

Hunger Count 1997

HungerCount '97 is a survey of food banks in Canada conducted by the Canadian Association of Food Banks. The Survey's main purpose was to determine the number of people assisted by food banks throughout Canada. Food banks responded to a questionnaire soliciting a range of specific information for the month of March.

This report presents survey results for emergency hamper programs. These are standard food bank programs in which people in need receive a basket of groceries meant to provide meals for a specified number of days. The actual size of the basket varies according to the size of the receiving household, and from food bank to food bank.

The main highlights of the study are as follows:

- 669,877 people received emergency food assistance in March 1997, representing 2.24% of the Canadian population in that month alone
- Children account for 41.9 % of the total number of people assisted
- Rates of food bank use are highest in Newfoundland, Ontario, PEI, Quebec, and New Brunswick
- The number of recipients has increased by 103.6% since HungerCount 1989

Survey Outline

In February 1997, The Canadian Association of Food Banks (CAFB) mailed a questionnaire to 905 food bank locations in all provinces and territories soliciting information for HungerCount 1997. Half of the food banks were in Quebec, and about 20% were in Ontario (Table 1)

The questionnaire asked food banks to provide the following information for the month of March 1997:

- Their location, area serviced, operations schedules, and mode of operation
- The numbers of people assisted in hamper or grocery programs
- The number of people who were served meals
- The quantity of food distributed
- Food recipients sources of income

Slightly less than half of all food banks returned completed questionnaires, though response rates varied by province (Table 1). Small food banks constituted the vast majority of those that did not respond to the survey.

An attempt was made to estimate the number of households, adults, and children assisted by food banks that did not respond to the survey, based on variations in total population and population density between food bank areas in the same province. This method was only partially successful. Therefore, among the food banks outside Quebec that did not respond to the survey, a sample of small, medium, and large food banks were contacted by telephone or fax and asked directly for the number of households, adults, and children assisted with hampers in (a) March 1997, or (b) the month closest to

March for which data were available, or (c) average of a typical month in the spring. At most, this left only about a quarter of food banks (all small) for which there remained no data or questionable estimates. Where this was the case (some food banks in BC, Alberta, New Brunswick) hamper program estimates are the average of confirmed figures for the smaller food banks in the province. In Ontario, where there was missing data or questionable estimates, the hamper program figures are the result of an estimation procedure used by Toronto's Daily Bread Food Bank.

In Quebec, rather than a phone/fax follow-up, the CAFB requested data from the Federation des Moissons du Quebec on behalf of all of their members. This approach was particularly efficient because of the large number of food banks in Quebec (Table 1) but also because most food banks in Quebec are affiliated to a regional Moisson. However it yielded only the total number of people served in hamper programs, rather than separate totals for households, adults, and children. Among the minority of food banks in Quebec that are not affiliated to a Moisson, estimates of the number of people assisted in hamper programs were supplied by the Federation.

FOOD RECIPIENTS IN CANADA

Provincial Comparisons

In March 1997, over half million (669,877) persons, or 2.24 % of Canada's population, received emergency assistance from food banks (Table 2). As expected, Ontario and Quebec account for most of the total.

Together, these two provinces account for 62.2% of Canada's population, and 68.8% of all persons assisted in emergency hamper programs. However the provinces of Newfoundland, PEI, Ontario, Quebec, and New Brunswick all have relatively high rates of food bank use. In each of these provinces, over 2% of the provincial population was assisted in hamper programs.

Yukon and Northwest Territories (NWT) are distinguished by their exceptionally low share of food recipients and low rates of food bank use. However, these low figures do not necessarily indicate that hunger is less widespread in Yukon and NWT. More appropriately, perhaps they reflect the small number of known food banks in the north of the country. In all provinces and territories, the numbers of people who request food assistance during a specific time period depend to some extent on the availability and accessibility of food banks (higher among urban populations), as well as on the availability of and/or peoples willingness to request support from alternative sources (e.g. family or informal community ties). Consequently it is safe to say that hunger is even more of a problem than the data in Table 2 suggests.

Inter-provincial variations in economic well-being do influence rates of food bank use (and the extent of hunger) from province to province (Figure 1). Newfoundland, PEI, Quebec, and New Brunswick all have high rates of unemployment and high rates of food bank use. At the other extreme, rates of food bank use are more modest in Alberta and Saskatchewan, in keeping with their low unemployment

percent of all people assisted in hamper programs even though only about a quarter of Canada's population is less than 18 years of age. Children are particularly numerous among food bank users in Newfoundland and Saskatchewan, where they constitute close to half of people assisted (Figure 2).

In theory, where the ratio of children to adults is high, the average household size is also likely to be high and/or the proportion of single-person households is likely to be low. This appears to be the case in PEI and Alberta (Figure 3). However, in Newfoundland and New Brunswick and Nova Scotia to some extent, large households appear to be associated with smaller proportions of children.

Regional Comparisons

Except for the north, the regional distribution of recipients is generally consistent with the distribution of Canada's Population among the regions (Figure 4). Nonetheless, Western Canada has a smaller share of food recipients than Quebec, even though its share of Canada's population surpasses Quebec's. Moreover, apart from the north, the rate of food bank use is relatively low in Western Canada (1.6% of the population) and highest in Eastern Canada (3.0 percent of the population).

Among the regions, roughly 40 to 43 % of recipients are children. However, there appears to be some regional variation in household size (Figure 5). Compared to the other regions, the higher ratio of recipients to households in the North and Eastern Canada suggests that single (i.e. unattached)

persons constitute a relatively small proportion of recipients. In contrast, the lower ratio in Ontario is generally consistent with a more substantial share of single persons, which should be expected in those parts of the country where large cities predominate.

PERSPECTIVE

There is little doubt that hunger is now more widespread in Canada than a decade ago. Since the last HungerCount in 1989, the number of people assisted by food banks in March has doubled (from 329,000 to 669,877). Similarly, the rate of food bank use in March has risen from 1.28% to 2.24% of the country's population. Moreover, children still represent a startling proportion of recipients. In fact, the proportion of children even increased slightly (from 40% in 1989 to 41.9% in 1997).

Clearly, these trends represent a serious deterioration in household food security in Canada. And it is certainly not accidental that this worsening situation coincided with a regime of high unemployment coupled with federal and provincial cuts to social programs.

TABLE 1 – Food Banks in HungerCount 97

Province	Responded	% responding	No Response	% not responding	Total Food banks	% of total	Final count of food banks
British Columbia	32	45.1	39	54.9	71	7.8	66
Alberta	25	39.7	38	60.3	63	7.0	60
Saskatchewan	11	52.4	10	47.6	21	2.3	19
Manitoba	6	46.2	7	53.8	13	1.4	28
Ontario	88	50.6	86	49.4	174	19.2	166
Quebec	197	44.2	249	55.8	446	49.3	n/a
New Brunswick	28	58.3	20	41.7	48	5.3	43
Nova Scotia	31	93.9	2	6.1	33	3.6	32
Newfoundland	18	60.0	12	40.0	30	3.3	24
PEI	2	66.7	1	33.3	3	0.3	3
Yukon	1	100	0	0	1	0.1	1
NWT	0	0	2	100	2	0.2	2

TABLE 2 – Food Recipients

	Population	Total Assisted	Provincial Share (%)	% of prov. pop.	Households	Adults	Children
BC	3,855,100	59,042	8.81%	1.53%	21,530	33,488	25,554
Alberta	2,789,500	37,582	5.61%	1.35%	12,180	21,472	16,110
Saskatchewan	1,022,500	16,949	2.53%	1.66%	6,970	8,596	8,353
Manitoba	1,143,500	22,720	3.39%	1.99%	9,756	13,665	8,505
Ontario	11,252,400	285,000	42.55%	2.53%	75,681	99,315	72,173
Quebec	7,389,100	176,000	26.27%	2.38%	nd	nd	nd
New Brunswick	762,500	17,407	2.60%	2.28%	6,273	10,253	6,138
Nova Scotia	942,800	16,188	2.42%	1.72%	6,482	10,044	6,144
Newfoundland	570,700	35,145	5.25%	6.16%	8,400	21,426	13,719
PEI	137,300	3,697	0.55%	2.69%	1,062	1,956	1,741
Yukon	31,500	49	0.01%	0.16%	17	29	20
NWT	66,600	98	0.01%	0.15%	34	58	40