

HungerCount 2011 – Ontario Provincial Report

Prepared by the Ontario Association of Food Banks, Member of Food Banks Canada

Food Bank Use By the Numbers, March 2011

- 395,106 individuals accessed Ontario food banks
- 37.5% were children under 18
- 63% of households receiving food were rental market tenants
- 25% lived in social housing
- 10.5% were gainfully employed
- 44.5% depended on social assistance
- 27.5% received disability-related income supports
- 10% of those assisted in March were turning to food banks for the first time
- 15% of food banks ran out of food during the survey period

What does food insecurity mean to nearly 3% of Ontario's population? In simple terms, it means not having the means to properly feed themselves and their families, causing them to turn to food banks for some type of emergency food relief. This assistance can range from a food hamper designed to sustain a person for three days to a community drop-in program that serves hot meals to those in need.

According to the World Health Organization, food security was defined during the 1996 World Food Summit as existing "when all people at all times have access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life." Commonly, the concept of food security is defined as including both physical and economic access to food that meets people's dietary needs as well as their food preferences.¹

Sadly, in 2011 this is still far from reality for the 395,106 Ontarians who access food banks and their affiliated programs across the province every month. This number can further be broken down into 246,887 adults and 148,219 children under the age of 18 who must swallow their pride and turn to food banks for help. And although overall food bank usage in Ontario decreased ever so slightly by 1.7% over last year, it continues to remain unacceptably high. The percentage of children accessing food bank programs, for example, has remained consistent at more than 37% since 2001.

As the 2008 recession pushed hunger in Ontario to record levels, food banks have undertaken a rapid expansion of capacity over the past two years to deliver food to the hungry. Food banks across Ontario are doing their very best to meet the seemingly unrelenting demand in communities both large and small, however 50% reported that they had to purchase more food than usual, and 41% had no choice but to cut back on their hamper sizes. The top five items reported by food banks as most lacking are fresh and frozen vegetables, fresh and frozen meat, milk, canned fruit and breakfast cereals, followed by personal care products which are also placed in high demand.

Taking into account reports from 1,470 food banks and other food programs across the province, a whopping 10% of households they served were helped for the very first time by a food bank. This translates into 15,817 households that needed to turn to food banks in order to stretch their meagre disposable incomes and put food on their tables. No less than 784,460 prepared meals were served by Ontario meal programs, and 150,830 snacks were made available through various snack programs. We are continuing to see a trend of single people leading the pack, followed in descending order by single parent families, two parent families, and couples without children.

While food banks are an essential source of support for many low-income Ontarians, we know that over 70% of users do not receive the minimum recommended daily intake of fruits and vegetables. Through the Ontario Association of Food Banks' ongoing agricultural initiatives, Community Harvest Ontario and Buy Local Share Local, we are able to provide a greater volume of fresh produce to Ontarians in need.

It is difficult to articulate the challenges one faces when one is struggling to find a nourishing meal. Therefore it is important to remember that people seeking food assistance are often also seeking access to various other social services. We recognize that our food banks do so much more than provide emergency food relief. But we need the new Ontario government to address the root causes of hunger, and implement long-term sustainable solutions that will end hunger in our province and make food banks obsolete.

To this end, the OAFB will continue to take advantage of every opportunity to be the voice of the food bank community in Ontario, and advocate three key recommendations for action by the provincial government. These are to implement a Food Bank Donation Tax Credit for Farmers to benefit farmers who donate excess food to local food banks; to introduce a Housing Benefit for Low-Income Tenants so they won't have to choose between paying rent and buying food; and to work with the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) to

encourage food producers and processors to donate a fixed percentage of their annual product to food banks across the province.

- Debra Hubner, Ontario Association of Food Banks

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¹ World Health Organization (2011). *Food security*. <http://www.who.int/trade/glossary/story028/en/> .