

# Food bank usage in Toronto doubles in just one year

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Toronto's Daily Bread Food Bank, in partnership with the North York Harvest Food Bank, released its annual "Who's Hungry" Report late last year. Once again, it comprises an indefensible list of neglect, exploitation and betrayed promises in Canada's largest city.

The report states that one in 10 people in Toronto is now relying on food banks, twice as many as in 2022. The doubling of food bank usage in just a year is the highest annual increase ever reported. There have been 2.53 million visits to food banks in Toronto over the past 12 months. Of those who used the service, 31 percent reported having gone a whole day without eating and 55 percent missed meals to pay for other needs.

The report projected that by the end of 2023, the number of annual food bank visits could have exceeded 3 million. Underlining the increasing deprivation in Canada's largest city, which is also home to the country's TSX stock market and a super-rich capitalist elite, the report indicates that over 120,000 new individuals started using food banks for the first time. This amounts to a 154 percent increase compared to the previous year.

The median monthly income of food bank clients is \$1,131, less than half the \$2,302 single person Official Poverty Line for Toronto.

Over a third of food bank users (35 percent) have disabilities, and 43 percent of them rely on the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP), which provides a miserly \$1,308 per month. Another 18 percent of food bank clients with disabilities who cannot access ODSP must rely on the provincial social assistance program, Ontario Works, which provides a paltry \$733 per month, less than one-third of the poverty-line income.

Not surprisingly, the lack of affordable housing is a major factor for those compelled to use the services of the city's food banks. Defined as costing more than 30 percent of income, 89 percent of food bank clients report living in unaffordable housing. Almost one-quarter now spend 100 percent of their income on housing, leaving them at high risk of homelessness.

Underscoring that wages are failing to keep pace with rising prices, 47 percent of food bank clients reported having at least one member of their household who is employed. This statistic alone indicates a massive one-year expansion of the ranks of the working poor.

Of those clients who are employed, 71 percent have no medical, dental, retirement benefits or paid sick days through their employer, making an already precarious situation potentially one step away from becoming disastrous.

A particularly sharp indicator of the exploitative nature of Canadian capitalism is the fact that the privation of relying on food banks is also reaching further into the supposedly upwardly mobile layer of the working class. In 2008, 25 percent of food bank clients in Toronto had completed post-secondary education. Ten years later that number rose to 34 percent, and in 2023 a majority (59 percent) of clients had achieved education levels ranging from college diplomas to master's degrees or higher.

This broad immiseration is occurring in one of the wealthiest cities in the world. A report by Henley & Partners ranked Toronto 12th out of 97 cities around the world in 2023 that have the fastest growing millionaire populations. The report considers the number of High-Net-Worth-Individuals (HNWI), those with at least US \$1 million in investable wealth, the number of individuals with prestige work titles and the number of high-value homes in the city to determine the rankings.

Toronto also achieved the designation of fifth wealthiest city in North America with 105,200 HNWIs. Among these were 193 centimillionaires, those with more than US \$100 million, and a whopping 18 billionaires. The three other Canadian cities that made the list—Vancouver, ranked 29th with 37,300 HNWIs, Montreal, ranked 48th with 17,900 HNWIs and Calgary, ranked 55th with 14,700 HNWIs—are also facing explosive demand for charitable assistance. A recent report on Quebec, where Montreal is the largest city, revealed that one in 10 residents rely on food banks.

Chief operating officer of the Greater Vancouver Food

Bank, Cynthia Boulter, related to the media that five years ago her organization was supporting about 7,000 people a month. Now, they are helping as many as 17,000 people a month. She said, “Parents are skipping meals so their children can eat, adults are skipping meals so they can pay their rent.”

At the extreme end of the crisis, Toronto has an estimated homeless population of 18,000 people. The city’s woefully inadequate public shelter system only has approximately 9,000 beds. As politicians from various levels of government boast about investments in affordable housing, the reality is that the social housing wait-list is 10 to 12 years long.

That the working class has been even more acutely feeling the intensifying grip of economic hardship over the past few years is not without reason. Statistics Canada reported that in 2021, the most recent year for which data is available, the annual incomes of the country’s wealthiest people jumped by almost 10 percent on average, while the bottom half of society saw their incomes conspicuously decrease. This was even before 2022, when a spike in inflation driven by the “let it rip” ruling class response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the US-triggered war against Russia in Ukraine worked to accelerate the wealth accumulation of the country’s financial elite. The working class experienced, and continues to experience, a massive hollowing out of their purchasing power.

Underscoring the widening income gap in Canadian society, the report specifically enumerates the financial haul enjoyed by the privileged few in 2021. Before taxes and not including capital gains, the average total income of the top 1 percent increased by 9.4 per cent to \$579,100. And the higher up the income ladder, the greater the gains. The average total income of the top 0.1 percent jumped 17.4 percent to \$2,086,100 and the top 0.01 percent raked in a 25.7 percent increase to “earn” a very tidy average of \$7,731,400. Such large increases among the wealthy elite have not been seen since just before the financial crisis of 2008.

In the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives annual pay report, the country’s highest earning 100 CEOs were revealed to be earning 246 times the wage of an average worker. By 9:27 a.m. on January 2, they had made more money than the average worker will earn during the entire year.

The fact is that before 1981, there was not a single food bank in all of Canada. Today, the monopolized retail grocery business is controlled by five large corporations that are generating record profits.

Meanwhile, the federal and provincial governments have been throwing billions in public money at profitable corporations to “attract investment.” And, in 2020, at the

beginning of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the federal Liberal government, with the support of the unions and New Democrats, simply handed \$650 billion to the financial markets and major banks to guarantee that there would be no serious disruption to the flow of wealth from the bottom to the top.

Speaking to CBC News, Neil Hetherington, CEO of Daily Bread Food Bank, said every elected representative in the city is being mailed a copy of the 2023 Who’s Hungry report. Hetherington stated, “Food bank usage is a symptom of policy failures. It is clear that there are multiple failures by all levels of government who have the opportunity to read the report and change.” He continued, “Given the provincial government’s initiatives and the fact that we have seen a four-fold increase at food banks over the past four years, we believe it is time for the government to revisit its strategy on poverty reduction and food insecurity.”

In the Toronto mayoral election earlier in 2023, the top candidates had nothing to offer except trite prescriptions for unspecified minor reforms. None of them, including the winner of the dismal electoral contest, Olivia Chow (NDP), addressed the enormous and growing wealth inequality in the city in any substantive manner.

The capitalist ruling class is driven by what it views as the imperative to defend its own interests through the ceaseless accumulation of wealth. In fact, the global system of capitalist profit extraction, dominated by the major imperialist powers, is in a crisis that has propelled it to maximize exploitation at home and wage war abroad.

The Daily Bread Food Bank and similar organizations provide vital services to the people of Toronto and everyone should fight to maintain and expand them. But, ultimately, appeals for concessions from the representatives of the ruling class have, for decades, proven to be futile and will certainly continue to be so. The fight against poverty and food insecurity requires the mobilization of the working class to fight for socialism, reorganizing society to meet the needs of all and not the accumulation of profit in the hands of a privileged few.



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