

Government Public Policy Drives Number of Food Bank Visits

About

A new report published by the School of Public Policy at The University of Calgary confirms that food bank clients are accessing services most when their income is constrained. The academic research paper, *The Sensitivity of Food Bank Visits to Social Assistance, Housing and Labour Market Conditions in Toronto*, quantifies, for the first time, the direct impact of changes in government policy on the number of people using food banks.

Using data over six years from Daily Bread Food Bank, study authors Ron Kneebone and Margarita Wilkins track changes in the cost of shelter and labour market conditions against food bank visits. The study period, between January 2014-March 2020, saw a 53% increase in visits to food banks.

In 2021, there were 1.45 million visits to food banks in Toronto, the highest number ever recorded in the city's history. For the first time, new clients outnumbered existing clients. With record increases in the cost of living, this trend is expected to continue as 2022 visits are projected to reach 1.8 million in Toronto.

Key Findings

Kneebone and Wilkins confirmed the number of food bank visits directly rises with increases in rent and falls with increases in minimum wage or disability benefits available to individuals requiring social assistance. *Their specific findings are below in italics.*

Drawing on this academic research, Daily Bread has extrapolated the findings to reflect what they mean in the city and province we live in.¹

Wages:

A \$1 increase in the minimum wage is associated with 11 fewer visits to food banks per 10,000 people.

- **What does this mean for Toronto? 36,876 fewer visits to food banks per year.**
- **What does this mean for Ontario? 187,756 fewer visits to food banks per year.**
 - According to the [2021 Who's Hungry](#) report, 36% of food bank clients reported having visited the food bank because their income was too low, 20% because they had lost their job, and 10% because they were unable to find work and were ineligible for benefits.
 - [With a 30-year high inflation rate of 5.7%, as reported by Statistics Canada for February 2022, increases in inflation are likely to further drive up visits to food banks.](#)
 - With a median income of \$1,106 per month (\$1,061 for racialized individuals) – which falls well below the poverty line of \$2,060 per month – food bank clients have \$9.17 left per person, per day after rent and utilities to pay for other necessities.

¹ All extrapolations are based on [population data from the Canadian Census 2021](#). Annual Toronto visits data is from [Daily Bread Food Bank's Who's Hungry 2021](#).

Ontario Disability Support Program

A \$15 per month increase in Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) benefits is associated with 16 fewer visits per 10,000 people.

- **What does this mean for Toronto? 53,652 fewer visits to food banks per year.**
- **What does this mean for Ontario? 273,099 fewer visits to food banks per year.**
 - According to the 2021 *Who's Hungry* report one in four food bank clients rely on ODSP benefits as their primary source of income.
 - Among food bank clients, 51% report having a disability or health condition that is expected to last a year or more.
 - Individuals living with disabilities continue to receive insufficient benefits, that are not indexed to inflation.

Rental housing costs:

A \$30 per month increase in rent is associated with 22 more visits per 10,000 people.

- **What does this mean for Toronto? 73,776 more visits to food banks per year.**
- **What does this mean for Ontario? 375,512 more visits to food banks per year.**
 - Housing is often the largest household expense, and its high cost is one of the key drivers of food insecurity. The Canadian Mortgage Housing Corporation (CMHC) considers housing unaffordable if it costs more than 30% of a household's pre-tax income.
 - According to the 2021 *Who's Hungry* report, 65% of food bank clients live in private market rentals (i.e., not in a subsidized unit), 80% reported paying more than half of their income on housing and utilities, putting them at a high risk for homelessness.

Recommendations:

The evidence in this report shows that poverty is the root cause of food insecurity. Although food banks are designed to provide emergency food relief, food insecurity cannot be outsourced to charity – governments bear this responsibility.

Daily Bread Food Bank calls on all levels 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.

To learn more, visit www.dailybread.ca/uofcreport