

# Click/Hear Quick Take:

## Nowhere to Go

An investigation of how clients would cope if there were no food banks

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**Daily Bread**  
Food Bank

## Background

While Canada has set itself up a champion of human rights, an escalating number of Canadians are unable to access food, a basic human right. As the numbers grow, so does concern over the capacity of the food bank network to support growing demand, concern for the people who are faced with an immediate food shortage, and concern for the wider implications on society and its civic health.

Governments have stepped away from their responsibilities to create the conditions in which all can live a life of dignity. Social assistance rates remain at half the official poverty line. Minimum wage and other labour protections are set so that someone working full-time, full year still lives a precarious life.

Food banks emerged in the 1980s as an immediate response to an economic recession. Daily Bread Food Bank will be 40 years old this year, and many others have been serving local members of their communities for as long. Except for some emergency funding during the pandemic, Daily Bread Food Bank (and many others) do not receive government funding.

Charitable efforts and volunteers cannot fill the gaps left when governments abdicate their responsibilities to ensure everyone security of life. As a sector, food banks recognize that in a better world, we would not exist. We would be obsolete. There would be no need for someone to rely on a donated box of macaroni to eat tonight.

Another fair critique is that not everyone facing hunger is being helped. Scholars who study food insecurity also remind us that these charitable efforts only reach a portion of those who are severely food insecure. In 2019, Professor Valerie Tarasuk and colleagues from PROOF at the University of Toronto estimated that food banks only reach one in five of those facing severe food insecurity.<sup>1</sup>

However, the reality is stark. One in three people being fed from a food bank are children. Half of clients report a disability or long-term health condition. One in six are seniors and sizeable numbers of clients receive government support, whether directly through social assistance or pension. Many come to us when a crisis hits because food banks act as a safety net when other supports fail.

The need for food banks is clear, and it's growing at unprecedented rates. Daily Bread has just passed 2.07 million visits over the past 12 months. Food banks have become a sign of a "perpetual emergency."<sup>2</sup> As demand for food banks continues to rise due to stagnant incomes, unaffordable housing, precarious labour and a frayed social safety net, what would happen if food banks simply did not exist? What would people do?

We decided to find out.

## Methodology

Through the *Click/Hear* program, Daily Bread maintains a client panel to stay connected with people who need to use food banks and to engage around the daily challenges they face. The *Click/Hear* panel is built from food bank clients who indicated they wished to participate in Daily Bread's research and advocacy activities. Regular short surveys are sent out, gathering responses by at least two methods: email, phone, and in-person.

165 food bank clients participated in this survey round. Respondents were asked three brief questions about the alternatives to which they would turn if there were no food banks.

## Overview of Findings

### Nowhere to Go

Asked what supports they would rely on if there were no food banks, two out of three food bank clients said they would have nowhere to go.

Clients offered various answers:

- 66% said they didn't have any other supports
- 12% said they would rely on family or friends
- 12% said they would go to another charity or government organization
- 4% said they would use community meal programs, community fridges and/or community gardens
- 4% said they didn't know what they would do
- 2% selected "other" — this included Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD) and theft

Food banks are a critical stopgap for most clients. People turn to food banks once they have run out of other options.

This is a story of social and economic isolation. And it echoes the *Who's Hungry* finding that 39% of food bank clients have no one else on whom they can rely. The larger number reported here (66%) means that some food bank clients may have others to count on but not someone with the capability to make sure they are not hungry.

Most other common community initiatives, such as gardens and food pantries, did not rise to the forefront of people's minds when considering their options.

### Impact on housing

The most significant impact was on people's housing. Forty-two percent (42%) of clients told us they would not be able to pay their rent. This mirrors findings done last fall in Hamilton, which found that 46% of food bank clients indicated that they would lose their housing if they had to purchase the food obtained from the food bank.<sup>3</sup>

This finding underlines food banks' role in preventing eviction and homelessness.

## **Impact on food security**

Thirty-nine percent (39%) reported they would have to miss meals. This again is evidence that food banks are ensuring that the level of food insecurity is lessened and that clients are able to eat three meals a day.

## **Other options**

In a parallel survey question, clients were asked about other options. Here, nearly one in five (19%) hoped to turn to other charities and government services. This echoes the same Statistics Canada study which found that 17% of low-income Canadians were “very likely to obtain food or meals from a community organization over the next six months due to rising prices.”

Thirty-seven percent (37%) of survey respondents reported that without food banks, they wouldn’t have enough to pay for essentials, such as transportation. Again, this is evidence that food banks are being used to buffer the (rising) costs of other necessities of life. Cutting back on other expenses such as phone and transit was the most frequent adaptive response (54%). Research cited by the University of Toronto’s PROOF also shows that 47% of those who are severely food insecure are “likely to delay, reduce, or skip prescription medication due to cost.”<sup>4</sup>

Twenty-eight percent (28%) of food bank clients reported they would turn to credit or loans. This is troubling given how low-income people can get caught in predatory lending cycles. According to a new Statistics Canada report, “19% of Canadians in the bottom income quintile reported that they had to often borrow money from friends or relatives or take on additional debt to meet day-to-day expenses. This compares to 2% of those in the top quintile.”<sup>5</sup>

## What clients have to say about a world without food banks:

**"Food banks help a lot of single parents like me."**

**"I work as general labour. It's hard. Rent is very expensive."**

**"I've started intermittent fasting and the girlfriend has got loans. I recently got credit cards to prevent us from missing rent payments that we can't afford to pay off. Can't afford to save up for a first and last months' rent to change our rental."**

**"With the cost of inflation, it is hard for many but most especially on low income or people on assistance. I do not have the answer, but something must give."**

**"Every month we get \$1500, and our rent is \$1250. It's very hard. This year I could afford only 3 clothes for my youngest son, he is 6 months old. I wash and change all the time. But now these 3 pieces have become small for him. I have 4 kids; winter clothes were \$150 for each. Now my daughter says: 'Mommy, it's small,' and I don't have money to buy her a new jacket. It's her birthday, I don't have money to buy her a gift or a cake or make a birthday party."**

**"I'm starting all over again as a mother of 3, and alone. You have no idea how humble I [have to be] to be able to get food for my family."**



# What clients have to say about a world without food banks:

"I would have to try to find another town to live in because all of the above would occur, and I'm already needing to borrow to pay rent each month. I would lose all of my friends and family, and some of them need me right now to help out. And I wouldn't have access to the health care I need here in Toronto. So, I would be completely isolated, hurting myself and my family, and I still wouldn't have any money for essentials.

I already have to factor in the bus fare to get to and from the food bank, and I pray each week that I can do it all on one fare. It was so nice the other day, my mom gave me a hug and she commented on how nice my shampoo smelled. I had just gotten a nice bottle of shampoo from the food bank and it felt so nice to be complimented on my appearance/cleanliness.

To be able to be clean and fed makes me feel more human and gives me a sense of belonging and self-pride through self-care. "

**"I'm on pension, single; rent went up this month and my pension didn't. I don't have enough to take TTC, I walked here. My feet are getting cold. [Getting] old is no fun."**

**"More and more I'm considering assisted suicide, as the day-to-day struggle and worry just to have food and a roof over my head is taking a heavy toll on my physical and mental wellbeing."**



## What clients have to say about a world without food banks:

**"If there were no food banks, with today's inflation rate not just myself but many people and families would be struggling. I think the crime rate would go up in the sense that when one is extremely desperate who knows what one may do."**

"The cost of living in general is so expensive that it worries me. I literally have to buy on-sale food or the cheapest. As a single parent, it's really scary not knowing if I can provide for my children anymore. My local food bank has helped me so much that it relieves some of that worry."

**"I'd go begging on the street."**

**"I would probably have to start stealing to survive. As I cannot cut back my expenses any more."**

"I also started feeding my pets the cheapest food I could afford. Unfortunately, my 7-year-old cat had health problems and the lack of his prescription food worsened his symptoms and he had to be euthanized after extensive suffering. If I had to do this all over again I would stop eating myself more so I could have paid for his prescription meds."



## Policy Implications

Food insecurity is a problem of poverty, caused by low incomes and high housing costs. Although food banks are designed to provide emergency food relief, food security cannot be outsourced to charity — governments bear this responsibility.

Daily Bread Food Bank calls on all orders of government to enact strong policies to tackle the systemic root causes of food insecurity through decent work, affordable housing, and a strong social safety net.

The Right to Food will never be realized until the systemic issues that perpetuate inequities in our communities are fixed. Poverty reduction needs to be addressed by governments through:

- Guaranteeing Income Security and Eliminating Systemic Poverty
- Solving Toronto’s Housing Affordability Crisis
- Mitigating the Steep Increases in the Cost of Living

Read our full policy recommendations at [dailybread.ca/whoshungry](https://dailybread.ca/whoshungry)

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1. <https://proof.utoronto.ca/resource/relationship-between-food-banks-and-food-insecurity-in-canada/>
  2. Tung, Cloutier, and Rose-Redwood, “Serving Us Rights: Securing the Right to Food In Canada” Canadian Review of Social Policy. 08 2021
  3. Wahoush, Olive and Roxana Rabet, “Hunger and the Risk of Homelessness: Impact Analysis of Food Bank Supports on Households Experiencing Food Insecurity,” unpublished. 2022.
  4. <https://proof.utoronto.ca/resource/food-insecurity-a-problem-of-inadequate-income-not-solved-by-food/>
  5. Statistics Canada “Rising prices and the impact on the most financially vulnerable: A profile of those in the bottom family income quintile” Released February 8, 2023  
<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/230208/dq230208a-eng.htm>