

UNRAVELLING THREADS: OTTAWA'S FOOD SECURITY CRISIS



Ottawa Food Bank
La Banque d'alimentation d'Ottawa

**WITH YOUR HELP
WE CAN END
FOOD INSECURITY
BY 2050**

OTTAWA FOOD BANK



2001 Bantree Street,
Ottawa, ON K1B 4X3

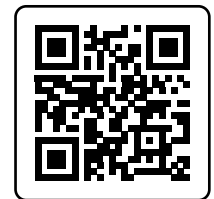
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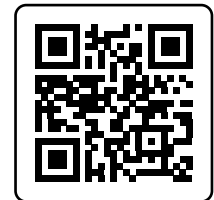
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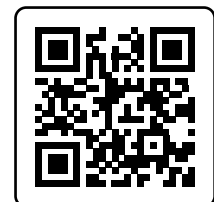


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ADDRESSING FOOD INSECURITY IN OTTAWA: ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

2023 brought new challenges to the work we do, as the Ottawa Food Bank network reported an astonishing surge in visits, totalling over 493,000. This is not just a number; these are people of all ages living in your community, working in your workplace. These unprecedented numbers should be a stark wake-up call.

With a 22% increase in the number of visits to the network in the last 12 months and reduced funding, the challenge has become an insurmountable task. Food banks try to keep up, but in this current climate, it's overwhelming. We must ask ourselves when enough is enough.

Nearly 150,000 people in our city are food insecure. Imagine entire neighbourhoods going without meals for days. Imagine the loss of jobs, the health impacts, and what that would mean for children trying to go to school. This is not a hypothetical scenario—it is the current state of our city. When do we collectively declare that enough is enough?

While food banks play a crucial role in our communities, their capacity is strained by the increasing number of visits to food banks. The continued emergency has strained resources, and demand has outpaced our ability to respond adequately.

Only a small fraction of this work is government-supported; Ottawa Food Bank receives less than 2% of our funding from any level of government. The social safety net, meant to be a lifeline, has worn thin and is failing to catch everyone in need.

Food banks are a solution in our community, offering support, referrals, and programs to move people out of poverty. They serve as an accessible entry point into the social support system, connecting with many communities overlooked by traditional systems.

But with more visits, it's becoming increasingly challenging for food banks to meet the diverse needs of their communities. To move beyond today's emergency, more resources are needed to provide the necessary solutions and support to address the root problems in our community.

AREAS OF INTERVENTION

Everyone has a home. Everyone can cover basic needs. Everyone can access mental health services.



The cost of poverty impacts us all—through healthcare costs, the justice system, and the loss of potential. We should all want to live in a community where everyone can thrive and contribute.

We know the path forward: access to nutritious food, enhanced resources, and comprehensive support. We're asking you to join us on this mission. The cost of inaction is too high. Together, we can create a city where food insecurity is eliminated. But we have to decide together, today, that enough is enough.

Thank you for your steady support, incredible generosity, and unwavering dedication to making Ottawa a place where everyone can thrive.

With determination,

Rachael Wilson
CEO,
Ottawa Food Bank



GROWING HOLES IN THE SOCIAL SAFETY NET

The Ottawa Food Bank, in collaboration with a network of 112 member agencies, is dedicated to providing nutritious food to the residents of Ottawa. We are a part of a larger social safety net that works to move people out of poverty. Our collective mission is to reduce the need for food banks—but despite our dedication, concerning trends have emerged. March 2023 marked the highest demand we've experienced in our almost 40-year history. This reflects the staggering 68% increase in visits we've seen since 2019. We're seeing more employed people, more new Canadians and more families visiting the network of agencies. Not only are more people accessing food banks, they're also making more frequent visits.

This increase in demand continues to outpace capacity. We're among many organisations doing more with less, with a decrease in donations and extremely limited government funding. Less than 2% of Ottawa Food Bank funding comes from any level of government, with donations making up the remaining 98%. As a network, we're increasingly meeting the holistic needs of clients by extending beyond our primary mandate of food provision. This includes providing parenting support, school supplies, and mental health services and dedicating more hours to meet the evolving and complex needs of clients.

Food insecurity is increasing—the number of people in Ottawa experiencing food insecurity has more than doubled since 2017, from 1 in 15 to 1 in 7. Current trends tell us why—government social assistance rates that put people below the poverty line, increasingly unaffordable housing, limited transportation options, high food prices, and incomes that are not keeping up. These trends should be a huge cause of concern. The impact of poverty and food insecurity go beyond personal health and well-being, with substantial costs to the health and justice systems. The children accessing food support today are at a higher risk of developing asthma, heart disease, chronic pain and depression in the future as a result of experiencing food insecurity.

While we work to alleviate hunger, people who visit network food programs often return to unstable housing, face impossible choices between food and medication, or skip meals so children can eat. Subjecting people to these situations in the absence of a sufficient social safety net is immoral and unsustainable. We need action now—to come together to mend the holes in the social safety net and keep people from falling through.

1 IN 7 PEOPLE IN OTTAWA ARE FOOD INSECURE

POSITIVE INDICATORS



**INVESTMENT IN MENTAL
HEALTH AND ADDICTIONS**

NEGATIVE INDICATORS



**POVERTY RATES
2020-2022**



FOOD BANK VISITS



COST OF HOUSING



**COST OF FOOD AND
OTHER BASICS**



**NEED FOR SOCIAL
SERVICES**

WHO WE ARE

We are a network of 112 member agencies that provide food and wrap-around supports to people in Ottawa, including groceries, meals, afterschool snacks and other social service programming. We work in partnership to improve our quality of service, increase access to healthy and culturally appropriate food, and establish connections to food banks across the city. With a goal to end food insecurity in Ottawa, we continue to ensure the equity and sustainability of the network and engage in policy advocacy.



The cost of living is so high, by the time you pay your rent, half the time you don't have money for food. You still need to go to the dentist, you still need to go see the doctor. You still need stuff to sustain yourself, like clothes. Sometimes people prefer to pay their rent and stay hungry. Or they don't pay their rent and they end up on the streets.

— Food Bank Client



PERCENTAGE OF FOOD BANKS THAT PROVIDE ADDITIONAL SERVICES

66% DISTRIBUTION OF CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE FOOD

46% MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS

47% EMPLOYMENT SEARCHES

39% POLICY ADVOCACY

29% ADDICTION SERVICES

11% CHILDCARE

38% SCHOOL SUPPLIES

14% EMERGENCY HOUSING

493,951

VISITS—UP 22%

39,000

HRS/WEEK FOR CLIENT NEEDS UNRELATED TO FOOD

17,500

VOLUNTEER HOURS

2,050

VOLUNTEERS

OTTAWA'S AFFORDABILITY CRISIS: A SNAPSHOT

A review of the data paints a dire picture in 2023. From the high cost of living to stagnating incomes, to a nonprofit sector struggling to keep up - our community is taking a hit from every direction. Urgent intervention is required. The Ontario Nonprofit Network warns that "without action, the erosion of Ontario's critical social infrastructure will only speed up."

FOOD BANK USE

FOOD BANKS SEE RECORD-SETTING DEMAND, SCALE BACK NON-FOOD SERVICES

March 2023 marked another high in food bank use after records were set twice in 2022. We're seeing more new Canadians, more two-parent households and more employed people and families. Not only are we seeing more people accessing food banks, we are also seeing them more often. The need is getting greater and deeper.

Most food banks in Ottawa address needs beyond food - including mental health, housing and employment - but there has been less additional programming in 2023. Amid rising demand and decreasing revenues, member agencies have had to prioritise paying for food and retaining staff. Agencies within the Ottawa Food Bank network nonetheless report spending 39,000 hours/week meeting client needs unrelated to food - and needing another 22,000 hours/week to meet their needs effectively. Behind the increased demand experienced by the Ottawa Food Bank's network: rising costs and eroding social safety nets.

↑ 68%

INCREASE IN FOOD BANK VISITS SINCE 2019



MANY SOCIAL SERVICE AGENCIES UNABLE TO KEEP UP WITH DEMAND

It's not just food banks reporting increased demand. The social services sector in Ontario and across Canada has been experiencing unprecedented demand, while experiencing less revenue and higher material costs with inflation. Staff wellbeing is a sector-wide concern, with reported burnout and difficulty recruiting and retaining staff. While volunteerism at the Ottawa Food Banks has been steady, volunteerism across the sector has not recovered post-pandemic.

OF THE ONTARIO NONPROFIT NETWORK'S SURVEY RESPONDENTS:

74% REPORT DEMAND INCREASE FOR THEIR SERVICES—UP FROM 47% IN 2020

86% OF HEALTH ORGANISATIONS REPORT DEMAND INCREASE

81% OF SOCIAL SERVICE ORGANISATIONS REPORT DEMAND INCREASE

83% OF ORGANISATIONS REPORT INCREASED COSTS

65% REPORT RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION PROBLEM

62% REPORT LOSING VOLUNTEERS



BEHIND THE INCREASED DEMAND EXPERIENCED BY FOOD BANKS: RISING COSTS AND ERODING SOCIAL SAFETY NETS

AN ERODING SOCIAL SAFETY NET GROWS FOOD BANK DEMAND

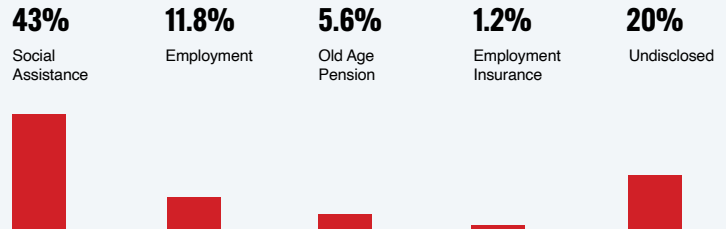
Those theoretically supported by the social safety net cannot meet their basic needs. 63% of all food insecure households in Canada are on social assistance and more than 30% of these households are severely food insecure, experiencing extreme deprivation and high risk of poor health outcomes. In Ontario, 59% of those on social assistance have disabilities, and many of them live in poverty, but the depth of poverty is unknown. Low-income measures do not account for the higher cost of living that people with disabilities face—including the cost of medication, mobility aids, transportation, personal care, and accessible housing.

With rising costs, those already in need are predictably falling further behind. Ontario Works (OW) provides up to \$733 per month. This rate has remained unchanged for five years and is worth less in the face of high inflation. The Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) saw a 6.5% increase in 2023, amounting to only \$80 more a month. The Maytree’s “Welfare in Canada” report found that both OW and ODSP rates have been below the deep poverty line since 2008 and that recipients on OW would need another \$17,000 a year just to reach the poverty line. As these systems fail, more turn towards food banks as an unofficial emergency social safety net.

Ottawa Public Health’s Nutritious Food Basket report shows that while those on Old Age Security saw a slight increase in spending power over last year, those on OW and ODSP are worse off.



PRIMARY INCOME OF FOOD BANK USERS, 2023.



2X

MORE LIKELY TO LIVE IN POVERTY IF YOU HAVE A DISABILITY

50%

OF PEOPLE EXPERIENCING FOOD INSECURITY HAVE A DISABILITY



FAMILY OF FOUR ON OW IS LEFT WITH -\$306/MO



ONE-PERSON HOUSEHOLD ON ODSP IS LEFT WITH -\$394/MO



ONE-PERSON HOUSEHOLD ON OW IS LEFT WITH -\$673/MO



ONE-PERSON HOUSEHOLD ON OLD AGE SECURITY IS LEFT WITH -\$349/MO

Source: Nutritious Food Basket, 2023

Ottawa's network of food banks saw an increase in visits from employed people in 2023. As costs rise and incomes stagnate, being employed no longer protects against food insecurity. 25 years ago, the majority of minimum wage workers were high school students. Fast forward to today and nearly 50% of minimum wage workers are 25 years old or older and 1/3 have a post-secondary degree. The increase in minimum wage, temporary, and precarious work also means the absence of adequate compensation, benefits, and protections. Working people most at risk of food insecurity are low-wage workers, folks working short-term and insecure jobs, and households where a single income supports multiple people.

EMPLOYMENT DOES NOT GUARANTEE FOOD SECURITY

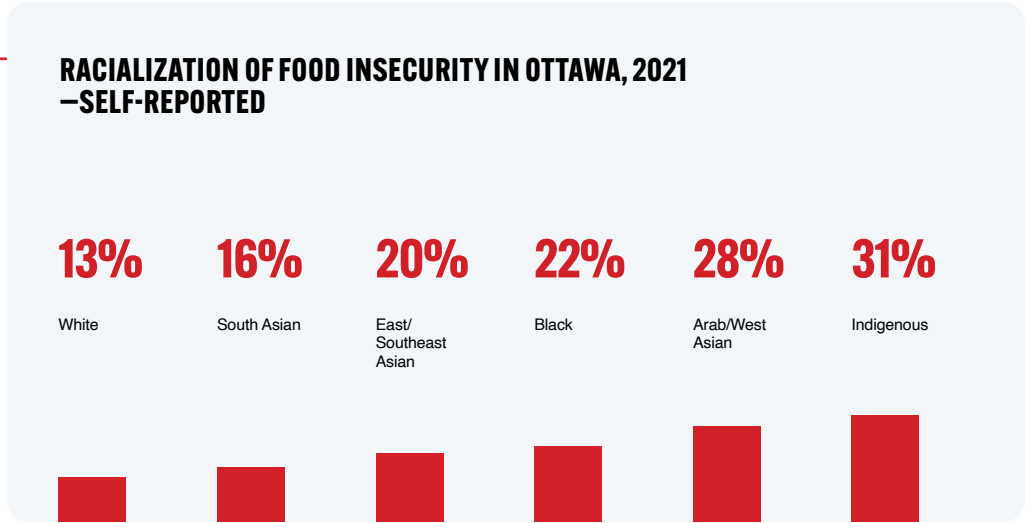


SYSTEMIC RACISM IN CANADA HAS A MARKED IMPACT ON FOOD INSECURITY—A SHOCKING 31% OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLE ARE FOOD INSECURE.



Because of the squeeze in my finances, I have cut down from two meals to one and a half.

— Food Bank Client



SIMPLY PUT

FOOD INSECURITY IS SYSTEMIC

Welfare, low wages, and systemic racism and ableism keep people in poverty and exacerbate health issues. The holes in our social safety net are growing, and more people in Ottawa are slipping through.

MORE TURN TO THE CHARITABLE SECTOR AMID AFFORDABILITY CRISIS



32% of Ontarians expect to access charitable services to meet their basic needs, May-October 2023

Behind the increased demand for food banks is an affordability crisis felt by many in Ottawa. A household's major expenses are housing, food and transportation - and all are rising. Last year Statistics Canada revealed the largest Consumer Price Index (CPI) increase in Canada since 1982, with food increasing by more than 9 percent. Prices remain high in 2023, but with the exception of gasoline, are rising at a slower rate. Nonetheless, Canadian families can expect to pay \$1,065 more for food in 2023 than in 2022. Crucially, costs have been rising faster than earnings. For example, while average house prices rose 180% in Ontario from 2011-2021, incomes only rose 38%. Those who were already in need are predictably falling further behind.

2022 SAW THE HIGHEST INCREASE IN MAJOR HOUSEHOLD EXPENSES IN ONTARIO SINCE 1982



+9.7%
TRANSPORTATION



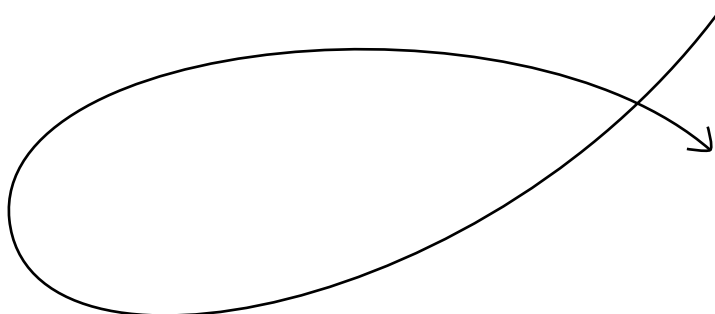
+9.1%
FOOD



+7.1%
SHELTER



6.9%
OVERALL—OTTAWA



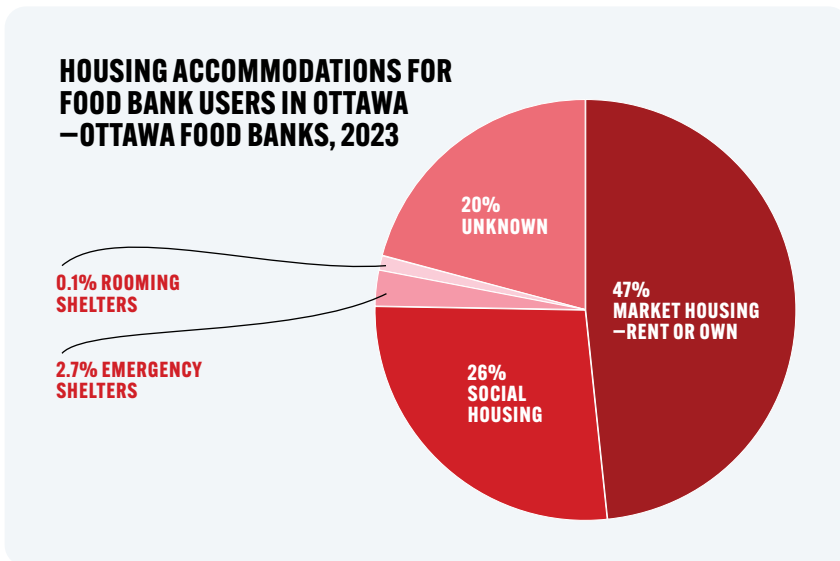
1/2 Hamilton food bank users couldn't cover the cost of housing if there were no food banks—and would be homeless.

THE COST OF HOUSING CONTINUES TO RISE—AND THOSE HARDEST HIT ARE RENTERS

The cost of home ownership has risen slightly for single-family homes and townhouses in Ottawa (0.4-0.6%), and decreased slightly for condominiums; but the average cost of renting an apartment has increased by 11.9%. Renters are more than 2X more likely to live in unaffordable housing in Canada - and more Canadians are becoming renters. In Ottawa, the percentage of renters grew by 27% from 2011-2021. Meanwhile, social housing is on the decline: seven units of affordable housing are being lost for every unit built. The strain on Ottawa's shelter system has reached unprecedented levels, prompting Ottawa City Council to declare a crisis and establish an emergency shelter task force in October, to address the urgency before winter.

THE COST OF RENTING INCREASES 11.9% IN 2023

UNPRECEDENTED NUMBERS FACE HOMELESSNESS IN OTTAWA THIS WINTER



In 2021, the Province of Ontario paused rent increases in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2023, the rent cap sits at 2.5% and applies to existing tenants only, with no limits on rent increases for new tenants. A new Statistics Canada report shows recent renters pay substantially more than longer-term renters - and young people and new Canadians are over-represented among recent renters. Research in British Columbia further suggests short-term rentals are playing an emerging role in inflating rental prices. The City of Ottawa passed the Short-Term Rental Bylaw in 2022 to address this, which limits short-term rentals to those renting out their primary home, and requires a permit.

62% OF OTTAWA'S RENTAL STOCK BUILT BEFORE 1979

↑ THE COST OF RENTING INCREASES 11.9% IN 2023

12%

(1/8) OF PEOPLE IN OTTAWA ARE IN CORE HOUSING NEED

7,584

PEOPLE HAVE USED SHELTERS

7 UNITS

OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING LOST FOR EVERY UNIT BUILT

2.2%

RENTAL VACANCY RATE

12,000+

ON THE AFFORDABLE HOUSING WAITLIST

0%

OF OTTAWA NEIGHBOURHOODS AFFORDABLE FOR A MINIMUM WAGE WORKERS

109 HOURS/WEEK

NEEDED FOR A MINIMUM WAGE WORKER TO AFFORD A TWO-BEDROOM APARTMENT

DEFINITION

CORE HOUSING NEED

Households living in unsuitable, inadequate or unaffordable housing—not including homeless people

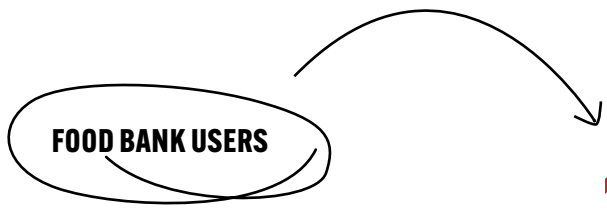
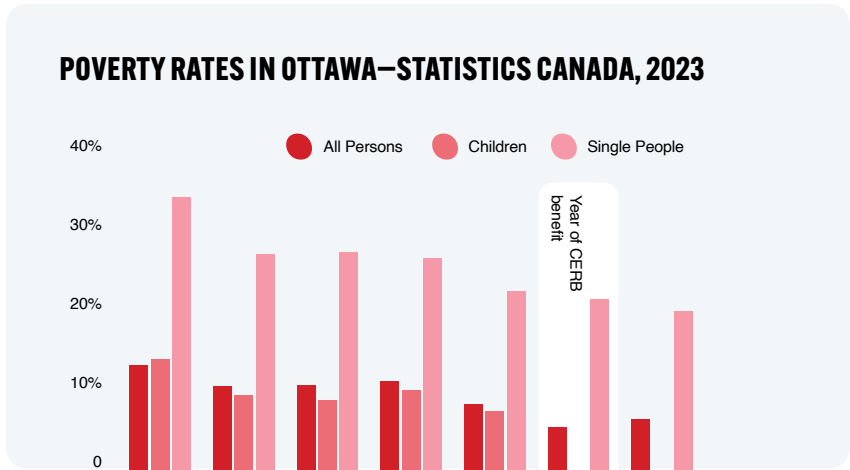
CHANGE IN COST OF HOUSING—AUGUST 2022-AUGUST 2023

- ↑ **0.6%**
Single family home
- ↑ **0.4%**
Townhouse
- ↓ **-0.4%**
Condominium
- ↑ **11.9%**
Apartment rental
- ↑ **17%**
for new tenants

PROGRESS ON POVERTY REDUCTION IN OTTAWA LOSES GROUND

Food insecurity is the result of low incomes. While people in Ottawa show signs of struggling in 2023, complete data on income is still pending. According to Statistics Canada, poverty declined from 2015 to 2020 in response to the federal and provincial child benefits but increased in 2021. Since then, the cost of living has risen substantially, and our measure of poverty (the Market Basket Measure) is outdated, and slated for review over the next two years.

Recognising the urgent need for up-to-date information, Statistics Canada has developed a methodology to estimate poverty trends in Canada. These estimations suggest a reduction in poverty in 2020 in response to COVID-19 support, followed by an increase in 2021 and a more significant rise in 2022. The data aligns with what service providers are seeing: more people in Ottawa are struggling to meet their basic needs. Poverty remains disproportionately high among racialized groups, especially among first-generation new Canadians, people with disabilities, lone-parent households, and single people.



24% **NEW CANADIANS**

24% **TWO-PARENT FAMILIES**

12% **HAVE EMPLOYMENT AS PRIMARY INCOME**

37% **OF THE PEOPLE SERVED ARE CHILDREN**

42% **ARE SINGLE**

THE HIGH COST OF INACTION

AND THE COURAGE TO IMPLEMENT PROVEN SOLUTIONS

Perpetuating poverty, inequality, and food insecurity negatively affects us all. Poverty and inequality in our communities are strongly linked with poorer mental and physical health across all income levels. They contribute to lower performance on all metrics of social well-being. And a net economic loss.

A conservative estimate placed the cost of poverty in Ontario at \$33 billion in 2019. This includes additional costs incurred in the health care and justice systems, along with the opportunity cost of unrealized higher incomes. Case studies around the world show that preventing poverty pays for itself. A 2023 study by the University of British Columbia showed

cash transfers to people experiencing homelessness resulted in savings to the private and public purse: those receiving aid secured housing, saved money, and reduced reliance on the shelter system which led to public savings of \$777 per person per year.

A plan to end poverty is the right and sustainable thing to do, for everyone. Though it comes at a high initial cost, the return on investment is indisputable.

THE HIGH COST OF INACTION

WHEN WE ALLOW POVERTY TO PERSIST

- ↑ HEALTH CARE COSTS AT ALL INCOME LEVELS
- ↑ COSTS TO THE JUSTICE SYSTEM ASSOCIATED WITH VICTIMS AND PERPETRATORS OF CRIME
- ↓ EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT
- ↓ FUTURE EARNING POTENTIAL FOR THOSE RAISED OUT OF POVERTY - AND THEIR KIDS

THE COST WHEN WE DON'T END POVERTY IN ONTARIO

33 BILLION DOLLARS

ELIMINATING POVERTY PAYS FOR ITSELF



AFFORDABILITY CRISIS EXPANDS MEMBER AGENCY MANDATES

Bruce House, a member agency of the Ottawa Food Bank network, is a lifeline for individuals of all ages living with HIV. Their mission is to facilitate access to treatment while also addressing complex issues such as addiction, mental health, homelessness and incarceration. Bruce House fills the gaps in essential services for their clients, with a staggering 90% of them on ODSP support. One of the most pressing issues they face is the increasing demand for food assistance. In 2019, Bruce House initiated a small food pantry to provide short-term relief at the end of the month. Today, the need for food is so essential that clients visit Bruce House for food support almost weekly.

Rising costs and stagnant incomes have meant that Ottawa Food Bank member agencies like Bruce House have begun to extend their services beyond their primary scope. They now find themselves supplying not only groceries, but also school supplies and mental health support. Managing this surge in demand with limited funding and staff is incredibly challenging, and as noted by the Ontario Nonprofit Network, is contributing to the erosion of essential social infrastructure.

“

We have clients whose entire ODSP cheque goes toward rent. And then there's the constant struggle for food. How many trips to food banks, food cupboards, and emergency food programs can you make in a month?

—
Patrick James Morley,
Manager of Communications and Capacity Building,
Bruce House



LEARN MORE ABOUT THE 112 MEMBER AGENCIES WITHIN THE OTTAWA FOOD BANK'S NETWORK



OUR NORTH STAR: BY 2050, NO-ONE IN OTTAWA IS FOOD INSECURE



At the Ottawa Food Bank, our North Star is to end food insecurity in Ottawa by 2050. We want to reduce the need for food banks; and when food insecurity does happen, we want to ensure our community has the capacity to provide a holistic response. Within our own operations we aim to increase the number of member agencies providing wrap-around services and properly resourcing them. We also advocate for comprehensive policies that address the underlying issues of poverty. We engage the network of 112 member agencies to understand and amplify their policy priorities.

IN 2023, THEIR TOP THREE PRIORITIES WERE:

**INCREASE
THE STOCK OF
AFFORDABLE
HOUSING**



**INCREASE
MENTAL HEALTH
SUPPORTS**



**INCREASE
SOCIAL
ASSISTANCE
BENEFIT LEVELS**



WHAT EACH OF US CAN DO TO END FOOD INSECURITY



AS A COMMUNITY MEMBER

- Ask your elected officials to prioritise action on poverty, food insecurity, and the growing affordability crisis.
- Talk about these issues with your community, family, and friends to help raise awareness.
- Donate time, food, or funds to support the Ottawa Food Bank.



AS A CITY

- Proceed with a planned Municipal Poverty Reduction Plan
 - Prioritise and fund the Poverty Reduction Plan recommendations from the community-led process, as part of the Community Safety and Wellbeing Plan.
 - Identify the right to food and the right to housing as underlying values.
 - Leverage strategic opportunities under municipal jurisdiction: housing, child literacy, affordable and convenient transit, affordable recreation.
 - Increase funding to food banks.
- Fund continued mental health + addictions programming beyond the current prototype
- Stem the housing crisis: implement the Alliance to End Homelessness Ottawa “Starts with Home” [recommendations](#)



PROVINCIALY

- Collaborate with the City of Ottawa to allocate provincial funding for affordable housing (both capital and operational).
- Increase rates for Ontario Works (OW) and Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) and index to inflation.
- Ensure full benefits from the Canada Disability Benefit (CDB) without any clawbacks (deductions or reductions) to overall financial support.
- Implement Ontario Nonprofit Network’s [recommendations](#) to support our struggling sector.



FEDERALLY

- Collaborate with the City of Ottawa to allocate federal funding for affordable housing (both capital and operational).
- Make the Canada Disability Benefit (CDB) available as soon as possible by expediting the design and rollout, and provide an immediate emergency relief benefit in the interim
- Reform Canada’s Employment Insurance (EI) program to address eligibility, increase benefit rates, and close gaps in coverage for unemployed Canadians.
- Implement Food Banks Canada’s [recommendations](#), including the development of new mental health measures with a focus on the impact of low incomes. Prioritise acute needs of single working-age adults, people with disabilities, and individuals living with addictions.



Until systemic solutions to poverty are in place, food banks need to be recognized and adequately funded to provide critical emergency services.

—Rachael Wilson

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH.

Dignified access to food and housing is a human right, one denied to more and more in our community as the affordability crisis reaches new heights. Perpetuating poverty and food insecurity is harmful and costly to all: it hurts those experiencing it, those working to prevent it, community members at all income levels, and the public purse. Continued inaction will further erode our ability to address the crisis. Enough is enough: we need urgent action now.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the dedicated network of 112 member agencies whose unwavering efforts ensure that each community in Ottawa has consistent access to nutritious food, every day. To the passionate staff, committed volunteers, generous donors, and helpful neighbours who support our mission - we thank you for your collective contributions and for joining us as we advocate for change.



**THE OTTAWA HUNGER REPORT 2023 WAS
PREPARED BY**

Katie J. Lore, Celia Lee, Alex Noreau, Lauren Whalen,
Rachael Wilson, and Jared Lebel.

METHODOLOGY

The Hunger Count survey is sent out to food banks in March of each year by the federal association, Food Banks Canada. The data collected is generally demographic information, such as age, sex, and household make-up. It also includes some optional psychographic questions such as source of income, education, and housing type.



The Hunger Count tracks data in March, every year, so that we can identify trends and issues in food banking in Ottawa. March is chosen as it is an unexceptional month, without predictable high or low use. Data is collected from our network of 112 member agencies using a database called Link2Feed. Data collected through Link2Feed is non-identifiable and the Ottawa Food Bank is not privy to clients' individual private information.



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