

# **Looking for a Hand Up: A Profile of Food Bank Recipients in Four Ontario Communities**

## **Executive Summary**

Despite the rapid expansion of food banks across the province and the growth in the number of people accessing Ontario food programs over the past two decades, few studies have documented the circumstances of food bank recipients in Ontario. Food bank clients in Sudbury, Kingston, Toronto and Waterloo Region have been the focus of study. Of particular note, the Daily Bread Food Bank has been conducting an annual survey of food bank recipients in the Greater Toronto Area for more than ten years. Following in the research tradition of the Daily Bread's work, the current study documents the circumstances and experiences of 1,796 individuals accessing food banks in four Ontario communities: Belleville, Hamilton, Ottawa and Toronto. Through the administration of a structured questionnaire, interviewers recorded information including the gender, marital status, household composition, educational attainment, employment, income, social assistance, disability status, housing, hunger status and unmet needs of food bank recipients.

This intercity project has provided a means of identifying commonalities and differences across communities. Given the higher cost of living, particularly housing costs, in Ontario's big cities, we might expect to find urban food bank clients with greater needs and facing more hardship than their counterparts in mid-size or small cities with their relatively lower cost of living. Instead, the current research reveals equally disturbing trends among food bank clients across study communities.

The demographic profile of food bank recipients was similar in each community. Food bank clients included slightly more women, people ranging in age from 14 to 86 years with an average age of 41 years, household sizes from 1 to 14 people with a median average of 2 people per household, and large numbers of single individuals and single parents and a disproportionate number of children at 36.3% of all clients.

Virtually all food bank recipients shared the experience of living in poverty with more than 70% reporting household incomes that were less than half of Statistics Canada's Low Income Cutoff, indicating a substantial depth of poverty. While rental housing costs have increased most dramatically in Hamilton, Ottawa and Toronto in the past few years, lack of affordable housing is a critical issue for the majority of clients in all four communities. More than 85% of food bank recipients spent over 30% of their income on housing, and more than 65% spent over half of their income on housing, leaving the latter group at risk of homelessness.

Most troubling, the majority of adults and many children experienced hunger despite the assistance of a food bank. Almost 60% of adults reported experiencing hunger at least once per month, including nearly one-quarter reporting hunger a couple of days per week. Among households with children, almost 40% reported that their children experienced hunger at least once per month. Over 80% of parents sacrificed their own food to feed their children, but often it was not enough to prevent child hunger. Rates of child hunger varied somewhat with a low of 34% in Toronto to a high of 50% in Belleville.

Survey results revealed a particularly striking finding. A large number of food bank recipients reported having disabilities that restrict their ability to maintain regular employment, with figures ranging from one-third to nearly half of all clients, varying by community. Among those food bank recipients with disabilities, 55% were not on the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP). Among food bank recipients with disabilities who were not on ODSP, more than 70% were subsisting on the Ontario Works social assistance program with its accompanying lower benefit levels. The current research suggests that over 60% of food bank recipients with disabilities who are not on ODSP would no longer require assistance from food banks if they were able to access even these modest benefits. According to the Ontario government, the ODSP “is intended to meet the needs of people with disabilities and help them to become more independent”. Yet, research conducted by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health<sup>1</sup> as well as the Income Security Advocacy Centre<sup>2</sup> has documented the serious barriers that people with disabilities face in successfully accessing the program. Clearly major reforms are needed to ensure access for people with disabilities in need of income assistance.

In addition to the problem of access to ODSP, benefit levels do not approximate the actual cost of living and have been frozen for more than a decade. Similarly, Ontario Works social assistance rates were cut by 21.6% in 1995 and have not been raised since 1993. With rates frozen and sitting well below the poverty line, it is not surprising to note that almost 70% of food bank clients were Ontario Works or ODSP recipients. The working poor constituted the third largest group of food bank recipients at 13.6% of the overall sample. In the 1980s, lack of access to employment was a critical issue for many food bank recipients. Today, low wages and unstable employment have left growing numbers of workers in food bank lines. At \$6.85 per hour, Ontario’s minimum wage has been frozen since 1995.

Urgent action is needed to improve food security, lessen hunger and reduce the need for food banks in Ontario communities. While the federal government’s commitment of new dollars for affordable housing programs is an important first step, substantial long-term investments are needed to address the housing and homelessness crisis in Ontario and across the country. The federal government must ensure that dollars committed are readily accessible to build new housing that is truly affordable for those in need. The

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<sup>1</sup> Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (2003). Barriers to ODSP: Experiences of People with Mental Health and Addictions. Toronto, Ontario: CAMH.

<sup>2</sup> Income Security Advocacy Centre (2003). Denial by Design ... The Ontario Disability Support Program. Toronto, Ontario: ISAC. ([www.incomesecurity.org](http://www.incomesecurity.org))

provincial government must return to the housing table and begin to commit funds for the provision of affordable housing to ensure that all Ontarians have access to this basic need. Further, major reforms are needed in the area of income assistance to provide proper access to programs and benefits at levels that reflect the actual cost of living in Ontario communities. As well eight long years later, minimum wage workers are in dire need of a raise. Unlike the minimum wage, the cost of living in Ontario has not remained stagnant. Evidenced by long waiting lists for subsidized child care, many parents with children require affordable, quality child care as a prerequisite for maintaining employment. At the federal and provincial level, new commitments are needed in the area of regulated, affordable child care.

Current housing, income security, labour market and child care policies do not provide a needed 'hand up' for individuals and families reliant on charitable food donations to meet basic needs in Ontario. The upcoming federal and provincial elections will provide a new opportunity for political parties to assert their priorities and present their plans for addressing national and provincial issues. Many voices are needed to bring about change that will ensure that everyone can pay the rent, feed themselves, and if they have children, feed the kids. It is our hope that we will witness a renewed commitment on the part of all parties to address these basic survival issues, to reduce hunger, food insecurity and the need for food banks and to ensure access to affordable housing for all.