

Record numbers of Canadians used food banks this year, report shows

E.P. Milligan
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A record number of Canadians had to make use of food banks this year as real wages stagnate and inflation soars. In its annual report, Food Banks Canada found there were nearly 1.5 million visits to food banks in March alone, 15 percent more than the same month in 2021 and 35 percent more than in March 2019, one year prior to the initial outbreak of COVID-19 in Canada.

The Food Banks Canada report compiled data from more than 4,750 food banks and community organizations. It identified key factors behind the sharp increase in food bank visits: rising food and housing costs, high inflation and low social assistance rates.

Emerging from the mass carnage of the COVID-19 pandemic as it ends its third year wealthier than ever, the Canadian ruling class has demanded that workers continue to fuel record profits through savage cuts to real wages and social programs, the ramping up of production quotas, and the price gouging of basic necessities. The Liberal Trudeau government is playing a leading role in fueling the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, spending more than \$600 million CAD on military equipment and assistance, while thousands of Canadians go hungry every day.

The recently published figures on food bank usage underscore just how devastating the consequences of this process have been for the vast majority of society, many of whom have been living on the edge since the pandemic began.

Numbers point to an overall 35 percent increase in food bank users in just two years, roughly half of whom are on some type of social assistance. Shockingly, one in seven food bank users was employed—a further reflection of stagnating wages in the face of rampant inflation.

The current social crisis has been particularly hard on

working class families, with children comprising 33 percent, a third, of food bank users across the country. A growing number of students and senior citizens, who often live on fixed incomes, have also been forced to rely on food banks as a result of economic hardship, including rising tuition costs and dwindling social assistance.

A Canada-wide survey of 1,001 respondents published Monday by the Canadian Hub for Applied and Social Research at the University of Saskatchewan showed that nearly 20 percent were reducing meal portions or even skipping meals entirely in order to save money. Most respondents said they were using coupons or hunting for sales to adapt to the spike in food prices.

Over half of respondents claimed they had started making meal plans to ensure they could afford their grocery bills. Over 30 percent said they were eating less healthy food to keep up with rising costs. Nearly 5 percent admitted to stealing food out of necessity, and another 5 percent had used a food bank or community fridge.

The survey noted that grocery store prices increased this year at the fastest rate since August 1981, just over 41 years ago. The majority of respondents—just over 79 percent—considered wage increases to be the most effective way of meeting the rising cost of living.

The 12th edition of Canada's Food Price Report also paints a stark picture of the daily financial struggles facing millions of workers, noting the “lingering challenges posed by COVID-19 as an unprecedented global crisis.”

The report shows the scale of the accelerating rate of food cost. While overall prices of foodstuffs in Canada rose between 3-5 percent last year, they are set to rise 5-7 percent by the end of this year. Its executive

summary noted that a family of four would pay \$106 CAD (Canadian dollars) more out of pocket than last year as a result of rising food prices.

The average grocery bill has risen some 70 percent between 2000 and 2022. While median income rose just over 6.5 percent between 2015 and 2019, food expenditure shot up by 16.3 percent over the same period. Within overall food expenditure, food retail (i.e., grocery store) prices had risen 19 percent just prior to the outbreak of the pandemic.

Jane, a student and young mother who wished to keep her real name anonymous, spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about her experience. Jane recently moved to St. John's, Newfoundland, with her husband and daughter to study in a Master's program at Memorial University. Already hit with moving-related expenses and the added financial strain of having no income while she and her husband looked for work, skyrocketing food prices forced her to seek aid from the local food bank.

"The food bank here sucks," she began. "The staff were nice, but the experience really stuck it in. They give a three-day supply to last a month [an individual can only use the food bank once every four weeks] and I had to wait outside in the rain.

"The food bank has more demand than supply," she continued. "The more people that need it, the less supplies they will have. When I went, there was no fruit, meat or vegetables." Most of the food bank supply consists of old canned or jarred goods, and even bread is scarce.

Jane grew up in a working class area and has dealt with food insecurity in the past but noted that things have become much harder today. "Things have always been bad because we grew up in the lower class," she said. "My husband and I both grew up with food insecurity, so we are good at navigating it. The cost of food and everything else makes it harder to navigate. We couldn't afford food in September, and it was getting to the point that neither of us were eating because we wanted to make sure the kid still had food. We ran out of staples like flour and sugar. I was living off broth and homemade bread until we ran out of flour, then it was just broth. My husband was eating less than once a day."

Jane's husband found work as a private security guard,

but getting steady hours proved difficult. "He had a job, but they stopped giving him hours," she said. "I found a job quickly, but it takes time to catch up on bills and re-stock up on food. We moved here in July so [we] didn't have anything stored, and our savings was gone. Once the money started coming in, we both needed to pay for gas to go to work so it took a few more weeks before we were 'secure.' The cost of food makes it very, very hard." Jane added that her family depends on the lunch program at her daughter's school to ensure she gets three square meals a day.

Food banks across the country have been put under enormous strain due to the growing demand driven by the rising cost of living. The food bank at Memorial University's St. John's campus is a particularly tragic example of the institutions' inability to keep up with the needs in the community. The centre was forced to temporarily close last week, citing surging demand that overwhelmed its resources. "The demand over the past few months has just been more than we could have possibly predicted," Matt Pike, the food bank's volunteer co-ordinator, told CBC News.

He explained that the food bank served around 150 clients in August. While under "normal" conditions, food bank usage typically increased by 50 percent in September as students return to class, Pike noted that client numbers actually doubled to 300 during this period. By October, the food bank was serving more than 360 clients before it was forced to close. "We were on track to doing closer to 500 clients this October had we not had to shut down," he said.

Pike noted that in addition to students, the food bank has increasingly been used by university staff and even some professors. "The cost of living is tough for everybody," he said. "It's not just the students." The St. John's food bank hopes to reopen November 3, though whether it will have enough resources by then to do so remains unclear.



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