

Food bank usage in Canada up one-third in a year as social crisis dramatically worsens

Penny Smith

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Recent nationwide reports from Food Bank Canada paint a dire picture of the soaring number of Canadians living in poverty and suffering food insecurity.

The charity's annual Hunger Report explains that food bank usage has reached "unthinkable levels," with a record 1.9 million visits to food banks in Canada in the month of March alone—a 32 percent increase year on year, and the highest numbers since the agency began collecting data in 1989.

Accelerating inflation at levels not seen in 40 years has driven up costs for basics such as transportation, food and shelter, while wages have not kept pace. Although the main cause of food insecurity is low income, as one food bank recipient in Ontario explains, "since September 2022, the cost of food and housing have been major issues."

The increasingly precarious conditions for the country's most vulnerable is underscored by the fact that children comprise over a third of all food bank recipients despite representing only 20 percent of the population. Additionally, seniors on a fixed pension income represent 8 percent of Canadian food banks users, rising at a rate far outpacing other age groups. Moreover, more than a quarter of food bank recipients are immigrants who have been in Canada for less than a decade, a usage rate that has doubled since 2016.

Notably, the expanding pool of food bank patronage—often the desperate last resort for people once all other avenues are exhausted—is no longer limited to those in the lowest-income households, such as people dependent on social assistance. As the report explains, "Never before have food banks seen such a high level of need among the working population," and more and more of those in higher income brackets are turning to food banks for the first time. According to the Food Bank survey, one in five food bank recipients have employment and over a quarter live in a two-parent household.

Skyrocketing rents, the outcome of the decades-long privatization and deregulation of the housing stock by all the official political parties, are eating into an ever greater share of Canadian incomes. The Food Bank survey reveals that nearly 70 percent of food bank clients live in rental housing, 36 percent of whom pay more than a third of their income on housing and 13 percent of whom pay more than half of their income on rental expenses. Additionally, single person households account for 43.8 percent of food banks users in Canada, while representing 29.3 percent of the population.

The report also notes that Canada's Indigenous population, where one in four live in poverty, is also disproportionately represented among food bank users at 12 percent, while making up only 5 percent of the general population.

Not included in the Food Bank report is data for Canada's three impoverished northern territories, where the majority Indigenous population suffers from the highest rates of food insecurity in the country. In the largest and northernmost territory of Nunavut, the food insecurity rate has reached a catastrophic 57 percent, prompting doctors to declare food insecurity among Indigenous children an "urgent public health crisis."

Across the country, funding-starved food banks are struggling to meet the explosion in demand. In Ontario, Toronto-based Charity Daily Bread reported Toronto's largest food bank is at "breaking point" and cannot keep up with the organization's quadrupling in patronage, from an estimated 65,000 client visits per month before the pandemic to an estimated 275,000 visits per month. Demand at the Food Bank of Waterloo Region has reached a "crisis" level and annual funding needs to double to more than \$1.6 million to keep up with demand. One food bank in Newfoundland said former donors are now coming to their doorstep for help themselves, and another in Prince Edward Island has been forced to turn

people away.

As millions of Canadians struggle to feed themselves, the grocery giants rake in record profits. Loblaw's, Sobeys, and Metro reported a combined \$100 billion in sales and \$3.6 billion in profits in 2022. In June, public outrage over the corporate profit gouging compelled Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to make a hollow appeal to Canada's top five grocery giants—Loblaw's, Sobeys, Metro, Walmart and Costco—to voluntarily curb food prices before the Thanksgiving holiday. Yet corporate profits continue unmitigated and the cost of food in Canada increased 5.9 percent in September year-on-year.

The Trudeau government continues to show callous indifference to what Food Banks Canada calls a “dire situation” confronting the one in five Canadians living with food insecurity. In the face of the greatest cost of living crisis in 40 years, it has allocated a pathetic \$10 million in its 2023 budget for food infrastructure needs.

The “historic” Affordable Housing and Groceries Act tabled in September with the ostensible aim of curbing the affordability crisis amounts in reality to yet another tax exemption for private sector developers who exploit the loose definition of “affordable” to win subsidies for near market value housing. The “affordable” price tags are still out of reach for most Canadians.

Trudeau's cynical scapegoating of the grocery giants is rhetorical in content and will do nothing to resolve the problem of food insecurity and only deflects from the underlying political issues driving the affordability crisis. The efforts of the scrambling food charities, as crucial as they are in providing emergency relief, amount to a bandage on a haemorrhage.

The decades-long erosion of the social position of the working class steadily undermined by the austerity policies and corporate enrichment of governments of all political stripes with the aid of the trade unions has left wide swathes of the Canadian population living in poverty and food insecurity. Despite these bleak statistics, the Liberals, propped up by the New Democratic Party, have committed to a 70 percent increase in the military spending budget, costs which are being redirected from essential social services and protections that vulnerable people rely on.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and supply chain disruptions served as an accelerant to this underlying process and provided the pretext for corporate profiteering. The escalating war against Russia in Ukraine that the Canadian government plays an outsized role in triggered a worldwide food and energy crisis and runaway

inflation.

The cost of living crisis is being met with growing opposition internationally, from France to Sri Lanka, stoking fear in the Canadian ruling class that this spontaneous strike and protest action will quickly galvanize into a politically conscious movement against imperialist war and austerity.

The atrocities now being committed by the Israeli government and backed by all the imperialist powers against the defenceless population of Gaza mark a new stage in the imperialist effort to carve up the energy-rich Middle East.

Under the guise of Israel's “right to defend itself,” the Canadian political establishment has given unanimous support for the continuation of the bloody massacre in Gaza that has now killed over 9,000 innocent Palestinians—almost half of whom are children. This underscores the hypocrisy and cynicism behind the \$60 million in humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip and surrounding areas Trudeau has pledged, which is really intended to paper over Canada's predatory role in the region as the junior partner to US imperialism.

The Canadian workers and youth, rightfully shocked and disgusted by the atrocities in Gaza, must politically arm themselves with the understanding that the spiralling economic crisis that is plunging an ever greater number of Canadians into poverty and food insecurity, is also driving the ruling class descent into barbarism. The solution is the building of an anti-war movement of workers and youth against the whole capitalist setup and for the socialist reorganization of society that will put an end to all forms of deprivation and poverty, and imperialist world war.



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