

# Canada: Food bank use continues to rise

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A study released last week documents an alarming growth of food bank use in Canada over the past 15 years—a phenomenon that points to deepening poverty and hunger in one of the world's most affluent countries.

Titled “Something Has to Give,” the annual report of the Canadian Association of Food Banks (CAFB) shows that the number of people who are reliant on food banks has more than doubled since 1989 and rose 5.5 percent in the past year. The report estimates that every month at least 750,000 people or about 2.5 percent of Canada's 31 million residents are forced to turn to food banks for assistance.

The CAFB is an umbrella organization that represents the vast majority of the country's food banks. Founded in 1985, it began compiling national data on food bank use in 1989 and since 1997 has issued an annual report called “HungerCount” based on surveys completed by its affiliated food banks. This year's survey found that “Despite some positive announcements from the federal government in the last year ... the use of food banks and food programs continues to grow.” In a typical month, fully half of those using food banks are families with children, meaning that children account for 40 percent of all food bank users.

Not surprisingly, increased reliance on food banks appears to be directly related to a sharp decrease in the number of persons receiving welfare or so-called “last resort” benefits. Between 1995 and 2002 the total number of people on welfare in Canada fell from 3.2 million to 1.8 million. While the unemployment rate did fall during this period, large numbers of people were disqualified from welfare through new, tighter eligibility requirements or forced, by the threat of having their benefits cut or eliminated altogether, into accepting extremely low-paid, menial jobs. Declares the report, “In every region, food banks report that inadequate minimum wage and social assistance rates,

followed closely by high rents, are among the primary reasons for the growing demand for emergency food assistance.”

While hypocritically lamenting the plight of the poor, governments at every level and of every political stripe have engaged in a race to cut public and social spending, targeting in particular those measures such as welfare which served to provide a modicum of protection to the most vulnerable. One of the first measures taken by the Ontario Tory government of Mike Harris when it came to power in 1995 was to slash welfare rates by 21.6 percent. Since then, welfare rates in Canada's most populous province have been frozen, which translates in real terms into a 37 percent cut in Ontario's welfare rates.

In 2002, British Columbia's Liberal government announced its own “welfare reform”—cuts in welfare benefits of in some case more than 10 percent; a 30 percent cut in the budget of the ministry responsible for social assistance; and the institution, for the first time anywhere in Canada, of time limits on persons' eligibility for assistance. Prior to these cuts it was estimated that BC's welfare payments only provided for 65 percent of minimum living costs for families with children.

The dramatic increase in food bank use in Canada has taken place alongside repeated and, what have been proven to be, cynical government promises to eliminate hunger. In 1989 all the parties in the federal parliament pledged to end child poverty in Canada by the year 2000. Similar promises were made by Canadian government representatives in 2002 at the World Food Summit in Rome, prompting the CAFB to observe in an earlier report, “On the international stage, the federal government makes promises to ensure human rights—the right to food, the right to housing, the right to an adequate standard of living—but at home, these basic human rights have taken a backseat.”

The federal Liberal government has attempted to deflect responsibility for the worsening plight of the poor by pointing to its 1998 introduction of a National Child Benefit. But this was preceded by the greatest program of public spending cuts in Canadian history, including massive cuts in federal transfers to the provinces, the elimination of all federal support for public housing, and a drastic tightening of the eligibility rules for jobless benefits that have left almost two-thirds of the unemployed with no right to Employment Insurance.

Moreover, the National Child Benefit was designed to support provincial initiatives to end so-called “welfare dependency.” Provincial governments are allowed to “claw back” the entire Child Benefit from welfare recipients and redirect the money to pay for daycare and other programs for the working poor. Taking inflation into account, most welfare families have actually seen their incomes drop since the Child Benefit was introduced.

In addition to the overall increase in the use of food banks, the survey points to disturbing changes in the social composition of those compelled to turn to charity to meet their basic needs. Over half of food bank users are parents, single parents and their dependents. Food bank use among students has risen sharply, a consequence no doubt of rising tuition fees and cuts to student aid. According to Charles Seiden, executive director of the CAFB, “Over 90 percent of universities have some type of food bank.”

The percentage of those using food banks who come from the “working poor”—those who name employment as their primary source of income yet whose incomes are insufficient to cover their food needs—is growing. Nearly 13 percent of food bank users in 2003 were employed, up from under 12 percent in 2002.

The report identifies abysmally low statutory minimum wages as a major factor fuelling this trend. In Ontario the minimum wage of \$6.85 an hour has remained frozen since 1995, resulting in its fall from the highest provincial minimum wage to the middle range. While the Ontario government may have led the attack on the minimum wage in recent years, the report shows that in no part of the country does the minimum wage provide for an income above the poverty line.

The second major factor the report identifies as fuelling the growth of the “working poor” is the

shortage of affordable housing. A growing number of working families find themselves forced to choose between paying their rent and utility bills, and buying groceries.

The shortage of affordable housing is especially acute in Toronto, Canada’s largest and wealthiest city. Toronto’s Daily Bread Food Bank reports that the average family on welfare in Greater Toronto spends 70 percent of its income on rent. It is further estimated that the amount an Ontario family on social assistance has left over in a given month after paying rent is a mere \$203.

Since the first food bank began operation in Canada in 198—in what was then considered a temporary measure to deal with the worst slump since the Great Depression—the number of such organizations has ballooned to 639. In addition there are some 2,500 agencies at work across the country providing assistance to the hungry. Yet fully 40 percent of the food banks now operating report they are having difficulty meeting the demand for food.



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