

Food bank use in Canada continues to rise

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Despite the current economic expansion and a significant decline in the official unemployment rate, the number of people in Canada forced to rely on food banks continues to grow. According to *Hunger Count 99*, a survey conducted by the Canadian Association of Food Banks, the number of people using food banks in March was 10.8 percent higher than in the same period last year.

The survey, whose results were released late last month, found that 790,344 different people, or about 2.6 percent of Canada's total population, used food banks last March. Of these about 40 percent were children. Newfoundland, Canada's poorest province, had the highest proportion of its population reliant on food banks—6.6 percent.

Over the past decade, the number of people dependent on food banks has more than doubled. Before 1981, there wasn't a single food bank in all of Canada.

While most of the food bank users were receiving unemployment or welfare benefits, significant numbers had low-paying or part-time jobs and 6.7 percent had no income whatsoever.

That food bank use rose between March 1998 and 1999 "during a period in which a number of economic indicators were favourable ... really raises the whole question of how the benefits in our society are being shared out," said Julia Bass, executive director of the Canadian Food Bank Association. Speaking at a press conference announcing the release of the survey, Bass added that there was a strong connection between food bank use and the spread of homelessness. "People using food banks in many ways can be seen as the pre-homeless. These are people who are struggling so hard to keep a roof over their head that they're spending an enormous proportion of their income on housing and there simply isn't enough left over at the end of the month to feed the family."

Hunger Count 99 attributes the spread of poverty to government cuts to welfare and unemployment insurance, the erosion of the purchasing power of minimum wages, stagnating wage rates, and the spread of temporary and contract labor.

As a result of the repeated tightening of unemployment insurance eligibility requirements, only 36 percent of the jobless are currently drawing unemployment benefits, as compared with 83 percent 10 years ago. Meanwhile, provincial governments across Canada have reduced welfare rates and implemented various programs, including workfare, to cull the numbers eligible to draw welfare.

Alberta, the province that has most vigorously pushed people off of welfare, had the largest number of food bank users who were employed—29 percent—or had no income—16 percent. Questioned about the survey, Alberta's Welfare Minister Clint Dunford denied there was any correlation between food bank use and government policy. He said some of those using Alberta's food banks had adequate incomes, only they wanted free food. Dunford later confessed to not having read the report.

In an attempt to pressure governments to restore funding to social programs and stop relying on food banks to fill the gaping holes left in the social safety left by a decade of budget-cutting, the Daily Bread Food Bank of Toronto and others threatened several years ago to close their doors. The federal and provincial governments simply ignored the threat.

Most of the 459 food banks surveyed give their clients less than five days' worth of food, and only allow one visit per family per month.



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