has created a number of questions, but most significantly, we are asking: *why are so many Ontarians struggling to get ahead?*

Over the last three decades, we've seen a progressive growth in precarious work, an erosion of our social support programs, and a failure to invest in affordable and supportive housing. These compounding problems substantially weakened Ontario's economic foundation and it is in this weakened state that we faced the pandemic and a spiraling cost of living crisis.

While for some, this has been a time of great profit and wealth accumulation, for many others, these pressures wore away at what little financial reserves they had left. As a result, more Ontarians than ever before have had to turn to food banks and hunger-relief organizations because they can no longer afford basic necessities, including enough food to eat.

The financial challenges being faced by Ontarians are also being faced by food banks. There was an extraordinary outpouring of support for food banks from our communities at the outset of the pandemic, but as times got tougher, it has become harder for people to find a little extra to donate. Demand is increasing each month, and so are food prices for both people in the province and hunger-relief organizations that are trying to keep their shelves full.

As the need continues to grow and outpace available food and financial resources, more of our food banks are facing the heartbreaking decisions of having to cut back on service or possibly even turn people away. Some are even worried they may have to shut down completely. This is devastating for the food bank leaders who advocated that they be allowed to keep their doors open to serve their communities during the pandemic, and even more so for the people in need who are turning to food banks for support.

The food bank model is one that is fundamentally designed to respond to an emergency need, but emergencies are supposed to end. Instead, hunger is becoming an accepted 'new normal' in our province, and food banks are becoming a way to subsidize governments' balanced budgets and corporations' profit margins. This is not sustainable. While a high level of food bank use is unacceptable in and of itself, we are at the precipice of something much worse. As a province, we cannot let 'hunger' be normal. This is not acceptable today and it is not the future we want for our children and their families.

The good news is a better future is possible. Together, the food bank network is made up of hundreds of thousands of visitors, volunteers, employees, donors, and supporters who have the ability to influence a better outcome. If we work together to demand quality jobs, strong social programs, and affordable housing, we can start rebuilding Ontario's economic foundation into a strong future where people can withstand the unexpected, afford their basic necessities, and not worry about whether they will have enough to eat.

Let's make this future our 'new normal,' and let's start today.



Carolyn Stewart
CEO, Feed Ontario



Executive Summary

Food bank use in Ontario has been increasing for the last seven years due to factors that have weakened our economic foundation, such as cuts to social programs, a rise in precarious work, and a failure to invest in affordable housing. However, as Ontarians bore the pressures of both the COVID-19 pandemic and inflation rates not seen since the 1980s, the growth in food bank use has exploded. Between April 1, 2022, and March 31, 2023, over 800,000 people accessed a food bank in Ontario, visiting nearly 5.9 million times. This marks respective increases of 38 per cent and 36 per cent over the previous year, and the largest single-year increases ever recorded by Ontario's food bank network. Two in five visitors had never visited a food bank before, an increase of 41 per cent over the previous year.

Workers are turning to food banks in ever-greater numbers, with more than one in six visitors now citing 'employment' as their primary source of income, an 82 per cent increase over 2016-17 and a 37 per cent increase over the previous year. Precarious work appears to be a major driver, with food bank visitors nearly four times more likely to be in a contract or seasonal job and nearly three times more likely to be working a part-time job than the general population.

Food bank use in Ontario

Between April 1, 2022 and March 31, 2023

800,822

unique individuals

+38% over last year
(2021-2022)

+60% over pre-pandemic
(2019-2020)

5,888,685

visits

+36% over last year
(2021-2022)

+101% over pre-pandemic
(2019-2020)



Social assistance also remains a significant driver of food bank use, with the absolute number of people relying on Ontario Works or the Ontario Disability Support Program increasing by 17 per cent over last year. Food bank visitors experience many barriers to getting a job or working more, with the most commonly cited barriers being health condition or disability (47.3 per cent), taking care of children or other dependents (25.7 per cent), and age (18.5 per cent).

As incomes stagnated, the cost of living skyrocketed. When food bank survey respondents were asked about their ability to afford their basic needs today compared to prior to the pandemic, 71 per cent said that their circumstances were "worse" or "much worse." More than two-thirds of food bank survey respondents had less than \$100 left each month after paying for housing costs (inclusive of rent or mortgage payments and utilities), with 22 per cent having housing costs that exceeded their monthly income.

When people are struggling to make ends meet, they will often turn to friends or family for help before community organizations like food banks.

However, food bank visitors seem to be much more likely to lack these sorts of social supports. When asked “how often would you say you have people you can depend on to help you when you really need it?,” 34 per cent of food bank survey respondents said “rarely” or “never,” a rate that is more than four times higher than the general population.

Food banks are struggling to keep up with the exponential rise in demand. The majority of food banks are worried about meeting the need in their community, with 69 per cent of food banks concerned about having enough food, and 53 per cent indicating that they are worried they do not have enough funding to adequately sustain service.

The impact that this has on their ability to serve people is significant, with 24 per cent indicating that they are concerned they will need to pause or reduce service due to demand exceeding their capacity and resource limitations. Feed Ontario calls upon governments at all levels to take immediate action to turn the tide on food bank use before the system collapses. These actions include:

- **Increasing provincial social assistance rates and reducing clawbacks on earned income and government benefits.**
- **Investing in building and maintaining social housing and improving tenant protections.**
- **Reducing the precarity of the labour market through improvements to labour laws and reducing barriers to unionization.**
- **Reforming Employment Insurance and improving access to tax benefits through automatic tax filing.**

Feed Ontario believes that its vision of an Ontario where everyone is food secure is shared by all levels of government, and that there has never been a greater need for collective action than there is today.

Land Acknowledgement

Feed Ontario acknowledges that we are situated on the traditional and ancestral territory of many nations and that the land we call Ontario, is located on the home of many diverse Indigenous, First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. We also acknowledge the historical impacts of colonization on Indigenous peoples, including the historical and ongoing intersection of food insecurity with the legacy of colonialism.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission concluded that colonialization in Canada resulted in the involuntary intrusion of external policies and practices into Indigenous ways of life, drastically affecting individual and communal control of local food systems. Harvesting, hunting, gardening, and most cultural and spiritual practices were regulated or banned. The resulting loss of access to and practice with Indigenous foods has eroded community knowledge about food and relationships with food, weakening cultural resilience and local health and food security.

We wish to emphasize our commitment beyond rhetorical gestures of inclusion and commit to continually work to build strong relationships and community resilience together, with Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples alike. We invite you to reflect on the unique connection that Indigenous peoples have had with this land for thousands of years, and on the relationship with the ecology that provides all we need for life.

Food sovereignty is generally understood as a shift away from food commoditization and a shift towards culturally appropriate systems and policies that places an emphasis on peoples' autonomy. By extension, Indigenous food sovereignty demands responsibility and requires action of us all to repair and strengthen relationships to Indigenous homelands that have been eroded by colonialism, globalization, and neoliberal policies.

We recognize that food sovereignty furthers restoration and reconciliation in Canada.



Food Bank Use in Ontario

Over the past year, food banks across Ontario have been facing demand unlike anything we have faced before. In Feed Ontario's 2009 Hunger Report following the Great Recession, we wrote, "*It has been the toughest year on record for food banks and families in Ontario since we began serving our neighbours over a generation ago.*" That year, food bank use across the province increased by 19 per cent in a single year. This record for single-year increases has remained intact until this past year, when food bank use in Ontario increased by an astounding 38 per cent. This dramatic increase should serve as a significant warning to Ontarians and governments at all levels, as there is clearly something wrong when hundreds of thousands of people cannot afford to put food on their table.

Food bank use can be used as a metric for severe economic precarity, as their services are typically accessed as an option of last resort for people facing food insecurity after other options, like asking for help from friends and family or delaying bill payments, have been exhausted.¹ Food banks are also one of the last guard rails left prior to falling into homelessness, as supported by a study out of McMaster University and Hamilton Food Share that revealed 46 per cent of respondents indicated that they would be at risk of losing their housing if they had to pay for the food they received from the food bank.²

Although headlines touted that Canada's official poverty rate improved between 2019 and 2021, this metric not only lags behind what is currently happening on the ground, it also does not show the full picture of material deprivation. For example, between summer 2021 and late 2022, the share of Canadians having difficulty affording their basic expenses increased from 19 per cent to 35 per cent.³

Last year's rise in food bank use was double the increase seen after the 2008 recession

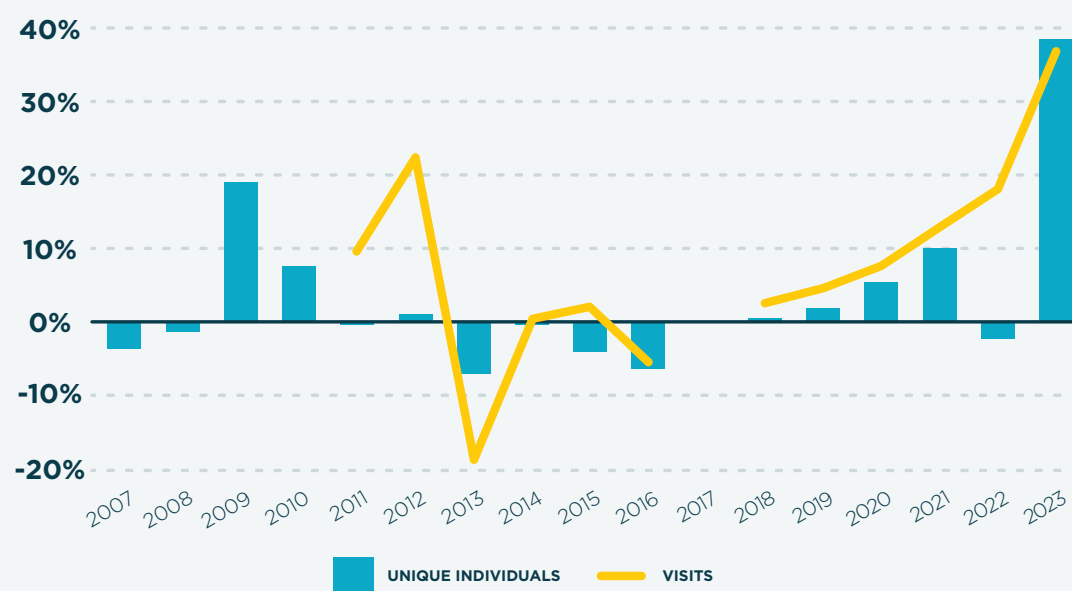


Figure 1.1 Year-over-year change in unique individuals and visits, Feed Ontario food bank network. The year represents the fiscal year in which the data was collected. Note: the data from 2017 was omitted due the shift in data collection methodology.

Similarly, food bank use in Ontario continues to escalate. Food banks serve a much larger share of the population than they did in the year before the pandemic, with 1 in 19 Ontarians now relying on a food bank, a 41 per cent increase over 2019-20.⁴ To put this into perspective, if the 800,822 people who visited Ontario's food banks between April 1, 2022 and March 31, 2023, became their own municipality, it would be the third-largest city in the province ahead of Mississauga.

People are visiting food banks more frequently than prior to the pandemic

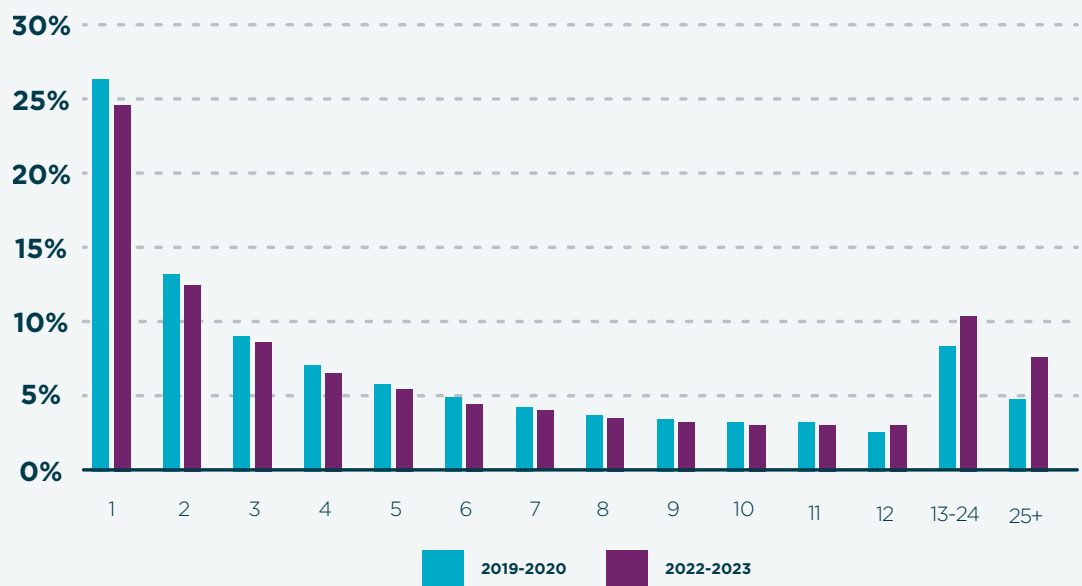


Figure 1.2 *Distribution of the number of times visitors used a food bank per year, Ontario, 2019-20 versus 2022-23.*

A major driver of this extraordinary growth was due to the number of people who had never had to use a food bank before now turning to their services for support. In the last year alone, two in five people who visited food banks were new visitors, a 41 per cent increase over the previous year. At the same time, metrics correlating with depth of need have also worsened. Frequency of use has shifted since the pandemic, with the proportion of households who only needed to use the food bank a few times (defined as one to three visits per year) decreasing by six per cent, while frequent visitors (defined as 13 or more visits per year) increased by 38 per cent (**Figure 1.2**).

Overall visits have also increased by 36 per cent, growing to nearly 5.9 million visits. In the year before the pandemic, someone visited a food bank in Ontario every 10 seconds. Last year, someone visited a food bank every five seconds. These statistics simply serve to demonstrate that food bank use in Ontario has reached a crisis level.



Monthly food bank use in Ontario has more than doubled compared to pre-pandemic levels

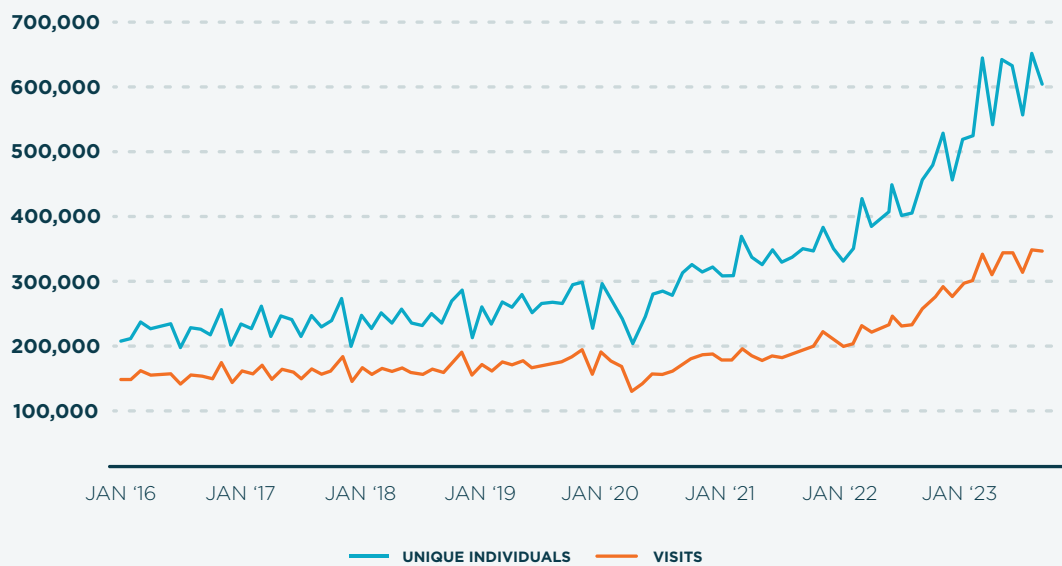


Figure 1.3 The number of unique individuals and visits made to food banks in the Feed Ontario network by month, January 2016 to September 2023.



Statistics

HOUSING TYPE	
Private rental	74.0%
Social rental housing	13.7%
Own home	4.7%
With family/friends	4.2%
Emergency shelter	2.3%
Rooming house	0.5%
Group home/youth shelter	0.4%
Unhoused	0.2%
Band owned	0.1%

HOUSING COMPOSITION	
Single people	51.3%
Single parent/guardian	16.6%
Two parent/guardian	14.9%
Other	10.1%
Couple with no children	7.1%

AGES	
0-2 years	4.1%
3-5 years	5.0%
6-11 years	10.9%
12-17 years	9.9%
18-30 years	21.5%
31-44 years	21.5%
45-64 years	19.9%
65+ years	7.3%

PRIMARY SOURCE OF INCOME

Disability related benefits	28.3%
Social assistance (Ontario Works)	25.5%
Employment income	17.1%
Other	14.7%
Old age pension	9.0%
Employment insurance income	2.4%
Student loan/scholarships	2.0%
CSB/CRSBB/CRCB	0.6%
Canada child benefits	0.4%

REASON FOR VISIT

Cost of living (housing, food, utilities)	86.8%
Delayed wages	4.7%
Low wages/not enough hours	2.3%
Relocation (immigration/moving)	1.7%
Benefit / social assistance changes	1.2%
Unemployed / recently lost job	0.9%
Natural disaster	0.8%
Debt	0.7%
Sickness / medical expenses	0.5%
Unexpected expense	0.5%
Family breakup	0.0%



Drivers of Food Bank Use

A 2002 Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives report once characterized the dynamics of poverty as similar to a game of Snakes and Ladders. As people progress through the game, they can move forward with ladders, like securing a good job, their government benefits being improved, or accessing affordable housing. Alternatively, they might slide back down when they hit a snake, such as being laid off, having their benefits clawed back, or their rent being increased.

When examining why food bank use has grown so dramatically in recent years, we have seen the ladders to get ahead being taken away and a growing number of snakes that are pushing Ontarians further behind.

PRECARIOUS EMPLOYMENT

It has been said that the "the best way out of poverty is a job." However, this adage may be becoming increasingly less true. After the recession in 2008, food bank use ran closely in parallel to unemployment rates, but over the past few years, these numbers have diverged. Those with jobs have become a growing demographic of food bank visitors in Ontario. More than one in six food bank visitors now cite employment as their primary source of income, an 82 per cent increase over 2016-17 and a 37 per cent increase over the previous year (**Figure 2.1**).



Workers in Ontario are increasingly turning to food banks for help

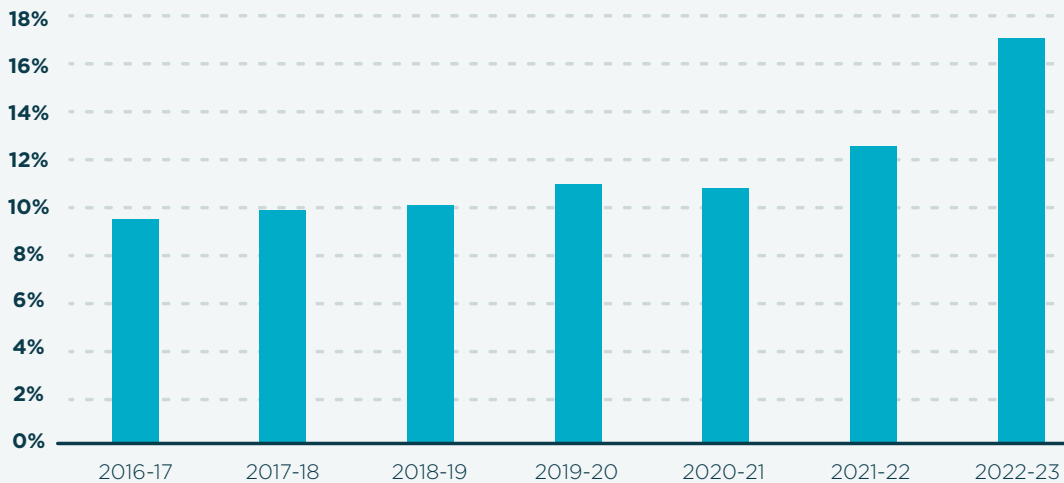


Figure 2.1 Percentage of Ontario food bank visitor households citing employment as their primary source of income (individuals citing "no income" are excluded from calculations).



There are so many missed opportunities that have happened because my employer doesn't follow the Employment Standards Act. I have to speak to a lawyer, but that will be a massive expense that I can't afford. When my employer doesn't pay me fairly I'm losing on both ends."

- Survey Respondent (answering "What is the biggest challenge of living in poverty?")

There is no single explanation as to why the increase in workers using food banks has been so dramatic this past year, but rather several concerning trends culminating at once:

1. Poor-quality jobs: Although unemployment rates in Ontario are currently low, it does not mean that employment quality is high. Since the 1980s, there has been a growth in precarious work, with temporary and part-time jobs comprising a greater share of the labour force in Ontario.⁶

These types of jobs tend to have lower wages, less job security, and rarely come with employer-provided benefits. Workers accessing food banks had high rates of this type of employment, with 41 per cent of respondents working a contract or seasonal job, which is nearly four times more likely than all Ontario workers,⁷ and 48 per cent working part-time jobs, which is nearly three times more likely than all Ontario workers.⁸

2. A rise in gig work: Work through online platforms like Uber, Instacart, and TaskRabbit has become a much larger part of the employment mix. A recent report from H&R Block says that 28 per

Wages did not keep up with the cost of living

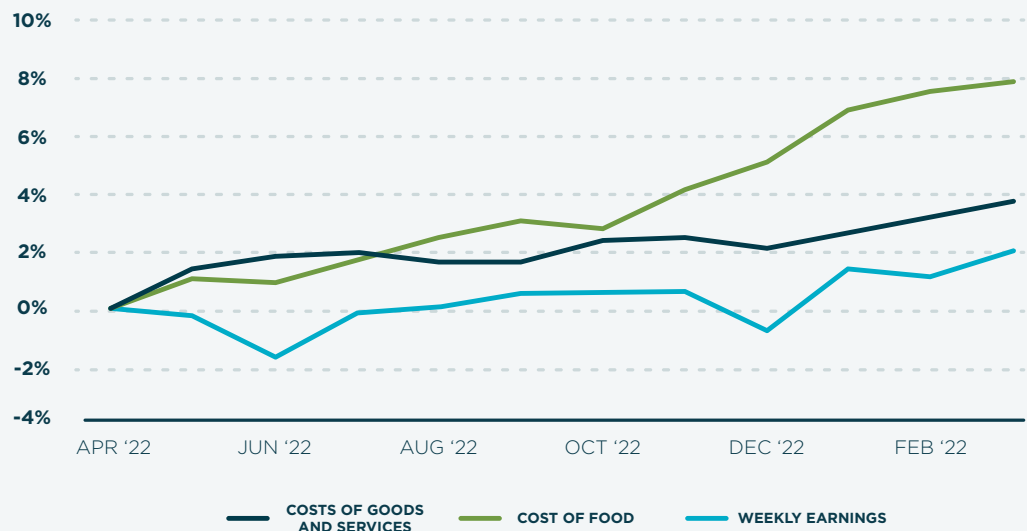


Figure 2.2 Change in average weekly earnings for all employees and the consumer price index for all items and food, Ontario, April 2022 to March 2023.

cent of Canadian adults are now participating in the gig economy,⁹ more than double the rate from 2022.¹⁰ Gig workers are treated as independent contractors rather than employees, and thus are not subject to the labour protections of the *Employment Standards Act*, nor can they typically access standard employee benefits like Employment Insurance (EI), Canada Pension Plan (CPP), or Workers Safety Insurance Board (WSIB) benefits.

3. Earnings are not increasing as fast as expenses: Between April 2022 and March 2023, weekly earnings for Ontarians increased by only two per cent,¹¹ while inflation rose by four per cent and food prices increased by eight per cent. (**Figure 2.2**)¹²

When households no longer have enough income to afford food, they become food insecure. Borrowing money or going into debt are common coping strategies employed to deal with food insecurity. As illustrated in **Figure 2.3**, 27 per cent of food bank survey respondents had taken out a loan or carried a balance on a credit card in the last six months. Household debt in Canada has steadily increased, and is now 107 per cent of GDP, the highest level of the G7 countries.¹³ Household debt as a ratio to disposable income rose to 185 per cent in the first quarter of 2023.¹⁴



Food bank visitors are forced into impossible choices to make ends meet

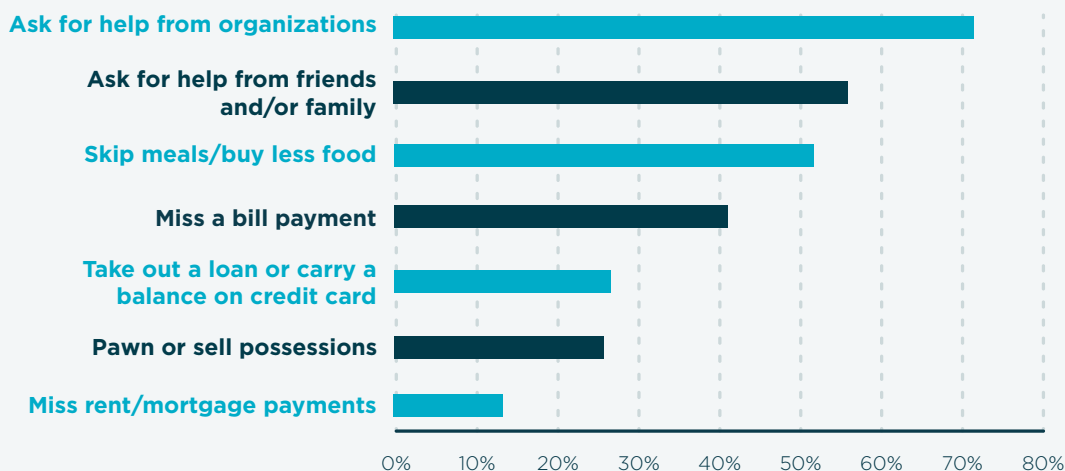


Figure 2.3 “In the last six months, what strategies have you used when you had trouble making ends meet? Select all that apply.” *Question from the 2023 food bank visitor survey.*

LEGISLATED POVERTY

Inadequate social assistance has long been a driver of food bank use in Ontario, especially as the value of the income provided continues to erode as the cost of living rises. We use the term “legislated poverty” because keeping rates far lower than the poverty line is a choice that successive provincial governments continue to make.

Social assistance remained the primary source of income for a majority of food bank clients over the past year, with 25.5 per cent of visitors citing Ontario Works (OW) and 28.3 per cent receiving the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) or other disability supports. While social assistance recipients represented a slightly smaller proportion of all food bank visitors than in previous years, primarily due to the rapid growth in Ontario workers and the overall decline in ODSP caseloads, the absolute number of OW and ODSP recipients accessing food banks grew by 17 per cent.

COVID-19 supports may have temporarily alleviated some OW & ODSP recipients' need for food banks

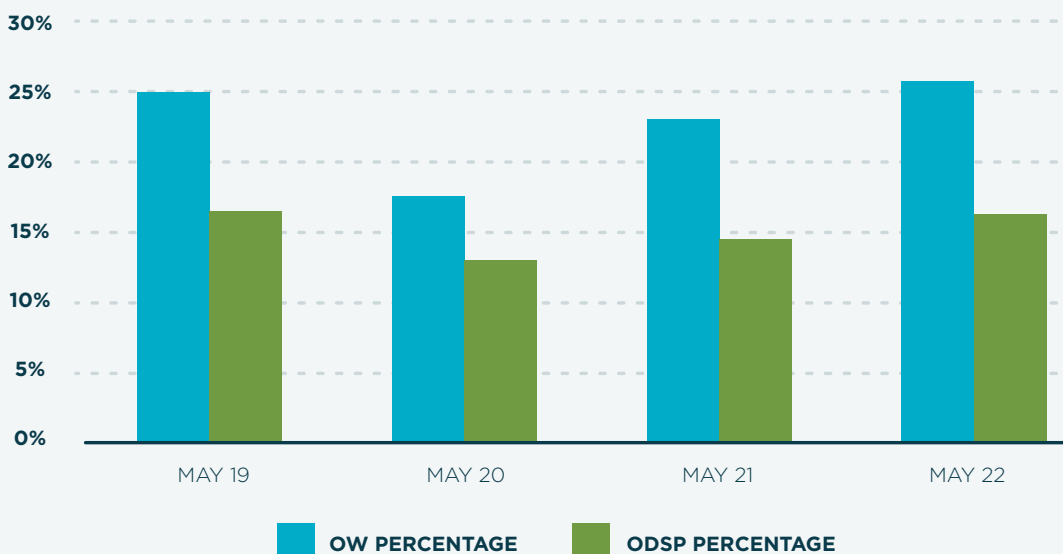


Figure 2.4 Percentage of Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program recipients using food banks. Calculated by dividing the number of food bank visitor households that cited Ontario Works or ODSP as their primary source of income by the number of Ontario Works and ODSP cases in the province (for May of that year).

An analysis of the percentage of all beneficiaries of social assistance using food banks over the past four years suggests that in 2020, fewer recipients were turning to food banks than the previous year (**Figure 2.4**). This dip could be related to the availability of pandemic-related supports that temporarily provided some recipients with higher incomes, and the province-wide rent freeze that was in effect until December 31, 2021. However, as these programs gradually ended, recipients lost access to this additional income, just as the cost of living started to rapidly increase. Despite minor increases to ODSP rates, the proportion of cases using food banks increased by 11.5 per cent for OW recipients and 12.9 per cent for ODSP recipients over the past year.¹⁵

The income provided to social assistance recipients still remains far below the poverty line and does not provide enough financial support to afford even a basic standard of living:

Ontario Works: The maximum amount provided to a single OW recipient remains at \$733, or 64 per cent below the poverty line (a shortfall of \$1,320, as set by the Market Basket Measure).¹⁶ Further, the financial support provided through OW has been frozen since 2018. If OW rates had increased annually with inflation, recipients would now be receiving \$863 per month.

Ontario Disability Support Program: ODSP rates were increased for the first time since 2018 from \$1,169 to \$1,227, and increased again to \$1,308 in July 2023. However, financial support still falls 51 per cent below the disability-adjusted poverty line (a shortfall of \$1,362 per month).¹⁷

These low incomes are the result of decades of cuts and freezes to social assistance rates. When adjusting for inflation over the last 30 years, the value of social assistance falls far below even what was provided in 1996, after drastic cuts were made by the provincial government (see **Figure 2.5**).



To be emotionally calm, so that I can give my daughter peace of mind and not feel the fear that I feel when I don't have enough money to cover all the expenses on time."

- Survey Respondent (answering "What is the biggest challenge of living in poverty?")



The value of social assistance benefits has eroded since the 1990s

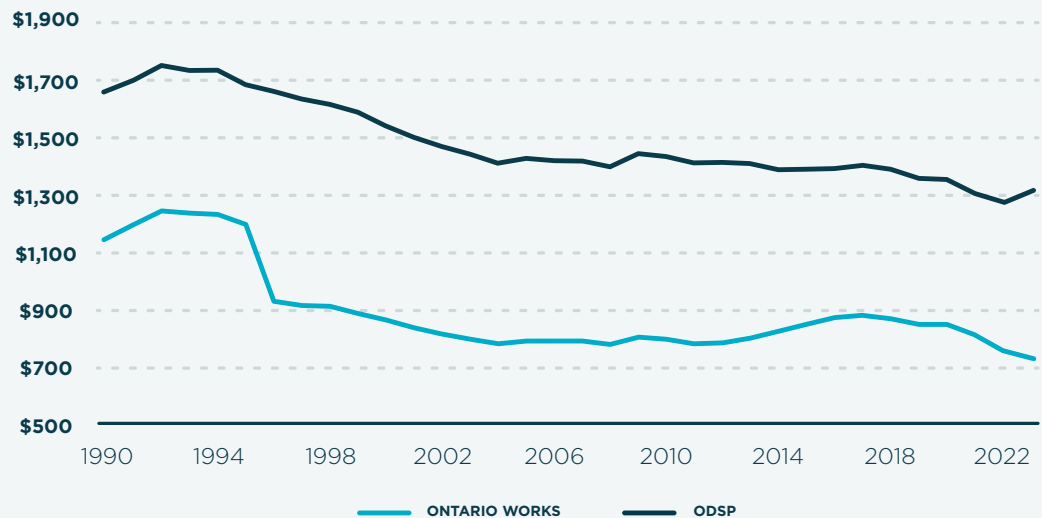


Figure 2.5 *Incomes provided to a single person with no dependents, Ontario Works (previously General Welfare) and Ontario Disability Support Program (previously Family Benefits), 1990-2023, in 2023 dollars.*

In addition to the low base income that program recipients receive, there are many rules in place that make it challenging to navigate the system and that contribute to trapping social assistance recipients in poverty. These include:

- Separate basic needs and shelter benefits:** The amount a recipient can receive is split into basic needs and shelter benefits, and the rates vary depending on shelter costs and living arrangements, with proof of both required. If a recipient has no housing costs because they are currently homeless, they are ineligible to receive the shelter benefit, which in turn makes it very difficult to secure housing in the future. To further illustrate, a single ODSP recipient who is unhoused would no longer be eligible for the full \$1,308 per month, but instead would only receive \$752 per month, making it even more difficult to save for first and last month's rent.
- Spousal definition:** Ontario's social assistance programs consider a co-habiting individual a spouse after only three months of living together. This spousal designation reduces the amount of the benefit the recipient receives and can even make them ineligible for assistance altogether. This is an unrealistic timeline to determine a

spousal relationship. It also creates barriers for low-income people to enter relationships, as they risk becoming financially reliant upon their partner after merely three months.

- **Clawbacks on earned income:** Every dollar an OW recipient earns from employment is clawed back from their benefits by 50 cents, after an initial monthly exemption of \$200. In a way, this serves as a hidden tax and makes it more challenging to earn enough income to move out of poverty. In addition, the \$200 earnings exemption is significantly lower than the new \$1,000 earnings exemption for ODSP recipients.

- **Clawbacks on benefits:** If OW and ODSP recipients are eligible for programs like EI, CPP-Disability, or WSIB, the payments they receive are clawed back from their social assistance benefits by 100 per cent. As a result, they end up no further ahead financially, despite already living in extreme poverty. Further, in clawing back these benefits, the government is effectively taking away earnings and program benefits that these individuals contributed to throughout their lives. As a result, these programs that are funded by employee and employer contributions, ultimately end up subsidizing or offsetting the provincial budget.

Food bank visitors face many barriers that prevent them from working

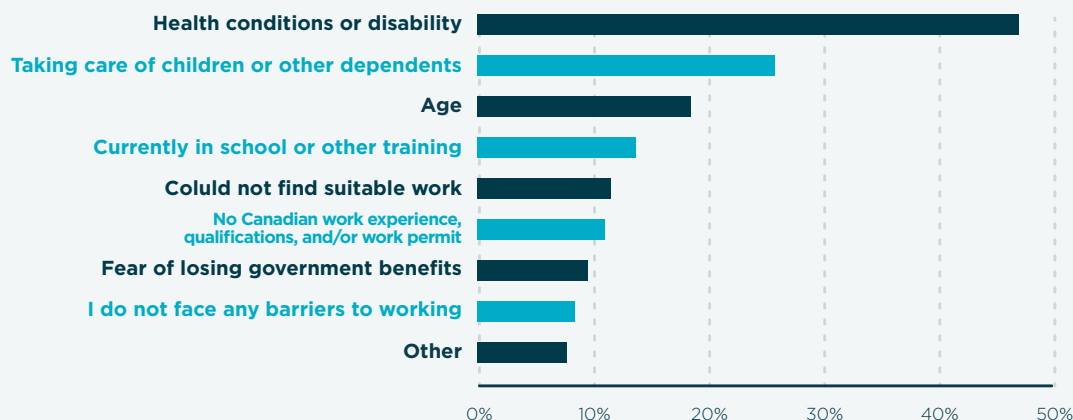


Figure 2.6 Responses to “Do any of these barriers below prevent you from working? Select all that apply.” from the 2023 food bank visitor survey.

There is a dangerous, common misconception that OW recipients are healthy, sitting at home, and choosing not to work. This is one of the reasons often used to justify keeping rates so low. However, this could not be further from the truth. The *Ontario Works Act* mandates that recipients participate in employment-seeking activities in order to maintain eligibility.

Further, as found in a report on Ontario Works recipients, half of the recipients had significant barriers that prevented them from working, including caregiving responsibilities, medical and mental health issues, addictions, criminal record history, homelessness, domestic violence, and trauma.¹⁸ A quarter were employed full-time or part-time, and the other quarter were preparing for employment through education, training, or supported job searching.

These results are consistent with food bank survey results on barriers to work (see **Figure 2.6**). The most commonly-cited barriers to working or working more were health condition or disability (47.3 per cent), taking care of children or other dependents (25.7 per cent), and age (18.5 per cent). It is essential that the unique barriers to employment that OW recipients face are considered when developing program criteria, and that the resources available to them while they work towards getting back on their feet are adequate.



The constant fear and guilt that comes with not being able to make ends meet and feeling like a failure for letting my kids down.”

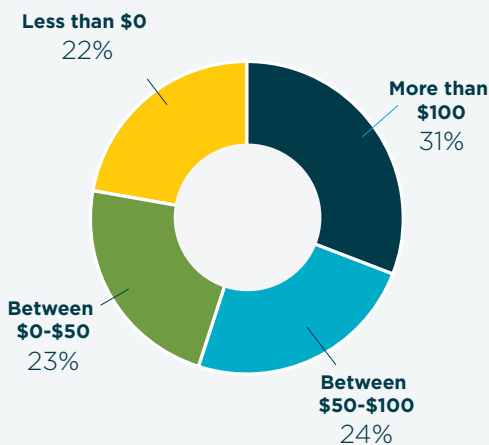
- Survey Respondent (answering “What is the biggest challenge of living in poverty?”)

HOUSING AND COST OF LIVING

When food bank survey respondents were asked about their ability to afford their basic needs today compared to prior to the pandemic, 71 per cent said that their circumstances were “worse” or “much worse.” Two-thirds of respondents attributed their challenges to the rising cost of living, including housing, food, transportation, and other essentials.

In particular, a lack of affordable housing has long been a significant driver of food bank use in Ontario. Housing is the single-largest expense for most households and is a non-negotiable cost that must be paid in full. If money is a little short one month, households will often cut back on their grocery budget to pay their rent or mortgage. As illustrated in **Figure 2.7**, more than two-thirds of food bank survey respondents had less than \$100 left each month after paying for housing costs (inclusive of rent or mortgage payments and utilities), with 22 per cent having housing costs that exceeded their monthly income.

Food bank visitors have little money left over after housing costs



2/3

had less than \$100
left each month after
paying for housing costs

Figure 2.7 Responses to “How much money would you estimate you have left over each month after paying for housing (rent and/or mortgage payment) and utilities (e.g. electricity, heat)?” from the 2023 food bank visitor survey. For those who indicated “Less than \$0,” their housing costs exceeded their incomes.

Between 2016 and 2021, median rent in Ontario increased by 27 per cent,¹⁹ while median incomes only increased by 21 per cent.²⁰ Rapidly increasing rent is not only an issue of bigger cities: between 2021 and 2022, the top 10 locations in Ontario for rent increases were all rural towns or smaller cities, such as Chatham and Ingersoll.²¹

The challenge of unaffordable rental rates is particularly acute for those who need to move or look for a new place to live. Rent control does not apply between tenants, so landlords can set the rent of vacant apartments to whatever the market will bear. To illustrate the difference this makes, the average asking price for listings through Rentals.ca for one-bedroom apartments is \$1,956.²² This is 45 per cent higher than the average one-bedroom rent through Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC)'s survey,²³ which is based on all purpose-built rental units, and thus reflects what all tenants are paying, regardless of tenure.

Further, research from the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) shows that very few major cities have any available housing on the market that is affordable to people relying on a low income (see **Figure 2.8**).²⁴ The only Ontario city that had any affordable units available was London, at a mere three per cent of all units. To compound this issue, applications for "own-use" evictions, where landlords sought to evict for themselves, family members, or to sell, and renovations, where landlords sought evictions to renovate, were on the rise in 2021 and 2022.²⁵ As a result, more tenants than ever are losing their rent-controlled apartments and must look for a new place to live in a much more expensive market.

Only one Ontario city has any affordable housing for low-income renters

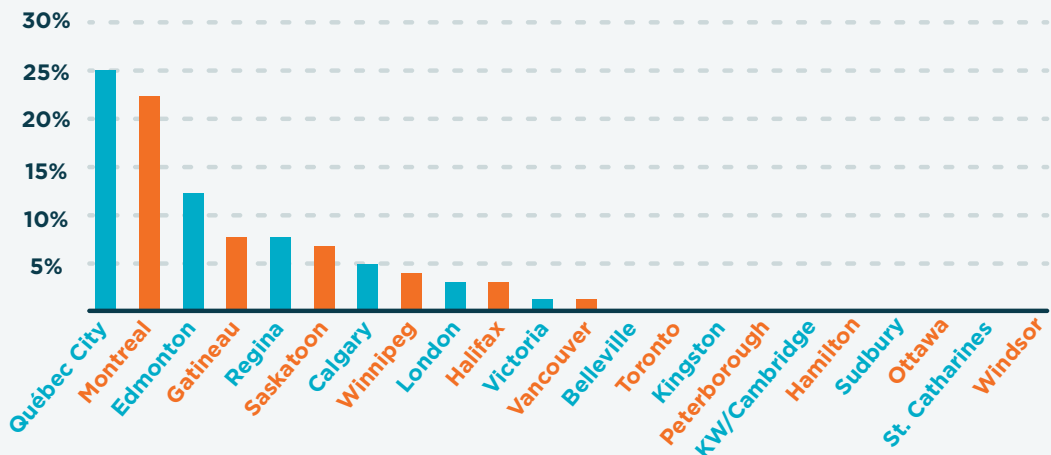


Figure 2.8 Share of units affordable to renters with the lowest 20 per cent of incomes, select Census Metropolitan Areas.

CHILDREN & SENIORS

Children remain the highest-risk age group for food bank use in Ontario. While no person of any age should live in poverty, hunger is a particular area of concern when it comes to children. Proper nutrition is essential for supporting a child's growth, and a lack of healthy food during childhood can have lifelong consequences on physical and mental health and development.

Children tend to be at higher risk of poverty than other age groups, as income from employment does not correlate to the number of children a parent is supporting. Those under 18 years old have historically been, and remain, the highest at-risk age group for food bank use. Canada is also the only G7 country to lack a national school food program.

That being said, over the last five years, we have seen a slower rate of growth in children aged five and younger accessing food banks than all other categories. This may be attributable to the protective effect of public investments that provide more money to families with children, like the Canada Child Benefit and the Ontario Child Benefit, and that reduce the costs of caring for young children and increase the ability for parents or guardians to participate in the labour market, such as full-day kindergarten, and reduced-fee daycare.



Research shows that the risk of food insecurity for low-income, single adults drops in half once they turn 65 and are eligible for pensions and programs targeted at seniors, like Old Age Security (OAS), Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS), and Canada Pension Plan (CPP).²⁶ Food bank data also reflects this, as seniors remain the least likely demographic at risk of needing to use a food bank.

However, the financial security of Ontario's seniors is fragile. As shown in food bank use data, while only 1.9 per cent of Ontario seniors visited a food bank in 2022-23, this rate is nearly double what it was in 2017-18 (1.0 per cent). Further, senior visitors tend to use food banks more frequently than other age demographics,²⁷ needing to access emergency food support and services more often. Unfortunately, this is not surprising as seniors are less likely to experience a positive change in their economic circumstances, such as a better-paying job or benefitting from lower-cost childcare. While senior poverty was drastically cut by the creation of public income support programs like CPP, OAS, and GIS, this relative financial security is threatened by the decline in private pensions.

Seniors remain the lowest risk for food bank use, but are the fastest growing demographic



Figure 2.9 Food bank visitors as a percentage of the Ontario population, by age group, 2022 and proportional change since 2017.



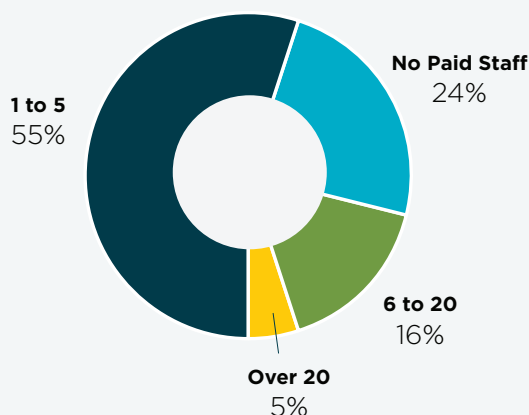
Trends in Food Banking

The needs, resources, models, and capacity of the food bank network in Ontario are highly diverse. Some food banks are located in communities with greater amounts of wealth resulting in more financial donations. Some have food manufacturers and farmers nearby that can make regular food donations. Others do not have access to any of these resources. Across the board, food banks are funded almost exclusively by community donations, not government support.

As the demand for emergency food support has continued to grow, food banks are finding themselves in progressively more precarious and unsustainable positions. Last year, one in four food banks experienced a 40 per cent or greater growth in unique visitors. This demand for charitable food support is becoming insurmountable and has started to exceed the capacity of food banks in many communities.

Service models: Service models vary widely between food banks, depending on community needs, facilities, and capacity. A third of food banks use what is known as the shopping model, wherein visitors can put together their own food hamper in a similar fashion to going grocery shopping. That said, nearly all food banks incorporate some form of choice into their service. In recognition that the root cause of hunger in Ontario is poverty, 84 per cent of food banks provide programming and services beyond emergency food support, including income tax preparation, community kitchens, thrift stores, emergency shelters or rent support, public health services, community referrals, and much more. More than half of Feed Ontario's direct member food banks have five or fewer paid staff, and 23 per cent are entirely volunteer-run.

A quarter of Feed Ontario member food banks are entirely volunteer-run



More than
1/2
of food banks
employ **5 or fewer**
paid staff

Figure 3.1 Responses to “How many paid staff (full or part-time) work at your food bank in a typical month?” in the Feed Ontario member renewal survey.

Food provided: Food banks were created to provide an emergency supply of food to those experiencing temporary hardship. They do not, should not, and cannot, fulfill the entirety of a household's total food needs. The majority of food banks in Ontario are able to provide service just once per month. As responsive organizations that rise to meet community needs, food banks have seen an increase in the demand on them and a growing gap in the emergency food needs of the people who are walking through their doors. This is apparent when comparing service between 2008 and 2023, which shows that the proportion of food banks providing more than five days' worth of food increased by 46 per cent.

Food banks are an emergency service. Nearly two thirds of our members can only provide service once per month

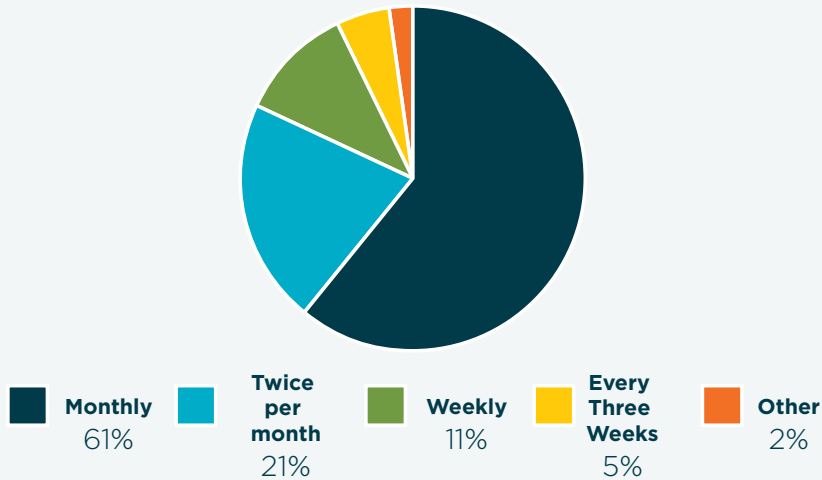


Figure 3.2 Responses to “How often can a person or household access food from your food bank?” in the Feed Ontario member renewal survey.

As the need grows, food banks are trying to provide more days of emergency food.

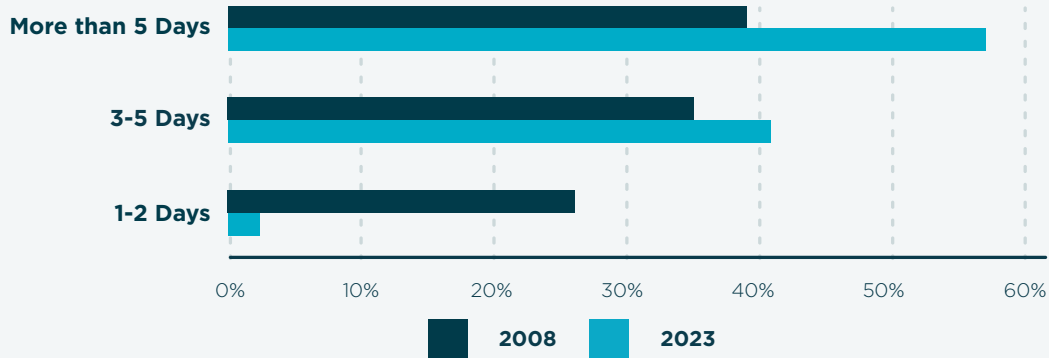


Figure 3.3 Responses to “How many days’ worth of food does your food bank provide per client during a single visit?” in the Feed Ontario member renewal survey.

Food purchasing: While community food drives and donation bins at the grocery store are what most people think of when they think of food banks, one in seven food banks purchase more than 20 per cent of the food they distribute to visitors, with 21 per cent of food banks purchasing the majority of their food. Nearly one in three food banks reported that they have increased the volume of their food purchasing by 90 per cent or more over the last three years. As food prices continue to rise, this puts a great deal of strain on a food bank's ability to maintain the amount of food they provide to visitors.

Food bank concerns: The majority of food banks are worried about meeting demand, with 69 per cent of food banks concerned about having enough food, and 53 per cent indicating they are worried they do not have enough funding to adequately meet demand in their community. The impact that this has on their ability to serve people is significant, with 24 per cent indicating they are concerned they will need to pause or reduce service due to demand exceeding their capacity and resource limitations.

Most concerning, 4.4 per cent of food banks are worried that they may need to close their food bank completely within the next six months due to insufficient resources. While this remains a small percentage of the provincial network at present, it could be a potential 'canary in the coal mine' for what the future holds for the food bank network in Ontario if numbers continue to climb.

The majority of food banks are concerned about their ability to meet demand

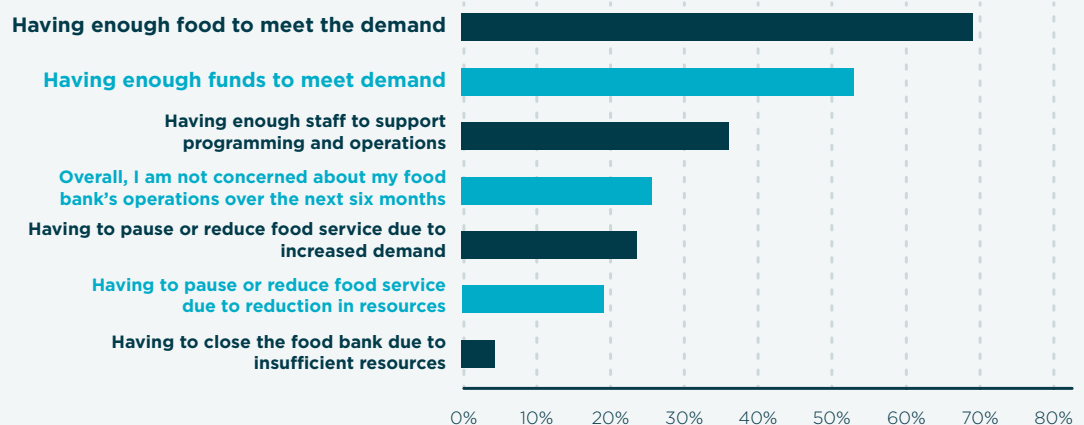


Figure 3.4 Responses to “When thinking about the next six months, what are your food bank’s primary concerns? (Please check all that apply)” in the Feed Ontario member renewal survey.

The background of the entire page is a dark teal color. Overlaid on this is a faint, light teal grid pattern. In the center-right, there is a silhouette of a person walking away from the viewer. The person is wearing a beret, a long coat, and has a bag slung over their shoulder. They are using a cane. The overall mood is somber and contemplative.

The Vicious Cycle of Poverty and Isolation

As a part of our research this year, Feed Ontario surveyed food bank visitors and learned that social isolation is both an outcome and driver of living in poverty, and impacts people in many different ways.

The most common poverty lines used by social science researchers, such as the Low Income Measure or Market Basket Measure, use certain income thresholds as their metric. While sufficient income is an incredibly important element, there are other pieces to the puzzle that contribute to whether or not someone can meet their basic needs, such as savings and credit, non-monetary resources (such as access to universal healthcare or subsidized housing), disability status, and social networks.²⁸

While poverty is sometimes conceptualized as a challenge for individuals to overcome by pulling themselves up by their bootstraps, no person is an island. Strong social networks play an important role in mitigating the impacts of poverty through sharing resources, providing material and emotional support, and offering assistance through small favours like childcare or transportation, as well as greater opportunities, such as career advice and job leads.²⁹

Conversely, the absence of social networks can worsen the impacts of poverty. The poverty rate in Canada for single people is nearly five times that of people in families.³⁰ Research has shown a connection between loneliness and higher rates of food insecurity³¹ and further, that social isolation is associated with conditions like cardiovascular disease, a weakened immune system,³² dementia, and cognitive decline.³³ Unfortunately, like many countries, Canada is experiencing an epidemic of loneliness.

People who turn to food banks tend to be at the most severe end of the food insecurity spectrum, and also appear to have considerably weaker social networks than the average Canadian. When asked “how often would you say you have people you can depend on to help you when you really need it?,” 34 per cent of food bank survey respondents said “rarely” or “never,” a rate that is more than four times higher than the general population (**Figure 4.1**).³⁴

Food bank visitors are more than four times as likely to rarely or never have people to depend on



Figure 4.1 Responses to “How often would you say you have people you can depend on to help you when you really need it?” in the 2023 food bank visitor survey, compared to data from the Canadian Social Survey 2022.

Many food banks offer additional services beyond emergency food hampers that can help alleviate loneliness, such as community kitchens, seniors' cafés, and community gardens. At a rural eastern Ontario food bank, for example, community members gather to knit blankets for women escaping domestic violence.

In a recent study of food bank visitors in the United Kingdom, it was shown that one of the advantages of using the food bank was the supportive, flexible, and non-bureaucratic approach that volunteers had when interacting with visitors, in contrast to their experiences accessing services provided by the state. While food banks should not be considered a replacement for robust income support programs that are the government's responsibility to provide, as grassroots organizations, they can have a role to play in creating community and connection.



End the Need for Food Banks

When governments balance their budgets by cutting services, and businesses produce more profits by relying more heavily on precarious workers, the basic needs that a strong social safety net and good jobs once fulfilled do not magically disappear. Instead, the burden shifts onto individuals and community-based organizations, like food banks, to try to do more with less.

Eventually, trying to do more with less becomes like trying to get blood out of a stone. Each food bank in our network has diverse access to resources and supports, some more than others. Regardless, none of them can meet the exponential growth in need they have experienced in the past few years indefinitely. The most recent numbers show that the growth in food bank use shows no sign of stopping. On the individual level, food banks have heard from visitors on ODSP that some are considering pursuing Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD) because they cannot bear to continue living in grinding poverty any longer.³⁵

One in 19 Ontarians now rely on food banks to put food on the table. This normalization of food bank use is both alarming and unsustainable. For nearly half of food bank visitors, the food bank is the only guardrail that is preventing them from falling into homelessness. However, food banks are sustained by the generosity of their communities, and with an increasing number of our neighbours struggling, there are fewer people in a position to help keep food banks afloat with donations and support.

Already, some food banks have indicated that they have been forced to reduce the amount of food they can provide due to high demand and a lack of resources. We cannot continue to rely on the charitable sector to fill the gaps left by poor public policy decisions. In a province like Ontario, everyone should be able to access enough income to afford the food and other basic necessities that they need. This situation is worsening, and we are calling on all levels of government to take immediate and urgent action.

GOVERNMENT OF ONTARIO

Feed Ontario puts forward these recommendations as first steps that can be taken to turn the tide on this crisis and reduce the need for food banks.

Social Assistance

- **Align Ontario Works and ODSP rates with the cost of living:**

Increase the income support available through OW and ODSP to meet a minimum income standard (as determined by the Market Basket Measure) in combination with other income security measures.

- **Reduce clawbacks on employment and other benefits:** Match the clawbacks on earned income for Ontario Works to ODSP, which exempts the first \$1,000 earned from clawbacks, with a 75 per cent clawback after that. Exempt payments from benefits like CPP, EI, WSIB, and the upcoming Canada Disability Benefit from social assistance clawbacks.

- **Create a standard flat rate:** Combine basic needs and shelter allowances into a standard flat rate that is consistent regardless of living situation.

- **Align the definition of a spouse with the *Family Law Act*:** Align social assistance's definition of spouse with that of the *Family Law Act*. At present, someone is considered a spouse under Ontario's social assistance programs after living with their partner for only three months. Aligning the definition with the *Family Law Act* would increase this time from three months to three years.

Employment

- **Classify gig workers as employees:** This would ensure that gig workers receive the same protections provided under the *Employment Standards Act*, Employment Insurance, the Canada Pension Plan, and the Workplace Safety Insurance Board.
- **Reduce barriers to unionization:** Unionization raises wages by an average of 20 per cent and has a greater impact on the quality of work for low- and middle-income, blue-collar, and non-college educated workers. Feed Ontario supports the recommendations made by the Ontario Federation of Labour to reduce barriers to unionization.³⁶
- **Protect victims of wage theft:** Greater enforcement of the *Employment Standards Act*, improved protections, and access to justice for workers whose rights have been violated.

Housing

- **Invest in the costed plan of the Ontario Non-Profit Housing Association and Co-operative Housing Federation of Canada:**³⁷ This plan recommends that over the next 10 years, the province:
 - Builds 69,000 affordable rental homes.
 - Delivers income support to 311,000 Ontarian households.
 - Extends the life of 260,000 community-owned rental homes.
 - Creates 30,000 new supportive housing units for individuals with mental health and addiction issues, and ends chronic homelessness.
- **Strengthen laws to protect tenants:** With 74 per cent of food bank visitors living in market rental housing, strong tenant laws are essential to ensuring affordability and reducing poverty. This includes applying rent control on units built after 2018, limiting rent gouging based on vacancy decontrol, and retaining rent control on all affordable units delivered through the National Housing Strategy in perpetuity.



The thought of not being able to pay my rent. Fear of homelessness.”

– **Survey Respondent** (answering “What is the biggest challenge of living in poverty?”)

GOVERNMENT OF CANADA

Feed Ontario puts forward the following recommendations as first steps that can be taken to turn the tide on this crisis and end the need for food banks.

- **Institute automatic income tax filing for social assistance**

recipients: Many government benefits that assist low-income individuals and families are delivered through Canada's income tax system; however, one in three single Ontario Works recipients do not file their taxes and miss out on an average of \$1,000 in government benefits they are entitled to receive.

Survey data shows that 15 per cent of food bank visitors reported not filing their income taxes this past year. As Ontario's social assistance programs collect the information needed to file taxes on the behalf of recipients, instituting automatic tax filing for these cases would allow more people to access supports that have been earmarked for them.

- **Reform Employment Insurance (EI) so that more Ontarians are eligible to access the program:** Despite most Ontario workers paying into EI, in 2018, only 28 per cent of unemployed Ontarians were able to access the program due to its limited and challenging eligibility requirements. During the first few years of the pandemic, the federal government temporarily expanded to its EI eligibility to make the program more accessible to unemployed workers.

By spring 2021, Ontario's EI coverage rate rose to 92 per cent, but after the enhanced EI rules ended, this rate dropped back down to 31 per cent in 2022. This is problematic, as unemployed individuals who cannot access EI must then turn to provincial social assistance, such as Ontario Works, which only provides a maximum of \$733 per month to a single person, versus \$2,815 per month on EI. Allowing more workers to access EI when they need it would provide them with more income and relieve pressure on provincial social assistance.

- **Feed Ontario endorses the federal policy recommendations of our federal counterpart, Food Banks Canada,** made in their annual Hunger Count, including:

- Expedite the development of the Canada Disability Benefit to ensure it is in place prior to the next election.
- Create a public development corporation to create more affordable housing and provide capital funding to non-profits to acquire and provide affordable housing.
- Alleviate Northern food insecurity by making the Northern Residents Deduction a refundable tax credit and initiate a comprehensive review of the Nutrition North Program.



A New Normal?

While Feed Ontario and the provincial food bank network will continue to provide emergency food support and services for as long as they are able, demand has already started to exceed our network's capacity and there will be a point when we are no longer able to serve everyone who comes to us in need.

As demonstrated through this report, far too many Ontarians are struggling to get ahead. Hundreds of thousands of people in this province are only one misfortune away from sliding into poverty, whether that be due to a job loss, disability, or a sudden increase in expenses. Meanwhile, through cuts to our social safety net and the rise in precarious employment, we have weakened the ladders that help people out of poverty or move ahead.

The solutions to food insecurity and poverty are complex, but there are tangible and immediate solutions. Investments in good public policies can lower our high-water mark and start moving the needle on poverty. This includes ensuring Ontario has a strong social safety net, quality jobs, and an affordable cost of living.

We cannot let today's record-high food bank use become 'the new normal.' We cannot let hunger become normal. As a province, we must work together to advocate for the future that we want. A future where everyone has the income and supports that they need. A future where no one goes hungry.

Methodology

The primary data for Hunger Report 2023 was collected from these sources.

LINK2FEED DATA

Feed Ontario member food banks use the cloud-based intake system Link2Feed to track client data and visits. Aggregate, anonymized data from food bank visits was pulled from 1,264 member food banks and affiliate agencies for the period of April 1, 2022 to March 31, 2023, to develop a picture of demographic data and trends in food bank use for Ontario. Visits to other programs, like meal programs (e.g. breakfast program or soup kitchen), were excluded from the analysis, as they do not collect unique client data. Many hunger-relief organizations operate independently of the Feed Ontario network, making the total unique individuals and visits in this report an underestimate of the number of Ontarians turning to food banks.

For a full list of Feed Ontario direct member food banks, visit feedontario.ca.

VISITOR SURVEY

Feed Ontario partnered with member food banks in Beaverton, Bolton, Kanata, Kingston, London, Mindemoya, North Bay, Trenton, Tillsonburg, and Windsor to survey food bank visitors during the month of July 2023 to gain a deeper understanding of their financial situation. A total of 333 surveys were completed in person and online. Participants were informed that the surveys were optional and would not impact their eligibility to use food bank services.

MEMBER SURVEY

Feed Ontario conducts an annual survey of its member food banks each Spring to learn more about food banks' capacity, service models, and chief concerns.

FOOD BANKS CANADA'S HUNGER COUNT

Historical food bank use data was drawn from Food Banks Canada's Hunger Count survey from 2006 to 2016. This survey is completed annually by food banks in Canada and provides a snapshot of food bank use during the month of March each year. While Link2Feed food bank use data and Hunger Count data cannot be directly compared due to different methods of data collection, this historical data allows for comparison of relative changes in food bank use.

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