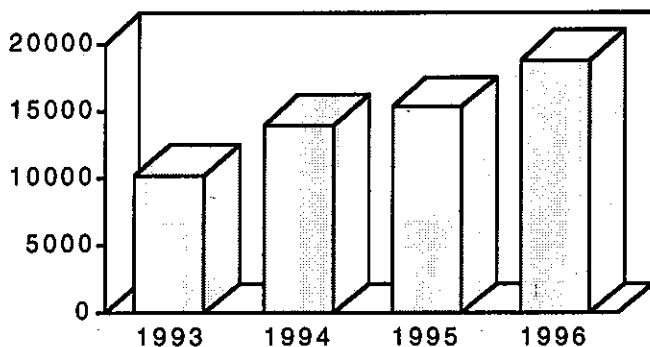


## HUNGER IN EDMONTON: understanding the need for food banks

During the month of January 1996, Edmonton's Food Bank provided emergency food to 20,546 people. This was a record level of food need in Edmonton. More alarming was the realization this number was 122 per cent higher than three years previous. As the months went by, demand remained at record levels. It was becoming clear that the Food Bank had reached a new level of demand. Food Banks can be conceptualized as a smoke detector for social wellbeing. They provide warning for us of impending social breakdown. Rising Food Bank demand is a signal of larger social and economic issues requiring resolution.

Chart 1: Food Bank Demand



This rise in food need occurred within an overall atmosphere of change in the province of Alberta. Since 1993, Alberta's economy, communities and government have undergone sweeping reforms. Albertans needed to evolve to new realities, becoming more competitive and efficient. Old ways were being left behind and the new shape of Alberta, still uncertain, was slowly evolving.

In particular, Alberta's approach to income security changed. In 1993 the province's income support program of last resort, welfare, was renamed to

Supports for Independence (SFI) and refocused to actively move recipients into employment and training. Benefits were cut 17 per cent to as low as \$394 a month for single employables. More stringent job search demands were made of clients. The welfare caseload dropped from 94,000 cases in March 1993 to 41,000 in October 1996. This represents approximately 106,000 fewer people collecting SFI.

Within the context of sweeping reforms and rising Food Bank demand, Edmonton's Food Bank teamed up with the Edmonton Social Planning Council (ESPC) to examine the reasons for the dramatic increase in Food Bank need. In addition, the two organizations hoped to determine if a link could be found between the record food need and the recent changes in government social policy. The study sought to provide answers to four questions:

1. Who are Food Bank recipients?
2. Why do they need to use the Food Bank?
3. Why is Food Bank demand increasing?
4. What role does government policy play in the increasing levels of Food Bank need?

The study employed face-to-face interviews with food bank recipients at selected food bank depots—816 interviews were completed during

representative cross section of the entire Food Bank population.

In addition, six focus groups were held with food bank recipients to develop qualitative aspects of the study.

## Findings

- The number of SFI recipients who needs the Food Bank is widening, putting more families at risk.
- One in 20 Edmontonians will use the Food Bank at least once in 1996.
- 41 per cent of Food Bank recipients are under the age of 18.
- 20 per cent of recipients are using the Food Bank for the first time.
- 46 per cent of Food Bank recipients do not have a telephone.
- Only four per cent of recipients need the Food Bank due to poor budgeting or bad habits.
- Only two per cent own their accommodation.
- One-half of all recipients have gone without any source of income at some point in the last three years, with an average duration of 18 weeks.

## Hunger in Edmonton

The study's first discovery is that the level of hunger in Edmonton is higher than expected. Families who turn to the Food Bank report they do not use soup kitchens, free meals at churches or the school lunch programs. The 36,500 individuals who will need the Food Bank this year do not include the thousands of others who will use these other programs. In addition, there is an undetermined number of people who survive solely through the assistance of their friends and family. The depth and breadth of hunger in our city is uncertain, but is known to be higher than previously anticipated.

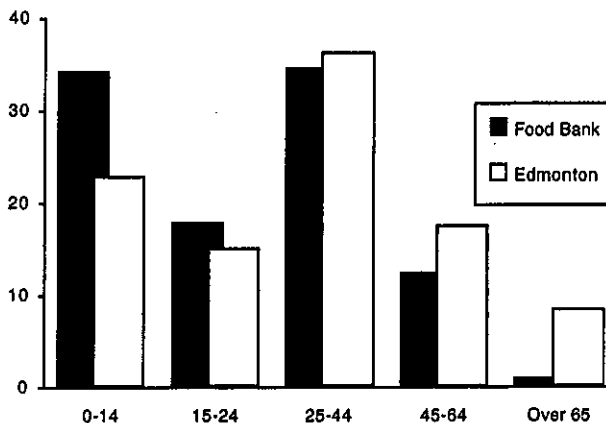
Edmonton's Food Bank serves the city's most vulnerable populations. The Food Bank population is made up of twice as many unattached singles and two and a half times as many single parents as the City of Edmonton (source: 1991 Census). Forty-six per cent of the Food Bank population are unattached singles. Another 25 per cent are single parents. Couples and two parent households make up the remainder.

Within these groups, 79 per cent of unattached singles are male, and 83 per cent of single parents are women. This reflects the higher risk of poverty facing these men and women. Unattached men and single mothers traditionally have the highest poverty rates in Edmonton (34 per cent and 60 per cent respectively in 1995; source: Canadian Council on Social Development-CCSD).

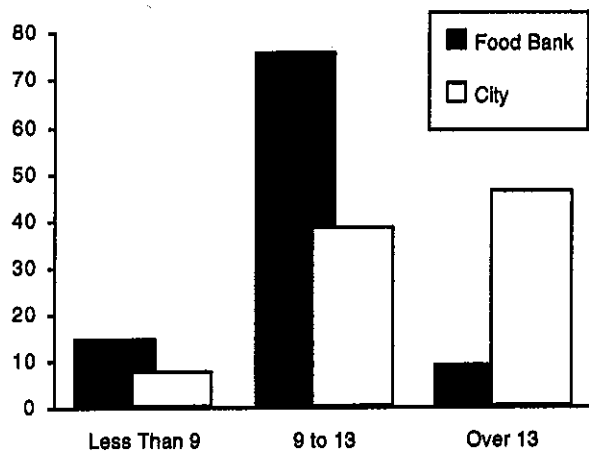
Recipients also come from the poorest neighbourhoods in Edmonton. Northeast and central residents make up over two-thirds of the Food Bank population. Conversely, only three per cent of the study sample came from southwest Edmonton.

The Food Bank population is substantially younger than the population of Edmonton. The average age is under 25 years. Seniors make up an insignificant portion of the Food Bank client base. (see Chart 2)

Chart 2: Age Distribution



Education levels are substantially lower than the rest of the city. The average level of education among the sample was less than 11 years. Fifteen per cent of adults have not completed even 9 years of education. This figure points to serious literacy and numeracy issues. (see chart 3)



### Income

Food Bank recipients are clustered at the very bottom of the income pool—74 per cent of Food Bank recipients received their primary source of income from government sources during the month of their Food Bank visit. Sixty per cent were receiving or waiting for SFI benefits. Only five per cent hold full time jobs. One in five had no income source whatsoever.

Most households are one or no income households. Only 22 per cent of respondents report more than one income earner.

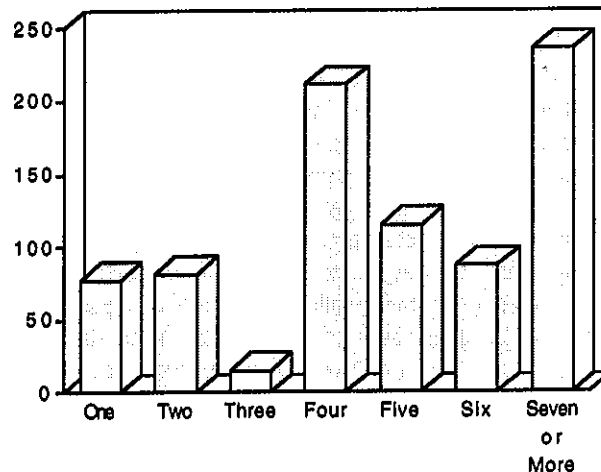
The average monthly income for all earners in the house was \$705. On average, Food Bank recipients are earning \$1,300 less each month than what is required to even reach the Statistics Canada low income cut-off line or "poverty line." There is not much distribution of income, either—85 per cent of households have income less than \$1,200 a month, compared to only 15 per cent of all Edmontonians (source: 1991 Census).

Those who report full time employment income are earning an average of \$6.30 an hour (based on a 40-hour week).

Their connection to the labor market is, at best, tenuous. It paints a picture of a pocket of severe and serious poverty amidst a city of relative wealth.

In contrast, Food Bank recipients have an average of \$197 in household expenses. This creates a \$92 deficit every month in their homes (see Chart 4). Out of their monthly income 58 per cent goes to rent and utilities. Another 32 per cent goes to food, although this translates into only \$227 a month. The Alberta Nutritious Food Basket for a family of three would cost \$337 (Source: Alberta Agriculture, February 1996).

Chart 4: Monthly Deficit by Family Size (in dollars)



Note: Differences in deficit magnitude can be partly attributed to the nature of housing economics. For example a family of three may spend less per person on accommodation than a family of four—the fourth member requiring an additional bedroom.

Not surprisingly, 80 per cent of recipients state their income does not last through the month. This raises the question of how they survive with such a marked shortage of money.

### How They Survive

With a \$92 deficit each month, it is clear something must be cut to make ends meet. Food, the most essential of necessities, is the first victim of inadequate income. More than rent, health, utilities or child expenses, Food Bank recipients choose to cut food from their budget. Sixty-nine per cent report food is the first thing they cut when running out of money (multiple answers allowed). Other cutback responses included clothing (30 per cent) and transportation (25 per cent). The choice of food as the first item cut comes from its lack of immediate consequences. Not paying the rent causes eviction; not paying the power bill causes disconnection; not eating for a day, on the surface, has fewer immediate drawbacks.

cent receive food from them and 32 per cent pawn possessions to raise cash.

Once these and other sources have been utilized as much as possible, only then do families turn to the Food Bank for a hamper.

The Food Bank is not the main source of support for most recipients. Neither is it the main source. In fact, it appears to be the last stop for people who are running out of food. Only when their informal support networks and other coping strategies fail to bridge the gap between income and expenses do they approach the Food Bank.

Of particular note is how the 20 per cent of recipients who have no income survive. They appear to move in with friends or relatives to reduce expenses. The no income recipients are a younger group, more likely to be unattached individuals. Many will have no income for only a short period before finding another unstable job. Others have had no stable source of income for the three years covered in the study. While they seem to use the same coping strategies as other Food Bank recipients, the study ultimately leaves unanswered how they continue to survive month to month with no source of income.

### Health Consequences of Food Shortage

Living on inadequate income and cutting corners on food and other essentials has consequences. The study reveals a number of those consequences.

- 52 per cent of Food Bank recipients have gone an entire day without food, 48 per cent of whom have done it three or more times in the last month.
- 51 per cent feel their nutritional needs are not met.
- 18 per cent of parents feel their children's nutritional needs are not met.
- 17 per cent of children miss meals because there is no food in the house.
- 47 per cent of parents skip meals so their kids can eat.

Food bank recipients are half as likely to report "good" health as the rest of the city. While 85 per cent of Edmontonians feel their health is "good" or better (source: Capital Health Authority), only 49 per cent of Food Bank recipients are feeling healthy.

Their health seems to be worsening—32 per cent feel less

As well, Food Bank recipients have an unusually large incidence of serious illness, such as AIDS, cancer or hepatitis. Of those reporting health problems, 12 per cent had one of these serious illness. Another five per cent reported "malnutrition" as their most serious health problem.

Stress is also a factor. Over half (52 per cent) report their stress level as "high." Forty-five per cent feel it is even higher than last year. Of those people that identified sources of stress, finances and the lack of employment are mentioned most often (37 per cent and 15 per cent respectively).

The health picture of Food Bank recipients is not encouraging. They are eating at a level which will invariably, if maintained even for a few weeks, bring about a deterioration in health. Their stress levels also influence their health, producing poor physical and mental health prospects down the road, should their financial situation not improve.

### Community Isolation

Living with inadequate income means more than lack of finances. Food Bank recipients report being cut off from the life of their community.

Food Bank recipients move far more frequently than the average Edmontonian. While 22 per cent of Edmontonians move at least once during a year (source: Statistics Canada), 65 per cent of Food Bank clients have moved in the past 12 months.

Almost one half of recipients do not own a telephone. The telephone has become a central communication tool in our society. At least 6,200 households in Edmonton (and probably more) do not have a telephone. This jeopardizes employment opportunities and prevents community participation.

Twenty-six per cent of survey participants have experienced barriers to banks and other financial institutions, such as minimum required balances and permanent addresses. Instead these individuals must turn to cheque cashing businesses and other informal means to make financial transactions. The Edmonton Social Planning Council estimates \$32,500 goes to cheque cashing businesses every month from the pockets of Food Bank recipients. This is money that would be used for food if barriers to chartered banks did not exist.

activities due to lack of money. These kids cannot join community sports teams, go swimming, take music lessons or join Brownies or Boy Scouts. Children's activities are important for personal and social development.

Food Bank recipients lack a connection to the community around them. This isolation makes it harder to escape the cycle of poverty.

## 2. WHY DO THEY NEED TO USE THE FOOD BANK?

### Reason for Current Use

When asked what caused their present food and money shortage, responses pointed toward three possible situations. First, for most recipients, about 60 per cent, their income is simply not enough to meet the regular expenses of life. Despite coping strategies and frugal budgeting, they still find they do not have enough money left over for food for the entire month.

Second, about 30 per cent of recipients are able to find a way, most months, to make ends meet. However, they do not have a cushion for unforeseen expenses, such as moving expenses, stolen money or family crisis. When such expenses arise, they need to turn to the Food Bank for temporary assistance to get through the month.

Third, the smallest group, about five per cent in the study sample, require the Food Bank due to poor budgeting or addictions.

### Factors Linked To Food Bank Need

The study examined what factors and variables increase someone's likelihood to need the Food Bank. Measuring frequency of use, the study found three factors linked to higher Food Bank need.

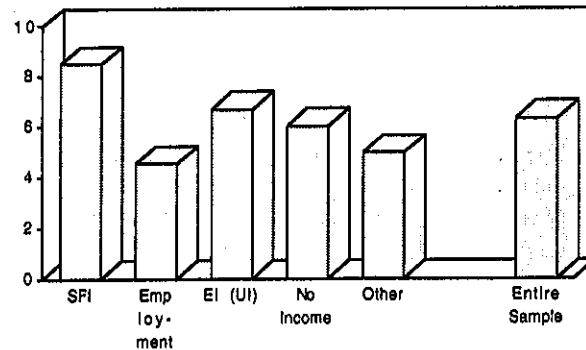
Income is found to be the strongest indicator of Food Bank need. The lower an individual's or family's income was a year ago, the more they needed the Food Bank this year. As well, those who experienced a drop in income during the past year are coming to the Food Bank more frequently. The households with the weakest financial situation have the weakest coping capacity.

The second factor linked to Food Bank need is education. The lower a person's education level, the higher their level

market, and therefore have the most difficulty in finding an adequate income.

The third link is source of income—more specifically income from SFI. SFI recipients need the Food Bank 30 per cent more often over the course of a year than people who rely on other income sources, including those with no income source. People receiving employment income needed the Food Bank significantly less often. SFI clients appear mired in a more long-term financial bind even more than other food bank recipients.

Chart 5: Frequency of Food Bank Use by Income Source (past 12 months)



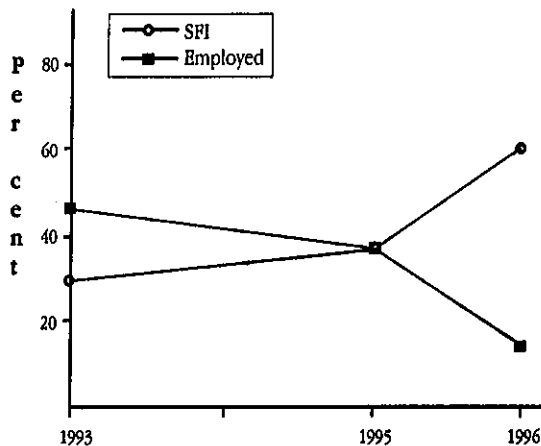
The data related to why people need the Food Bank touch the core issues of the cycle of poverty. We have in Edmonton a large pool of people who simply do not receive enough income to pay the bills. Their low education and lack of a financial cushion mire them in a difficult cycle of economic insecurity.

## 3. WHY IS FOOD BANK DEMAND INCREASING?

Comparisons to previous studies show the demographic profile of Food Bank recipients has not changed substantially in 12 years—yet the numbers of people coming to the Food Bank has risen dramatically. There are more of the same types of people needing Food Bank services.

Our study is the first to examine the income history of current food bank recipients. It found three years ago 45 per cent of respondents were employed. Only 30 per cent were on SFI. (see Chart 6) Average income was substantially higher in 1993 at \$1,140 a month.

## PLAY IN THE INCREASING LEVELS OF FOOD BANK NEED?



Note: Respondents were asked what was their source of income three years ago and one year ago. The chart displays the answers to these two questions.

The data suggests three years ago many current recipients did not need Food Bank services. They were in some form of employment and finding a way to make ends meet. Within the last one to two years something has happened to cause a drop in their income and a loss of their jobs.

This and other analyses performed on the data reveal two subgroups which comprise most of the Food Bank population. The first group, (almost half) as shown above, are recent arrivals to the Food Bank. The second group (about one-third) is made up of long term recipients, who have been shut out of the economy for many years. The remaining recipients come from a variety of backgrounds and experiences.

Alberta's economy is stiffening and polarizing. Jobs are becoming more scarce, and the jobs that exist are either low-end unstable jobs or high-end, well-paying positions.

Food Bank recipients have never been part of the high-end well-educated part of the workforce. What we may be seeing, then, are the first overt effects of the polarization of Alberta's economy. The pattern of who is left out has not changed, instead simply the magnitude of who is left out is increasing.

Food Bank recipients are the working poor and the non-working poor. One in two recipients have gone without income for a period of time in the past three years. These periods are attributable to unemployment and waits or delays in government benefits. Most appear to move through a cycle of employment, to unemployment with possible government support and then back to employment.

Many recipients find themselves in low wage positions with no security and often no eligibility for Employment Insurance (EI). Government policy around minimum wage and job creation appear to have a direct and life-altering effect on this portion of the population. Only 51 per cent of those who previously held full time employment and are currently without income have applied for EI benefits. It is plausible to hypothesize they are not eligible for EI.

Every government income security program has a small portion of its caseload coming to the Food Bank. However, the single most frequent program mentioned is SFI (Welfare). From calculations based on the study findings, we can estimate in a month 20 per cent of SFI clients in Edmonton need the Food Bank. Over the course of a year, up to 50 per cent of SFI recipients will show up at a Food Bank.

SFI is Alberta's income support of last resort. The proportion of SFI recipients needing the Food Bank highlights the need for a closer examination of this program's policies and its central role in Food Bank demand.

- 82 per cent of Food Bank recipients report some involvement with SFI in the past 3 years.
- 38 per cent of SFI clients feel they were treated "poorly" by the program.
- 73 per cent of SFI clients feel benefit levels are not adequate to meet needs.
- 35 per cent of SFI clients were referred to the Food Bank by their social worker.

The shift in SFI policy appears to have affected client prospects for secure income. The study determined three major ways in which policy has affected this group's Food Bank need and ultimate employability.

One in five SFI-involved respondents have been cut off SFI at some point in the past three years. Fifteen per cent have had their applications denied.

One in two denials had nothing to do with level of financial need, but instead with past employment, age or other non-financial reasons. These families are left with no means of support for an undetermined length of time.

In addition, 88 per cent of those denied disagreed with the reason for denial. Seventy-six per cent of those cut off disagreed—while the tendency to disagree can be expected, those that appealed (only 38 per cent filed appeals) had the decision overturned 43 per cent of the time. This turnover rate suggests the clients' grievances may have some level of validity and SFI may be implementing policy somewhat arbitrarily.

Second, benefit levels simply do not meet the most basic of life necessities. Repeated evidence in the study demonstrate, despite frugal living and cost cutting, SFI recipients cannot make it through the month on what is given them. Most are paying more for accommodation than shelter allowance guidelines, despite best efforts to find the cheapest place. The expectation that bus passes, school supplies, winter clothes and furniture can come out of the "standard allowance" (designed to meet food and household bills) creates an even larger household deficit.

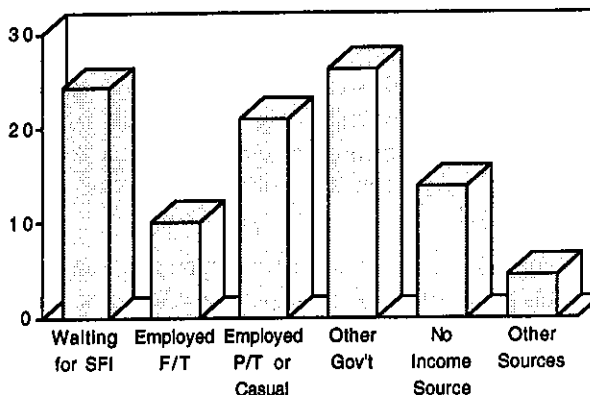
Inadequate income is the largest reason, among SFI recipients, for needing the Food Bank (40 per cent). This reflects directly on the level of benefits provided. If 20 per cent of the SFI caseload in Edmonton needs the Food Bank in any given month then benefit levels are clearly not adequate.

Third, SFI policy appears to make recipients more dependent and for longer. Recipients are receiving no support to help them find work. They receive no resources to photocopy resumes, get appropriate clothing for job interviews, buy a bus pass to get to the interviews, or even a telephone to find out if they got the job. This lack of direct employment support locks recipients into a longer term stay on SFI, at benefit levels inadequate to meet basic necessities.

The priority of SFI officials to reduce the caseload by moving clients into training and employment is not borne out by the study. This study provides evidence for the whereabouts of about 10 per cent of the SFI cases closed in Edmonton in the last three years. Among these closed

percentage with no income sources and the percentage waiting for SFI. (see Chart 7)

**Chart 7: Income Source of Closed Cases**



Instead, there is evidence the policy of reducing caseloads has created a merry-go-round of income support. Many clients were sent to Student Finance for training and upgrading. However, 73 per cent returned to SFI following completion of their program. Others are sent to job placements, but go to EI immediately following the term and then back on SFI when EI benefits run out. Sixty-four per cent of switches to EI ended back on SFI. The caseload reduction policy is effectively reducing the numbers of individuals on SFI at any one time. However, the evidence available in this study indicates it is not reducing the overall level of government dependency.

SFI policy changes in the past three years have had a direct impact on Food Bank demand in Edmonton. Evidence from this study suggests many of the policies implemented to encourage movement into the workforce have, for this portion of the caseload, resulted in the opposite effect. Instead, these individuals are coming to the Food Bank in greater numbers and greater frequency.

### **Keeping Hope**

The study paints a stark picture of families struggling to survive. On one level, it is a discouraging result. Yet the study also finds hope among the Food Bank population. Despite their daily struggles, most are able to maintain hope and belief in a better future. They hold clear career and personal aspirations. They foresee digging themselves out of their current situation and achieving their goals.

Understandably, most hopes revolve around a stable source of employment and a happier, more secure family life. These are universal hopes for all Albertans.

Respondents are taking an active role in achieving these goals. Many spoke of returning to school to upgrade or pick up new skills. Others had detailed plans for securing a well-paying job. Regardless of the route, most realized the path to greater security is through their own personal efforts. They are not afraid or reluctant to roll up their sleeves to change the course of their life. This is contradictory to the common stereotype of low income individuals.

For others, the only path of hope lay on a highway out of the province. Many feel Edmonton and Alberta no longer offer anything for them. So they desire to move to a place with more hope, where they can start fresh and rebuild their life.

Beyond economic security, there was a common sentiment that quality of life is more than money. There is also a strong desire for happier family lives. Respondents want to spend more time with their children or work on a more settled relationship with a spouse.

Respondents do not look to government to solve their problems. They do, however, believe the government has a role to play in removing barriers. They feel the government can do more to create an atmosphere of opportunity in Alberta.

The message of hope from the recipients themselves should be heard by all Edmontonians who wish to tackle poverty and hunger in our city. If those experiencing it feel it can be changed, than the rest of us should take heart as well.

## STUDY CONCLUSIONS

In undertaking a comprehensive examination of Food Bank recipients and the causes for their food shortage, this study has shed light on the roots of poverty and hunger in our city. Many stereotypes of low income individuals are challenged by the evidence presented above.

Food Bank recipients are not just looking for a free ride. Three years ago, the largest segment of the population were making ends meet on their own. They have only recently needed to turn to the Food Bank. It is their last resort to offset a sizeable monthly deficit. They are living

frugally and cutting every conceivable corner. They are also making every effort possible to free themselves from poverty and hunger. Yet the number of recipients continues to grow.

The rising levels of Food Bank demand in Edmonton have clear social implications. Edmontonians need to ask themselves if it is acceptable to have one in 20 Edmontonians needing Food Bank services over the course of a year. Whether or not government policy is linked to the rise in demand, the evidence found in this groundbreaking study suggests changes to government policy could reduce Food Bank demand.

An ever-growing number of Edmonton families are needing Food Bank assistance to survive. An even larger number of Edmontonians are barely making ends meet. They are two paycheques away from the Food Bank. If action is not taken, these families will be the next ones to require food hampers.

Income, education and adequate income support systems provide possible routes out of the cycle of poverty. Steps taken to address these issues rest with our community and its collective social and political will to break the cycle.

Project Managers: Brian Bechtel and Marjorie Bencz

Project Coordination and Writing by: Jason Foster

Research Team: Jason Brown, Midge Cuthill, Stephanie Casemore, Jason Foster, Colleen Harris

Copies of the complete findings of the Food Bank study are available at ESPC for \$3 per copy. For more information about the Council, please contact:

The Edmonton Social Planning Council  
#41, 9912-106 St  
Edmonton, AB  
T5K 1C5  
Phone (403) 423-2031  
Fax (403) 425-6244

E-mail [edmspc@compusmart.ab.ca](mailto:edmspc@compusmart.ab.ca)  
Our homepage web site address:  
<http://www.compusmart.ab.ca/espc>