FEED ONTARIO

Hunger hurts Ontario

HUNGER REPORT 2025

About us

Feed Ontario is the largest collective of hunger-relief organizations in the province, representing more than 1,200 food banks and hunger-relief organizations across Ontario. Together, we distribute millions of pounds of food to more than 1 million people each year.

Feed Ontario's work is focused under three pillars:

FeedON

We distribute nutritious and fresh food to food banks across Ontario for people and families in need.

Feed Possibility

We provide food banks with training, support, and resources to help ensure programs run efficiently.

Feed Change

We work to eliminate food insecurity and poverty through research and advocacy.

Our commitment to Truth and Reconciliation and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Feed Ontario acknowledges that we are situated on the traditional and ancestral territory of many nations and that the land we call Ontario is located on the home of many diverse Indigenous, First Nations, Inuit, and Metis peoples. We also acknowledge the historical impacts of colonization on Indigenous peoples, including the historical and ongoing relationship between food insecurity and colonialism.

This year, Feed Ontario completed both a Truth and Reconciliation audit and a Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) audit. These helped us to better understand how we can support positive change, both within our organization and across the food bank network.

We believe that both Truth and Reconciliation and DEIB are essential to building an Ontario where everyone is food secure and where everyone belongs.

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Executive summary

Food bank use in Ontario reached yet another record high last year, with more than 1 million people turning to emergency food support over 8.7 million times. This marks the ninth consecutive year that food bank use has increased and reflects a deeply concerning trend across the province: every year, more and more Ontarians cannot afford the cost of living each month.

While events like the pandemic can cause sudden spikes in demand, the continued increase in food bank use is directly related to the ongoing affordability crisis. For a growing number of Ontarians, the cost of everyday essentials, like housing and food, has become unmanageable, leading more people to turn to food banks for support. Compounding this issue is the lack of stable, well-paying jobs and social support programs that are working in opposition to each other or their intended outcomes.

Over the past five years, the Province rolled out its 2020-2025 Poverty Reduction Strategy, which focused on helping Ontarians enter or re-enter the workforce. This strategy included key investments in employment services, skills training, and social assistance reform, as well as investments intended to make life more affordable for Ontarians. Despite this work, poverty rates increased, food bank use doubled, and homelessness only continued to rise.

While food bank use is often seen as a measure of immediate need, the data shows it is also an early warning sign that some of the province's biggest challenges are going to get worse. High food bank use often predicts future increases in homelessness, greater strain on the healthcare system, and growing instability within communities. With over 1 million people now turning to food banks for help, this realization should be alarming and a clear call that urgent action needs to be taken before these problems escalate even further and cause soaring costs for the Province.

Addressing the root causes of food bank use will require more than short-term fixes. It will require a new approach to poverty reduction that recognizes the complexity of the problem and its drivers. To accomplish this, Feed Ontario recommends that, as a core component of its next Poverty Reduction Strategy, the Government of Ontario strike a taskforce to conduct a comprehensive review of the province's social support system, with an examination of the drivers of poverty in Ontario. This could include a review of how provincial programs align or conflict with municipal and federal efforts, and an assessment of the role the charitable sector is playing and how it might serve as a partner without exceeding its already overstretched capacity. The establishment of clear measurements that show meaningful progress, including a reduction of food bank use, is also essential to a strong Poverty Reduction Strategy.

Hunger is hurting Ontario and immediate actions also need to be taken to improve the well-being of people and families across the province. This includes moving forward with the life stabilization investments committed to in the Supporting Recovery and Competitiveness Act, 2021, building on the reforms made to Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) by expanding these changes to Ontario Works (OW), creating more quality employment opportunities, and increasing investments in affordable housing.

Record-high food bank use is not just a crisis for food banks. It is a crisis for Ontario. But, with urgent and coordinated action, we can address this crisis at its roots and build a stronger and more resilient province for everyone, together.

Introduction and purpose

Ontario's Poverty Reduction Act, 2009 requires the provincial government to develop a new poverty reduction strategy every five years. Each strategy must set a measurable target, outline initiatives to address poverty, and include indicators to assess progress. The current poverty reduction strategy, covering 2020-2025, concludes this year.

In looking back, it is clear that the past five years have been shaped by unpredictable and extraordinary events, including the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic impact, as well as recent global trade tensions. Ontario's poverty reduction strategy has worked to address some of the challenges related to these events, particularly those related to affordability and developing the workforce. This has included key investments to help reduce the cost of living, streamline the administration of provincial social assistance programs, expand skills training programs, and support people re-entering the workforce.

Despite these efforts, poverty and food bank use have increased, with over 1 million people in Ontario needing the help of food banks to keep themselves and their families fed. While skills training and employment opportunities are essential components of a poverty reduction strategy, focusing on these indicators as the primary pathway out of poverty is limiting. This approach overlooks the complexity of the challenges many Ontarians face and does not factor in essential measures of health or well-being, like whether or not everyone can afford nutritious food or to keep a roof over their head.

This report provides an in-depth look at food bank use in Ontario over the past five years and makes the case for including it as an official poverty reduction indicator. Doing so would allow the province to more accurately assess both the well-being of Ontarians and the impact of its poverty reduction strategy.

Specifically, this report will:

- Provide a snapshot of food bank use in Ontario today and highlight demographic changes over the past five years.
- Illustrate how food bank use connects to other provincial priorities, including housing stability and homelessness prevention, healthcare costs, and social stability.
- Propose a new approach for the next poverty reduction strategy, as well as provide specific actions the Government of Ontario can take today to start moving the needle.

The 2025 Hunger Report is not just about food bank use, it is about a systemic issue that has solutions. It is about problems that can be solved through coordinated actions. Most of all, it is about building an Ontario where everyone can thrive, and a future where no one goes hungry.

Section one

The persistent problem of hunger in Ontario

Snapshot: food bank use today

For the ninth consecutive year, the number of people who have been unable to afford enough food for themselves or their families has increased. Between April 1, 2024, and March 31, 2025, Ontario's food banks served over 1 million people who accessed food assistance programs more than 8.7 million times. This is nearly double the number of people who needed help only five years ago (2019-20) and is, once again, the highest level of need on record.

1,007,441 people

(***87% increase*** *since 2019-20* | ***1% increase*** *over last year*)

8,712,897 visits

(***165% increase*** *since 2019-20* | ***13% increase*** *over last year*)

34%
new/first-time visitors

14% increase
since 2019-2020

20% decrease
over last year

76%
rental tenants

1% decrease
since 2019-2020

4% increase
over last year

51%
single person households

4.6% increase
since 2019-2020

0.2% increase
over last year

29%
children

10% decrease
since 2019-2020

2.9% increase
over last year

61%
social assistance recipients

19.5% decrease
since 2019-2020

2.9% increase
over last year

23%
(or 1 in 4) are employed

84% increase
since 2019-2020

3.4% increase
over last year

**People and visits are absolute changes, demographics are relative changes.*

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Food bank use in Ontario

Food banks across Ontario are working tirelessly to meet the surge in demand; however, the growth in need is outpacing the resources available. Many food banks continue to be in the difficult position of having to reduce services or, in some cases, even turn people away. The rate at which food bank use increased over the last five years is staggering, and raises the question: how did we let this happen?

While acute events, like the pandemic, can cause spikes in demand, the data shows that today's sustained and record-high levels of food bank use are being driven by the affordability crisis, and a widening gap between income and the cost of living. Since 2020, the cost of basic living expenses, like rent and food, have increased significantly while wages and income supports have not kept pace. This has put financial strain on households across Ontario, but most significantly on those who were already trying to stretch limited dollars or a fixed income. As a result, more Ontarians have moved from "just getting by" to "needing help," and have had no choice but to turn to food banks for support.

The following section provides an overview of food bank use over the past five years, including variations in need and support across the province and trends among first-time and returning visitors. It then examines key demographics of food bank visitors, focusing on age (children and seniors), income source (employment and social assistance), students, and housing type, illustrating how the affordability crisis is affecting different groups.

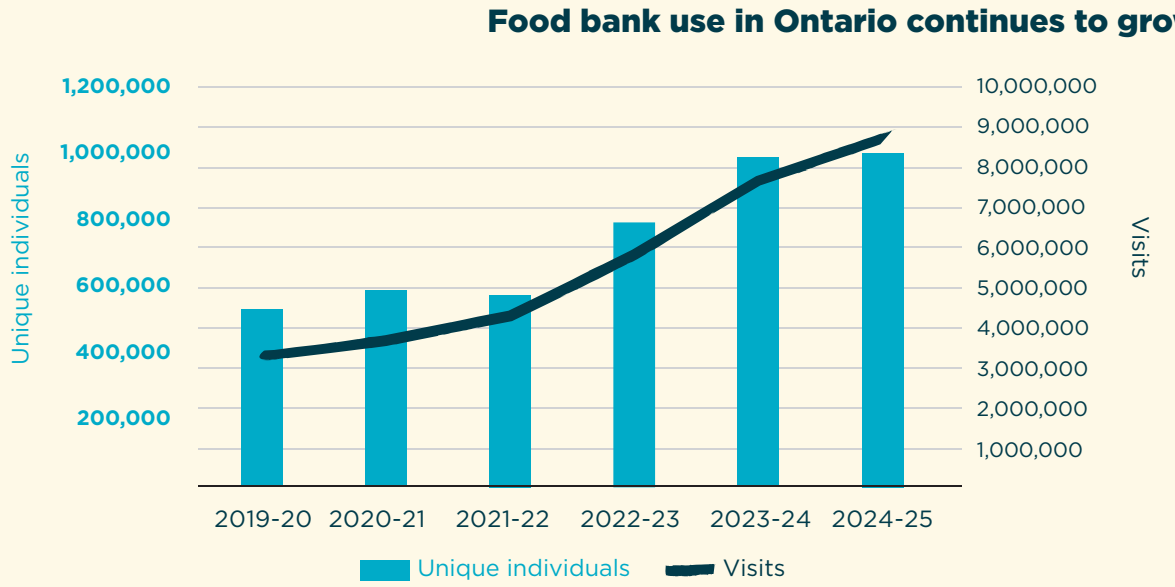


Figure 1
Annual unique individuals and visits to Feed Ontario member food banks.

Food bank use over the last five years

Feed Ontario looks at two key pieces of data to determine food bank use trends in the province: the number of people accessing food banks (unique individuals) and the number of times that they access our network's food assistance programs (visits) over the course of the year.

Figure 1 shows the number of people and the number of times that they visited over the last five years, revealing that visits are increasing at a much faster rate than the number of people who are turning to food banks for help. This indicates that, not only are there more people needing help each year, but the amount of support they need is increasing as well.

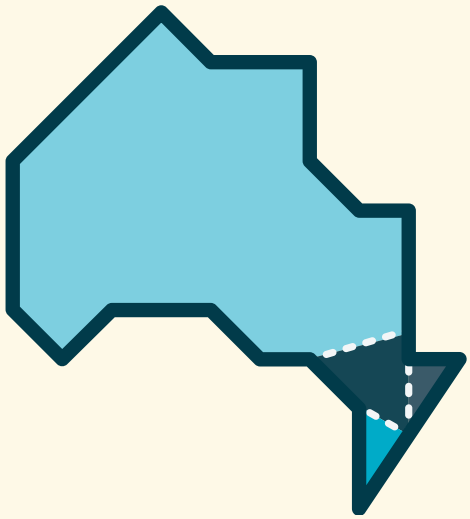
What makes this particularly concerning is that in a recent survey of the Feed Ontario food bank network, 1 out of 10 food banks indicated that they have had no choice but to reduce the number of times that someone can visit their services because they do not have enough food to support everyone who needs help in their community. It should be noted that this data is only derived from visits to traditional food assistance programs and does not include visits to the additional services that many food banks support or provide, such as meal programs, school food programs, shelters, or holiday hampers.

As a result, it can be assumed that while this data reflects record-high demand and a very significant issue, it also underestimates the true scale of the problem and does not fully capture just how significant the need is across the province.

Variations in need and support

Hunger exists in every corner of Ontario, and the number of people seeking help has risen in every community served by the provincial food bank network. As illustrated in Figure 2, each region of the province has experienced double digit increases in food bank use over the past five years.

Regional changes from 2019-2020



	Unique individuals	Visits
NORTH	54%	33%
SOUTHWEST	48%	94%
EAST	79%	99%
CENTRAL	140%	257%

Figure 2 Changes in unique individuals and visits to food banks by region, 2019-20 to 2024-25.

It is important to note that there are several underrepresented areas in the province, particularly in Northern Ontario, where data collection is limited and food insecurity is disproportionately high. Gaps in data collection can be due to a variety of factors, including limited internet access, variations in service and support models (e.g. food support programs not connected to the Feed Ontario network) and, in some regions, the complete absence of food banks or hunger-relief services.

Food bank services also vary significantly across the province. As independently-run charitable organizations, food banks are not funded by provincial or federal governments and rely almost exclusively on the resources available within their own communities. In areas of the province where resources are limited or there are fewer donors or businesses in a position to donate, food banks are often limited in the amount of support that they can provide to the people turning to them for help. This is illustrated in Figure 3, which shows proportionally how many days' worth of food that food banks across the province provide on a monthly basis.

Food banks and their staff and volunteers are working tirelessly to meet increasing demand with the resources available to them; however, the need in the province is growing faster than any organization can sustainably scale to meet.

There is a significant variance across the province in the amount of support food banks can provide

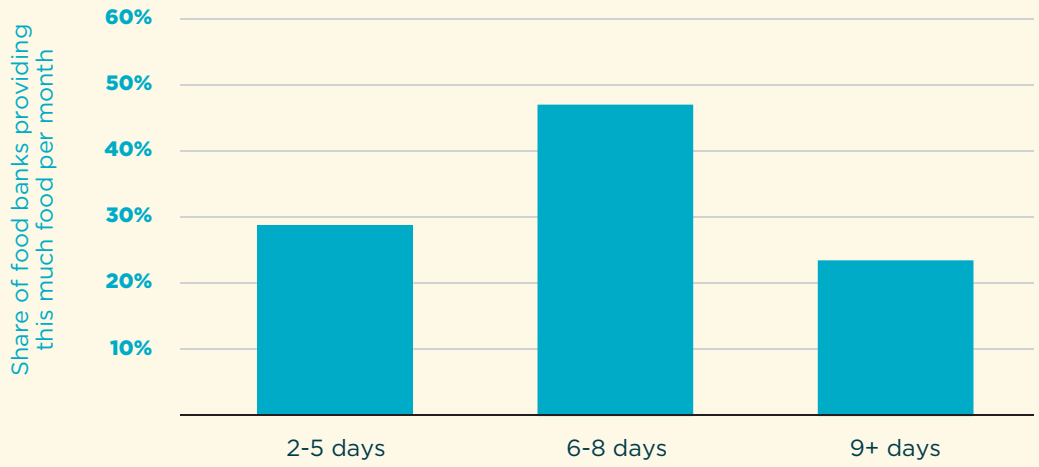


Figure 3
Days worth of food provided per month, calculated by multiplying the number of visits allowed per month by the days worth of food provided per visit. Feed Ontario Member Renewal Survey 2024.

Demographic insights

With over 1 million people in Ontario turning to food banks for help, no two stories are the same. Each person or family has faced a unique set of complex circumstances and difficult decisions, often caused by factors outside of their own control. This section highlights notable changes in visitor demographics over the past five years, with particular focus on first-time visitors, children, students, seniors, housing and homelessness, and employment. These highlights are followed by detailed tables that compare additional demographic information, including age, household composition, and the reason for visit between 2020 and 2025.

First-time and returning visitors

Over the past five years, the proportion of first-time food bank visitors has increased. This trend is unsurprising, as overall food bank use has nearly doubled, with much of this increase being from people who had never needed the help of a food bank before. In 2019-20, first-time visitors accounted for 30 per cent of all food bank users; however, by 2023-24, this had risen to 43 per cent, or nearly 1 in 2 visitors.

In 2024-25, the proportion of first-time visitors declined to 35 per cent, or approximately 1 in 3 visitors. While this might first present as a positive change, with fewer new people seeking support, food bank use year-over-year has continued to rise. This indicates that although there are fewer new people and families turning to food banks for help, those who already need this support are relying on food bank services for longer periods of time and their circumstances are likely worsening.

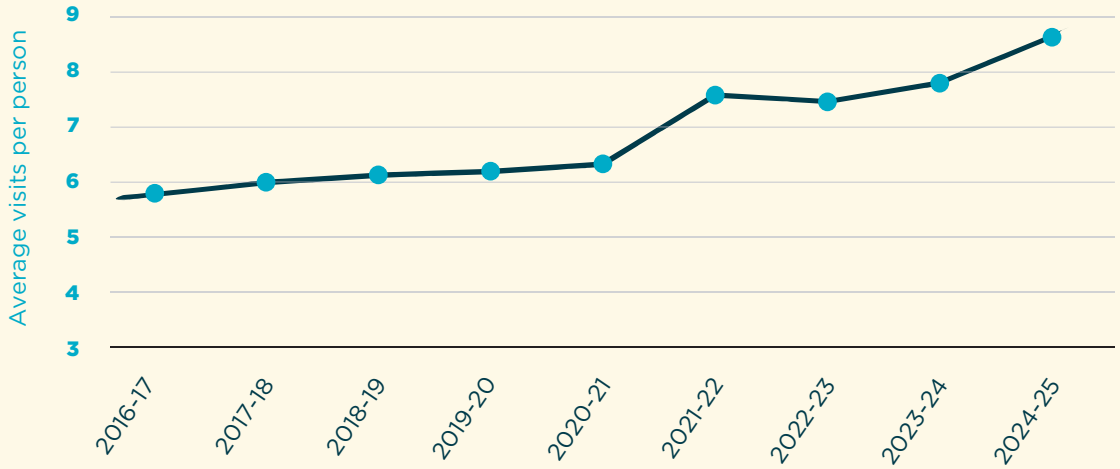
This trend is further supported by visit data (Figure 4), which shows that on average, people are visiting food banks 8.7 times per year, compared to 6.1 times per year in 2019-20.

Age (children and seniors)

When looking at food bank use across different age groups, it is important to view demographic trends through both a lens of proportional "risk" (i.e. the likelihood that someone will need the support of a food bank) as well as in the context of overall population dynamics and policy interventions. As illustrated in Figure 5, the population-wide risk of using a food bank has increased significantly, with the proportion of people accessing food banks rising from 3.7 per cent of Ontario's population to 6.4 per cent over the last five years, an increase of 70 per cent.

People are visiting food banks more often in a year

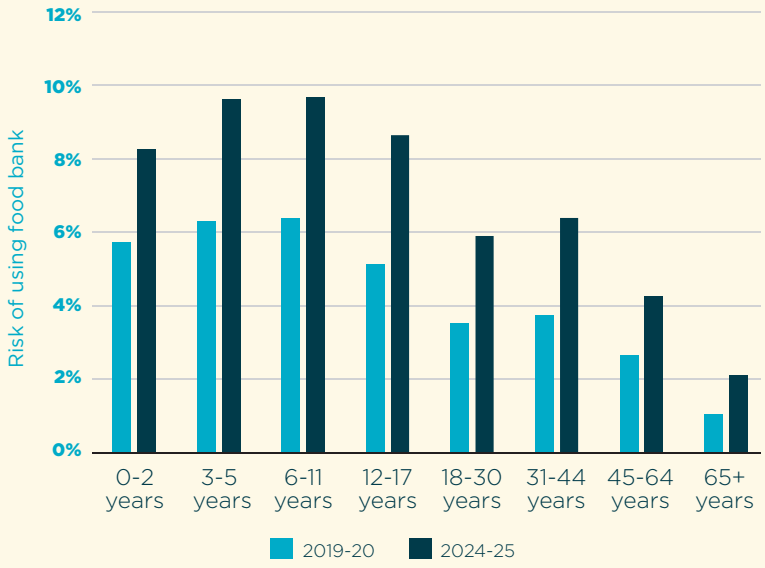
Figure 4
Average food bank visits per unique individual, 2016-17 to 2024-25.



Within this increase, data shows that there are some demographic groups that have been more affected than others. Children and youth (people under 18 years of age) have long been the highest-risk group for food bank use, in part because of what researchers call the "lifecycle income problem."[1] Families often have children earlier in life, when their income earnings are lower and the cost of raising a family is at its highest. As a result, many parents are raising children at the stage of their life when they can least afford it. Both federal and provincial governments have implemented supports to help offset the cost of raising a family, including supports like the Canada Child Benefit, Ontario Child Benefit, and the expansion of affordable childcare options. Even still, 1 in 3 children in Ontario are experiencing food insecurity.[2] This is also reflected in food bank use data, which shows while policy interventions have helped to slow the growth in the number of children accessing food banks, children still represent 29 per cent of those who rely on food banks for help meeting their basic needs.

By contrast, seniors (people 65 years of age or older) have historically been the least likely age group to access food banks, with only 2.2 per cent of Ontario's senior population turning to food banks for help. This lower rate is largely due to stabilization and support benefits for older adults, such as the Canada Pension Plan, Old Age Security, and the Guaranteed Income Supplement. However, the proportion of seniors relying on food banks has doubled since 2019-20, when only 1.1 per cent of Ontario's seniors were accessing support. This trend is particularly concerning, as older adults are often on fixed incomes and, unlike younger Ontarians, are less likely to see their financial circumstances improve over time. As a result, once a senior starts using a food bank, they are more likely to continue needing long-term support and to access services more frequently throughout the year than other groups.

Age affects risk of food bank use, but policy interventions can make a difference



CHANGE IN RISK

0-2 years	**+42%**
3-5 years	**+52%**
6-11 years	**+67%**
12-17 years	**+67%**
18-30 years	**+68%**
31-44 years	**+69%**
45-64 years	**+57%**
65+ years	**+92%**

Figure 5
Unique individuals visiting food banks as a proportion of the Ontario population[3], by age group, 2019-20 vs. 2024-25. Percentages are likely undercounts due to food bank visitors whose ages have been anonymized.

Source of income (employment, Ontario Works, and social assistance)

When looking at the source of income for households accessing food banks, the most commonly cited sources are employment income (23 per cent), financial support through Ontario Works (32 per cent), and financial support through the Ontario Disability Support Program (29 per cent). In June, Feed Ontario conducted a survey of food bank visitors from these groups to better understand why they are accessing food banks.[4] When respondents were asked to identify the top reasons that they were financially stressed, the cost of food and housing were the most common answers across all three groups. Beyond that, however, the answers varied, which provides additional insight into the types of solutions that might be most effective for each group, which are explored in greater detail in the following sections.

Working Ontarians

Top reasons workers feel financially stressed	
Cost of food	**88%**
Cost of housing	**88%**
Wages from work are too low	**55%**

Employed adults are one of the fastest-growing groups of food bank visitors in Ontario. In 2019-20, only 10 per cent of households accessing food banks cited "employment" as their primary source of income; today, that number has increased to nearly 23 per cent, or 1 in 4 visitors.

More than half of employed survey respondents identified "low wages" as a key source of financial stress. Compared to those relying primarily on social assistance, employed respondents were more likely to cite housing costs as a major concern. This is likely because social assistance recipients have greater access to rent-geared-to-income housing.[5]

While the Government of Ontario has increased the minimum wage by 22 per cent between 2019 and 2024, it still falls short of a living wage. In various communities across Ontario, minimum wage is between $2.30 and $8.80 per hour below what is needed.[6] Further, as illustrated in Figure 6, despite these gains in the minimum wage, households in the lowest income quintile saw only a 14 per cent increase in their income from working ($2,117 per household) between 2019 and 2024, while their spending on essentials like food, housing, and transportation increased by 22 per cent ($6,025 per household). What this means is that while the minimum wage has increased, people and families are less able to afford their basic necessities.

This reality speaks to both the depth of the affordability crisis and the quality of the employment opportunities available to Ontarians. Despite significant investments in

For the lowest income Canadians, income gains from working did not offset the increases in the price of essentials

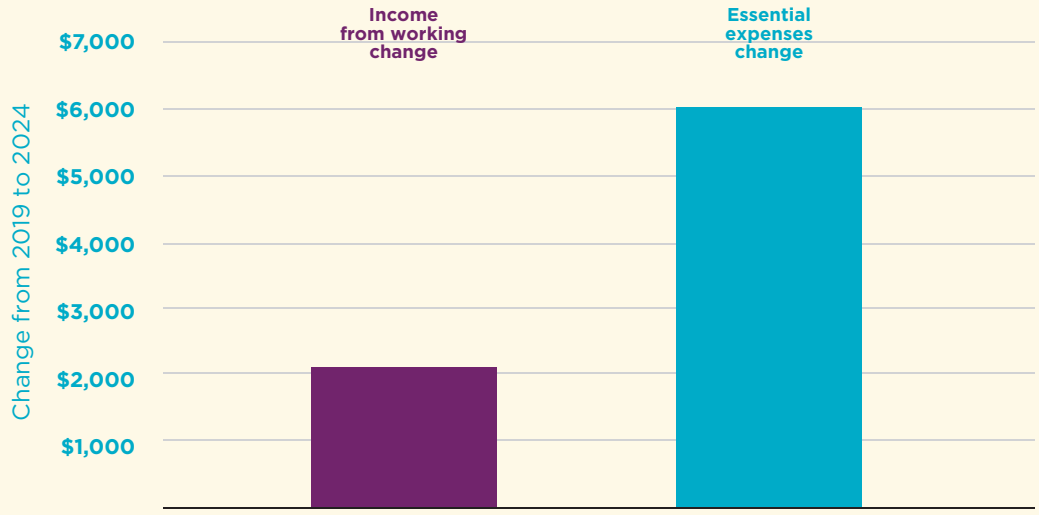


Figure 6
Change between 2019 and 2024 in income from employment (compensation of employees) and self-employment (net mixed income) versus expenditures on food and non-alcoholic beverages, housing, water, electricity, gas and other fuels, and transport, on a per household basis, for the lowest income quintile.[7]

Ontario's workforce, many employed Ontarians are still unable to earn enough income to make ends meet. Further, this indicates that having employment does not guarantee that someone will not live in poverty.

Social assistance recipients

Top reasons Ontario Works recipients feel financially stressed	
Cost of food	**86%**
Cost of housing	**70%**
Unemployed/underemployed	**57%**

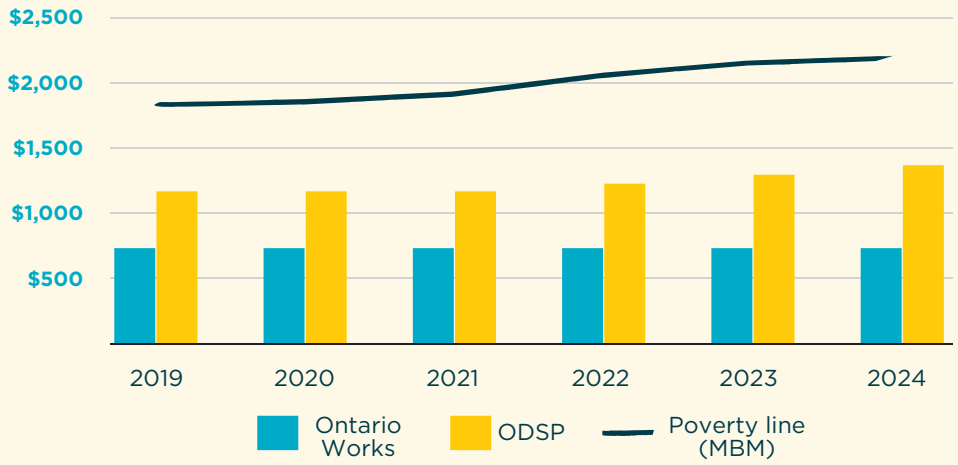
Top reasons ODSP recipients feel financially stressed	
Cost of food	**86%**
Cost of housing	**67%**
Government support programs are too low	**55%**

Financial support from Ontario Works (OW) and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) remain the most common sources of household income for food bank visitors, representing 32 per cent and 29 per cent of households respectively.

In the food bank visitor survey, respondents from both groups identified inadequate social assistance support as a leading source of financial stress. This is unsurprising given that the financial support provided through both programs falls far below the poverty line, and the gap is widening. Between 2019 and 2024, the amount needed to not be in poverty grew by 19 per cent,[8] while the support provided to ODSP recipients for shelter and basic needs increased by 17 per cent and OW support did not increase at all (Figure 7).

The gap between social assistance supports and the poverty line continues to grow

Figure 7
The Market Basket Measure (MBM) (Ontario city, 100,000-499,999 people) for a single person[9] and OW and ODSP maximum shelter and basic needs amounts.[10]



Students

One of the most significant changes is in the proportion of households that cite "student loan / scholarship" as their primary source of income, decreasing by 37 per cent in the last year. Further, the number of people who identified as post-secondary students has declined 18 per cent, moving from 9.4 per cent of food bank visitors to 7.7 per cent (Figure 8).

This decrease is likely being driven by several factors, including food banks working in partnership with local colleges and universities to provide education about food banks and options to access support through their post-secondary institution, as well as changes to government policies, such as federal regulations on study permits. Previously, international students applying for study permits were only required to show $10,000

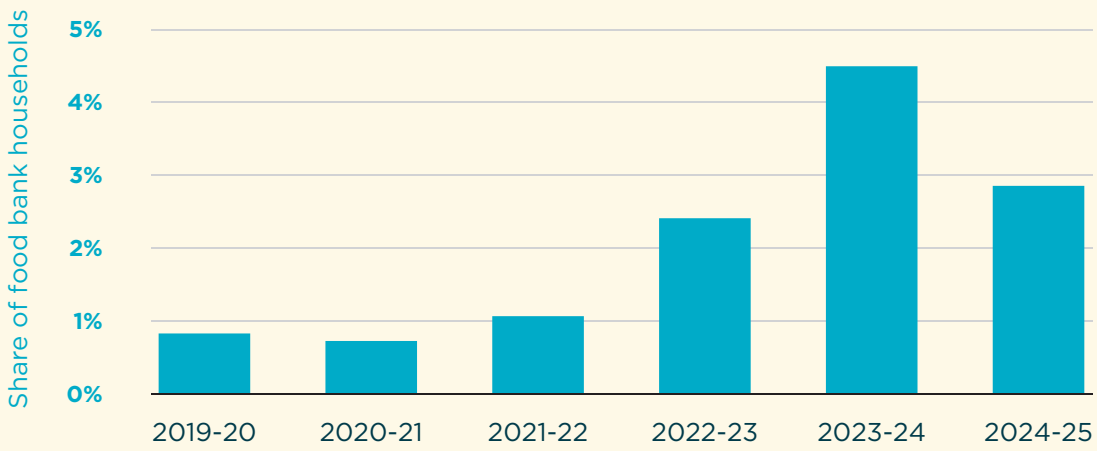


Figure 8
The share of food bank households citing "Student loan/ scholarships" as their primary source of income, 2019-20 to 2024-25.

in savings to attend school, a financial requirement that had not changed in more than 20 years. In January 2024, this threshold was increased to $20,635 to help ensure that incoming students were better prepared for Canada's cost of living.[11]

Housing and homelessness

Over the last five years, there has been a 22 per cent increase in the share of food bank visitors who are experiencing some form of homelessness, as well as a 32 per cent decline in the proportion who are living in social housing. This is likely a reflection of both the growing affordable housing and homelessness crisis, as well as a shift in service models at the food banks to better accommodate the needs of people they support. As reported by the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO), it is estimated that more than 81,000 Ontarians experienced homelessness and 232,419 households were on the waitlist for social housing in 2024, which is a five-year increase of 32 per cent and 21 per cent respectively.[12]

Historically, food bank visitors that are unhoused have been relatively low. This is largely because food banks would most often provide food that required refrigeration or preparation, such as eggs, milk, or rice. Many food banks would work in partnership with local meal programs and shelters to provide support; however, individuals accessing these services are often not captured in food bank use data. With more Ontarians experiencing homelessness, many food banks have started to adapt their service models to provide increased support alongside local meal and shelter programs. This includes options like food boxes with ready-to-eat meals and snacks that can be picked up regularly, removing the need for food storage or cooking facilities.

Housing type	
Private rental	**76.1%**
Social rental housing	**10.3%**
Provisionally sheltered	**5.0%**
Own home	**4.8%**
Emergency sheltered	**2.7%**
Unsheltered/unhoused	**1.1%**

Household composition	
Single people	**50.9%**
Two parent/guardian	**16.7%**
Single parent/guardian	**15.4%**
Other	**10.1%**
Couple with no children	**6.9%**

Ages	
0-2 years	**3.9%**
3-5 years	**4.9%**
6-11 years	**10.8%**
12-17 years	**10.0%**
18-30 years	**20.9%**
31-44 years	**23.1%**
45-64 years	**19.2%**
65+ years	**7.2%**

Primary source of income	
Social assistance (Ontario Works)	**31.9%**
Disability-related benefits (ODSP, WSIB, CPP-D)	**28.6%**
Employment income	**22.8%**
Old age pension (CPP, OAS, private)	**10.4%**
Employment Insurance income	**3.0%**
Student loan/scholarships	**2.8%**
Canada Child Benefit	**0.4%**

Data for 'other' and 'no income' have been excluded due to inconsistencies in how these categories are recorded.

Reason for visit	
Cost of food	**55.9%**
Cost of housing	**27.1%**
Cost of utilities	**9.1%**
Delayed wages	**2.5%**
Low wages/not enough hours	**1.3%**
Relocation	**1.2%**
Debt	**0.9%**
Benefit/social assistance changes	**0.6%**
Unemployed/lost job	**0.5%**
Sickness/medical expenses	**0.5%**
Unexpected expense	**0.3%**

Not all figures add up to 100 per cent due to rounding.

Section two

Why persistently high food bank use is everyone's concern

Hunger is often perceived as a matter of human conscience, and one that is ultimately managed by the charitable sector. From this perspective, food bank use can be seen as something separate from broader public policy priorities, especially in the face of pressing challenges like trade tensions or international crises.

However, this assumption is wrong for two reasons. First, Ontario's food banks are overwhelmed. As community-based and community-supported organizations, they were designed to provide short-term, emergency relief, not to meet and ongoing, structural needs. It is often said that 'you can't solve food insecurity with food,' and food banks know this more than anyone. As hard as they are working to scale their services and meet a persistently increasing demand, there is no amount of food they can source that will ever be enough to meet today's extraordinarily high level of need.

Second, persistently high food bank use is not an isolated issue. It is a warning sign, or a "canary in the coal mine," for deeper systemic problems that have consequences far beyond the charitable sector, including rising homelessness, increased pressure on the healthcare system, and even national security concerns.

The following section explores these broader implications and illustrates how high food bank use signals cracks in Ontario's social and economic foundations that affect everyone.

A warning sign

The increasing number of people turning to food banks for help is not just a statistic. It is an early warning sign of bigger problems ahead. Specifically, it is:

An early predictor of homelessness

Research shows that needing to access a food bank is often an indicator of housing instability and a predictor of eventual homelessness. This is well supported by two recent studies from McMaster University and the University of Calgary.

In 2022, a McMaster University study found that only 4 per cent of Hamilton households turning to food banks had access to stable housing, and that nearly half (46 per cent) said they would most likely be homeless without food bank support, as it allowed them to direct the money that they would have otherwise needed to purchase food towards their rent and housing costs.[13]

Similarly, a 2025 University of Calgary study that linked data from the Calgary Food Bank and the Calgary Homelessness Foundation found that more than 60 per cent of people entering a homelessness shelter for the first time had used a food bank at least once in the past five years. In the year before entering the shelter, food bank use amongst these individuals increased significantly, by 70 per cent for individuals and 74 per cent for families.[14]

These findings build on longstanding evidence that as the gap between rent and income widens, low-income households will first cut other expenses and exhaust all other options (often by relying on food banks or other charitable organizations for support) before defaulting on their rent and losing their housing. As one research team concluded:

"For many individuals and households, homelessness is not the result of a sudden catastrophic event but rather a steady worsening of one's circumstances. By using data on food bank reliance as an early indicator of housing distress, policymakers and service agencies may be able to develop interventions to prevent homelessness before it happens."[15]

This pattern is reflected in Ontario's data, as shown in Figure 9. When comparing homelessness data and food bank use from 2016 to 2024, spikes in food bank demand tend to precede spikes in homelessness. The average number of food bank visits per person has increased by 13 per cent, a warning sign that another surge in homelessness is on the horizon as more of the one million Ontarians accessing food banks exhaust their options and fall deeper into poverty. This is further supported by AMO's report, which found that without immediate intervention, the number of Ontarians experiencing homelessness could grow from 81,000 today to 300,000 by 2035.[16]

Rising homelessness has significant consequences for both the people experiencing it and the Province. For people, it is not only devastating and difficult to navigate, but can lead to long-term impacts that make it even harder to move out of poverty. This includes increased health risks and safety risks,[17] as well as interactions with the justice system that affect a person's ability to obtain employment and regain stability.[18]

For the province, addressing homelessness is significantly more expensive than investing in homelessness prevention. As reported by the Auditor General of Ontario in 2017, the average monthly cost of providing social housing to a household is $613, compared to $2,100 for a shelter bed, $4,300 for a correctional facility bed, or $13,500 for a hospital bed.[19] This illustrates that ensuring low-income Ontarians have access to sufficient financial support and affordable housing is not only compassionate, it is also a smart, cost-effective investment in healthier people and more stable communities.

Jumps in food bank use precede growth in homelessness

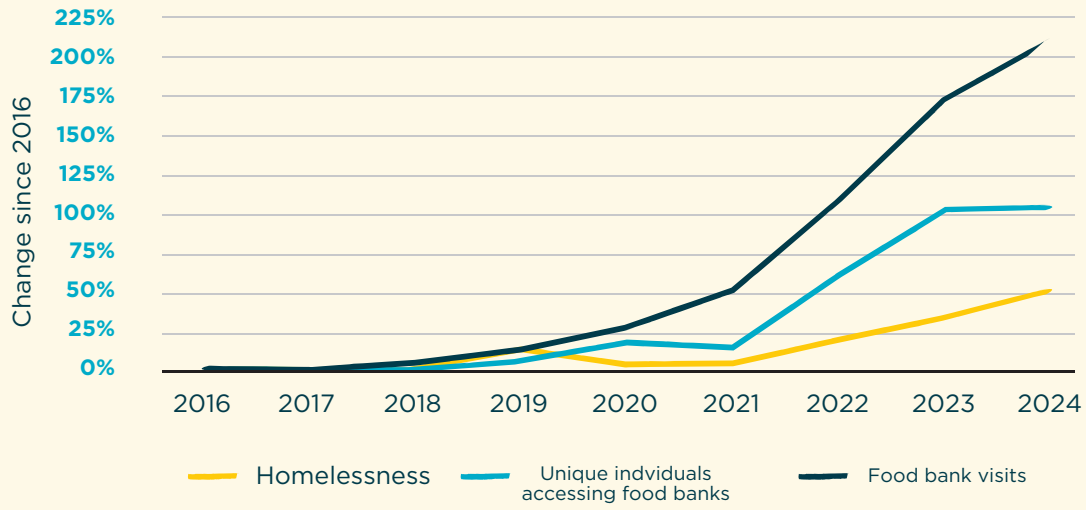


Figure 9
Change since 2016 in the number of people who are homeless,[21] unique individuals accessing food banks, and visits to food banks in Ontario.

A predictor of higher health care costs and longer wait times

High food bank use is connected to increased healthcare costs and longer hospital wait-times. While this connection might not be as immediately apparent as the link between food bank use and homelessness, a closer look shows just how strong the relationship is and, more importantly, how early interventions and investments in poverty reduction can improve the overall healthcare system for everyone.

It is widely known that Ontarians living on a low income are more likely to experience poorer health outcomes than those with higher incomes. This is largely because low-income Ontarians have less access to nutritious and sufficient food, often face barriers getting to healthcare services (like the cost of transportation to medical appointments), and may have to go without critical health care, like medication, because they cannot afford the expense.[21] As a result, low-income Ontarians are twice as likely to live with multiple chronic conditions and 2.5 times more likely to be hospitalized for conditions that could otherwise be managed outside of a hospital setting.[22]

Understanding the link between poverty and healthcare is critical to both supporting individual wellbeing and ensuring the sustainability of Ontario's healthcare system. This is especially true today as, even though healthcare is the Province's largest budgetary expenditure, emergency departments are in crisis. In the past year alone, Ontario emergency departments were forced to either temporarily or permanently close their doors more than 1,000 times due to staffing shortages. They have also faced overcrowding, record-high wait times, and shortages of the essential resources staff need to provide care.[23]

In 2008, Feed Ontario's first Cost of Poverty report estimated the impact of poverty on Ontario's healthcare system by calculating how much current healthcare expenditures would decrease if the incomes of those in the lowest income quintile were raised to the level of the second lowest income quintile. At that time, it was estimated that poverty-related healthcare expenses were costing the Province an additional $2.9 billion per year.[24] Using the same methodology with 2024 data, this figure has more than doubled, reaching $6.2 billion per year (see Figure 10).

With this understanding, it is arguable that investing in poverty reduction can reduce the need for future healthcare spending, including reducing demand and the challenges associated with overcrowding and long wait times. This further supported the 2014 Housing First study conducted across five Canadian cities, which found that providing immediate housing to people experiencing homelessness substantially reduced both emergency room visits and outpatient care use.[25]

Cost of poverty to the healthcare system per year

Income quintile	Share of public expenditures on health	2024 share (in $billions)
5 (highest income quintile)	15%	$13.5
4	14%	$13.0
3	16%	$14.9
2	24%	$22.3
1 (lowest income quintile)	31%	$28.5
Total public expenditures on health		**$92.5 billion**

Healthcare savings by moving from quintile 1 up to quintile 2

$6.2 billion saved

Figure 10
This methodology was developed in the Cost of Poverty 2008[26] that used data from a study of healthcare use by income, and has been updated with 2024 public expenditures on health in Ontario.[27]

A predictor of growing instability and national security risks

Ensuring everyone has enough to eat has important implications for social stability and national security in a rapidly changing and precarious world. Research shows that food insecurity contributes to civic unrest and political instability.[28] Increasing income inequality is significantly associated with reduced trust in governments,[29] as well as with higher levels of crime and resistance to core values of society.[30]

These concerns have become more critical due to the significant recent threats to Canadian sovereignty. Experts on national security have repeatedly warned that widespread food insecurity is a vulnerability that could easily be exploited by foreign governments or groups seeking to destabilize Canada. As Neil Bisson, Director of the Global Intelligence Knowledge Network, has stated, "If you have individuals who are concerned about where their next meal is coming from or if they're going to get a roof over their head, that supersedes sovereignty."[31] This was echoed by Ward Elcock, former Director of Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) who said, "If Canada is really impoverished, people may start to think about [annexation]."

What both of these experts are saying is that when someone's basic needs are not being met, and where there is no longer hope that circumstances can improve, people start to lose trust in their governments. This loss in trust can lead to social unrest, political instability, or even make people and communities more susceptible to manipulation by external groups that promise a better future. In Ontario, this risk is growing as communities have experienced the ongoing loss of major employers since the 2008 recession, quality jobs have been replaced by precarious work that offers little hope for a strong economic future, and more youth face unemployment and struggle to enter the workforce. Poverty weakens communities and the trust that people have in the institutions that are meant to protect them and help them care for themselves and each other.

Building strong and stable communities will take leaders at all levels of government, but first, it requires ensuring everyone's basic needs are met, including having a roof over your head, food on the table, and hope for a better tomorrow.

If food banks fail

Food banks were created to provide short-term, emergency relief, not to serve as a permanent substitute for adequate social support programs, quality employment opportunities, or affordable housing. Yet today, they have become the last line of defence for hundreds of thousands of Ontarians who are at risk of falling into deep poverty or homelessness.

Compounding this issue is the very real concern that food banks are in jeopardy and at risk of closing. After nine consecutive years of rising demand, donations and resources have not kept pace, particularly as Ontarians who were once able to give are no longer in a financial position to help. As a result, food banks are struggling to keep food on their shelves and their programs running. A survey of 140 food banks across Ontario found:

- 2 in 3 food banks are concerned about sustaining their operations over the next six months.
- 1 in 2 are worried that they will not have enough food to meet the need in their community.
- 1 in 3 fear that they will be forced to pause, reduce, or end services because demand has surpassed the resources available.

In understanding how food bank use is connected to some of the most pressing issues in the province – and how food banks help prevent these issues from becoming even more severe – it is fair to say that if food banks fail, the consequences will be significant. Children, seniors, and adults would go without food, families would lose their homes, and Ontario's hospital, healthcare, and social service systems would face even greater strain as hundreds of thousands of people are pushed deeper into poverty.

Municipalities across Ontario are already recognizing the severity of this problem with eight declaring food insecurity emergencies between November 2024 and August 2025: Mississauga, Toronto, Kingston, Hawkesbury, Brantford, Smith Falls, Cochrane, and Brockville. As stated by the Mayor of Mississauga, Carolyn Parrish, "This situation is unacceptable and unsustainable. While food banks continue to fill a critical gap, this is a broader issue that they – and we – can't solve alone… We need long-term, sustainable, poverty-reduction legislations, policies and programs supporting basic human rights."[32]

While food banks, community groups, and municipal governments are trying to sound alarm bells, they lack the fiscal resources and jurisdictional authority to fully address the systemic drivers of food insecurity. Record-high food bank use is not a crisis for food banks. It is a crisis for Ontario. Addressing it requires urgent and coordinated action from all levels of government.

Section three

Addressing poverty at its roots

Poverty reduction is extraordinarily complex, and there are many different viewpoints as to how this issue could be addressed. Through Ontario's recent Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) 2020-2025, the Government of Ontario has taken the position that the most effective path is through individual responsibility, with a strong emphasis on employment and a particular focus on moving social assistance recipients into work.

The Province has completed much of the work it set out to do under the PRS with regards to modernizing social assistance delivery. This has primarily been achieved through two multi-year endeavours: the Employment Services Transformation (EST) project that combined social assistance employment services with Employment Ontario, and Social Assistance Renewal (SAR), that centralized and digitized social assistance intake and administration. These reforms were not only intended to find efficiencies, but to provide caseworkers with more capacity to better support social assistance recipients in assessing their needs, navigating services, and providing supports.[33]

The Government of Ontario has also put significant attention towards encouraging employment and addressing affordability over the last five years. This has included significant investments in skills training and workforce readiness programs,[34] raising the minimum wage to keep pace with inflation,[35] reducing the cost of transportation by cutting the gas tax and investing in public transit,[36] and signing an agreement with the federal government to expand school food programs to reach 160,000 more children.[37] The Province also exempted the new Canada Disability Benefit from clawbacks under its social assistance programs, a vital step to improve the incomes of Ontarians with disabilities so they can better meet today's cost of living.[38]

That being said, despite these efforts, the intended outcomes of Ontario's poverty reduction strategy have not been achieved. The primary marker of success for the PRS was "exits to employment from social assistance;" however, last year, exits totalled only 35,000, which is below the baseline established in 2019 and only half of the strategy's goal of 60,000 per year by 2024 (Figure 11).[39] Other critical indicators have also worsened: the poverty rate has increased for the third consecutive year, outcomes for those assisted by employment services have declined, fewer jobs are being created (particularly full-time jobs), and employment rates for Ontario Works recipients have fallen to half their 2019 level. Beyond these indicators included in the PRS, homelessness has continued to rise and food bank use has reached another record high. This raises several questions, but most urgently, *what are we getting wrong*?

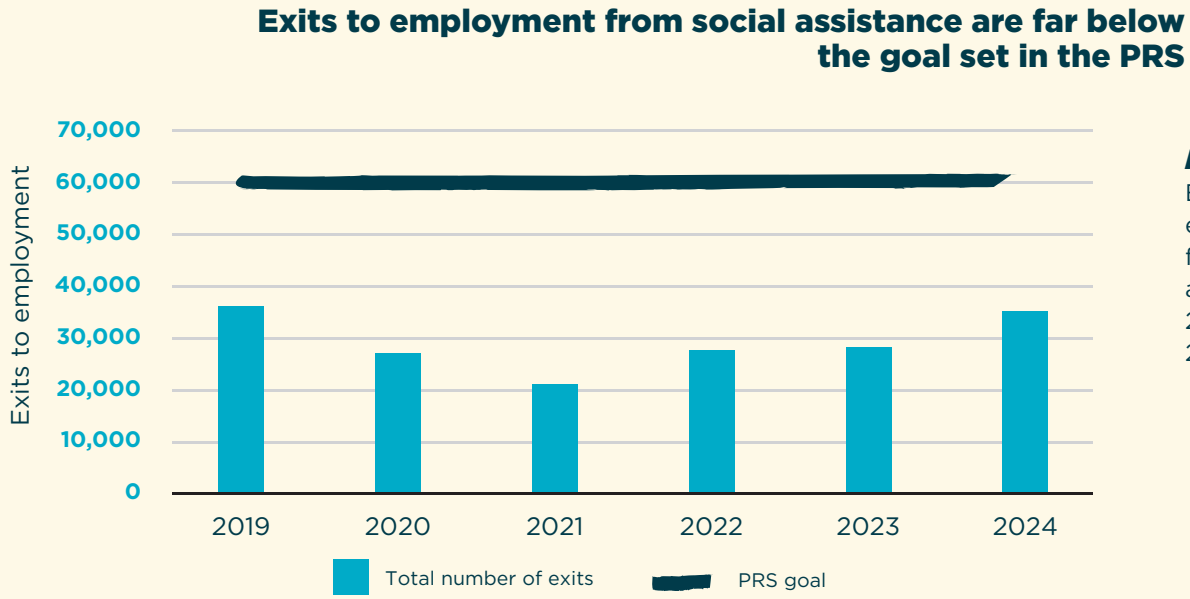


Figure 11
Exits to employment from social assistance, 2019 to 2024.[40]

Laying the groundwork for a new and coordinated approach to addressing poverty

Ontario's 2020-2025 PRS put a strong focus on modernizing social assistance delivery and helping more people move into meaningful employment. It has delivered on many of its promised initiatives, as outlined above, and has arguably built an important foundation for addressing long-standing challenges in the system. That being said, building on this foundation will require addressing two critical gaps: supports and rules.

1. Supports: fulfilling Ontario's commitment to life stabilization

The 2020-2025 Poverty Reduction Strategy correctly recognized that not everyone is in a position to immediately enter or re-enter the workforce, with "life stabilization" being a major component of the SAR plan.[41] Many people who are focused on day-to-day survival or living in unstable conditions need supports like financial assistance, housing, childcare, and healthcare before they can realistically concentrate on training or finding a job. While some investments have been made, they have not matched the scale of the challenge or the depth of support that people need today.

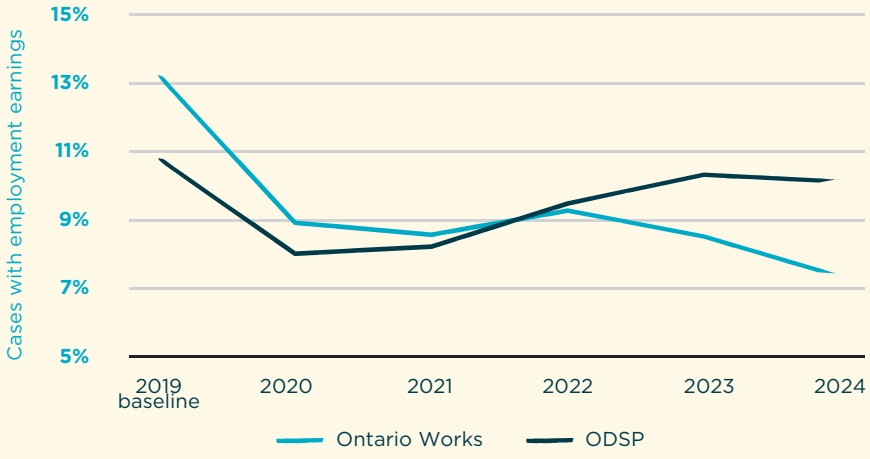
A common concern around financial support is that if it is too generous, it could serve as a disincentive to work. The belief is that people on social assistance might become comfortable with the benefits provided and feel as though they no longer need to pursue employment. While it is reasonable to set a point at which income earners are no longer eligible for financial assistance, there is also a counter problem: supports can be set so low that they actively undermine stability and prevent people from re-entering the workforce.

For example, over the last seven years, the basic support provided to someone on Ontario Works to help cover their rent and food has remained the same, despite a rising cost of living. It is still just $733 per month for a single person. In 2018, this benefit was already 60 per cent below the poverty line in a mid-sized Ontario city, but by 2024, that gap had grown to 66 per cent. Yet an increasingly low level of financial support did not result in more people seeking employment. Rather, the opposite happened. Only 7 per cent of OW cases had employment earnings in 2024, which is nearly half of what it was in 2019 (Figure 12). Conversely, the Government of Ontario increased the support provided to ODSP recipients by 20 per cent over that time, and their employment rates are now where they were in 2019.

The decreasing amount of financial support provided to OW recipients may be contributing to worse employment outcomes

Figure 12

Percentage of Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) cases with employment earnings, 2019 to 2024.[43] While both percentages fell in 2020 and 2021, likely due to the impact of the pandemic on employment, ODSP rates of employment have rebounded to their 2019 baseline, while OW rates have continued to fall.



However, despite life stabilization's role as a key plank of the Social Assistance Renewal Plan, the necessary investments have not been made to fulfill this promise. Alongside a lack of access to supports like affordable housing, primary healthcare, and mental health services, Ontario's social assistance rates are so inadequate that they are actively working against people's ability to regain stability and move into long-term employment. It is time to take a different approach that not only considers the upper limit of support, but sets a foundational minimum that effectively ensures program recipients have the building blocks of greater independence and long-term employability.

2. Rules: tackling complex and inefficient directives

As stated before, there is no single solution to addressing poverty or reversing the trends Ontario faces today. The drivers of poverty are interconnected and complex, and the programs and systems that all levels of government have put in place to mitigate these issues are equally complicated. While each level of government is working to address these issues within their own jurisdiction and capacity, programs and supports are often developed and implemented in isolation from each other. This lack of alignment is preventing them from achieving their intended outcomes and, in some cases, resulting in programs and supports that are counteracting one another and leaving recipients in the same or even worse position.

The second gap lies in the rules (directives) governing the benefits, which often create barriers for people trying to move off of the program. In some cases, they even leave people worse off for making what most would consider to be reasonable financial choices, such as working more hours, saving money to bridge gaps between contracts, or moving in with a partner to reduce costs.

Consider Angela's story:

- Angela receives the maximum Ontario Works support of $733 per month for her basic needs and shelter, plus an additional benefit of $88 from the Special Diet Allowance, which was prescribed by her doctor. This provides Angela with a total of $821 per month, along with access to a number of other ancillary benefits if she needs them.
- When Angela secures a job that pays $1,350 per month, her OW cheque is reduced under the program's earned income clawback rules, leaving her with a total income of $1,596 per month. She turns down extra shifts at work, even though she could use the money, because her shifts are inconsistent and working too many hours in just one month could make her ineligible for OW moving forward.
- In the future, if Angela is laid off from her job, she would qualify for $745.50 per month through Employment Insurance (EI). However, because EI is clawed back by 100 per cent under OW, Angela's OW cheque would be reduced to $0, rendering her ineligible for the Special Diet Allowance and other benefits. As a result, Angela would be left with less total income and fewer supports than she had when she was unemployed and relying solely on OW for her monthly income.

$1596=Income
- $1307 (Rent)
- $78 (Hydro)
- $128 (Bus pass)
-$55 (Phone)
-$49 (Internet)
-$24 (Laundry)
-$55 (Personal care)
-$28 (Insurance)
-$28 (Medication)
-$392 (Food)
=-$548

While there is a longstanding belief that people should "pull themselves up by their bootstraps," the way programs are currently structured is effectively cutting the proverbial bootstraps and making it impossible for people to succeed, no matter how hard they try. This needs to change.

Between all levels of government and the wide range of programs and supports that exist, understanding how each intersects with another is challenging. However, if Ontario is going to successfully reduce poverty, this deep understanding is essential for building a strategy that leverages every available opportunity for both the Province and the people who depend on these supports.

To address this issue, Feed Ontario recommends that the Government of Ontario lead a comprehensive review of Ontario's social support system as a core component of its next poverty reduction strategy. As part of this work, the Province should strike a taskforce to examine how Ontario's poverty reduction programs and investments intersect with municipal and federal poverty reduction initiatives, and specifically:

- Identify the complex drivers of poverty, food insecurity, and homelessness in Ontario and identify why people, including those with jobs, still cannot get ahead.
- Review Ontario's social support programs and poverty reduction measures and how they either complement or work in opposition to municipal and federal supports, identifying opportunities for alignment and coordination across all levels of government.
- Engage and work with stakeholders in the non-profit sector to determine how organizations, like food banks, can support poverty reduction efforts without exceeding their already overstretched capacities.
- Establish measurements that reflect the complexity and interconnectedness of poverty, including food bank use, to assess the overall health of the province and progress of this work.

Based on the findings of this taskforce, Feed Ontario calls on the Government of Ontario to develop a plan to reform social assistance and other elements of the social safety net that is responsive and flexible, reflects the complexity of the problem, and considers the diversity of Ontarians and the realities of a rapidly changing and unpredictable world. This strategy must also be supported with adequate investments that reduce poverty across the province.

What Ontario can do today

While assessing the complex interactions between programs and developing a comprehensive and coordinated set of reforms is vital to addressing the poverty in Ontario, this work will take time. Fortunately, there are policy changes and investments that can be implemented today to address inefficiencies, better prepare people for employment, and improve the health and wellbeing of people living in poverty.

In addition to the recommendations and calls to action outlined above, Feed Ontario recommends the following policy improvements and investments for immediate action:

Prevent homelessness

As outlined in this report, the number of people who are experiencing homelessness has increased and there are thousands of Ontarians at risk of losing their housing this year. At the same time, food banks, which are the last line of defence for many of these households, are running out of resources and have been forced to scale back programming because they cannot keep up with demand. Without immediate action, these compounding issues will result in a significant increase in unhoused Ontarians and a deepening homelessness crisis across the province. To help mitigate these challenges, Feed Ontario recommends that the Province:

- **Increase base rates for Ontario Works and ODSP recipients to prevent homelessness**: Between June 2022 and July 2024 the number of Ontario Works and ODSP cases experiencing homelessness nearly doubled.[44] This trend can be reversed by aligning social assistance rates with the cost of living.
- **Combine shelter and basic needs benefits to reduce homelessness**: Currently, the Ontario Works and ODSP rate structure divides financial support into separate “basic needs” and “shelter” benefits. If a recipient becomes homeless and no longer has housing costs, they become ineligible for the shelter benefit. This significantly reduces their monthly income, making it nearly impossible to save for first and last month’s rent or demonstrate sufficient income to secure new housing. Replacing this two-part rate structure with a single flat-rate benefit would provide recipients with consistent support, helping them maintain or obtain housing. Further, this change would reduce the administrative burden on caseworkers to continually assess recipient housing costs, and support provincial efforts to address the growing encampment crisis.

- **Increase the supply of affordable and supportive housing**: While progress in increasing the supply has been made, there continues to be a severe shortage of affordable and supportive housing. Feed Ontario endorses AMO's call for an investment of $11 billion over 10 years to end chronic homelessness, including 75,050 new housing and support spaces and shifting resources from crisis management to long-term stability to reduce reliance on emergency systems like shelters and hospitals.[45]

Improve health and wellbeing

As the previous section demonstrated, many low-income Ontarians struggle to maintain their health simply because they cannot afford their basic necessities, like safe and adequate housing, medicine, and nutritious food. This leads to higher healthcare costs for the province and a great strain on Ontario's already overstretched healthcare system. Improving access to income is essential to the health and wellbeing of people, families, and communities, and to reducing the pressure on Ontario's hospital and healthcare services across the province. To help more Ontarians afford their basic necessities, Feed Ontario recommends that the Province:

- **Invest in "life stabilization" supports for Ontario Works recipients**: Although referenced under the Supporting Recovery and Competitiveness Act, 2021, the sections of the legislation referring to life stabilization have not yet been proclaimed or supported with necessary investments. This includes supports such as housing, mental health services, addiction counselling, and domestic violence support for social assistance recipients. These services are vital to job readiness programs and ensuring social assistance recipients have the resources they need to enter the labour market.[46]
- **Reduce clawbacks on employment income and benefits:** To help program recipients afford their basic necessities while trying to re-enter the workforce, align clawback rates under Ontario Works with those under the Ontario Disability Support Program, and reduce clawbacks on worker benefits, such as Employment Insurance (EI), Canada Pension Plan (CPP), and Worksplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB).
- **Implement the recommendations outlined in the *Making it Work: Delivering the Transformation Promise in Ontario* and *Tangled in Red Tape* reports:**[47] [48] People with disabilities who are trying to enter the workforce face a number of barriers under Ontario's new employment services model. The above reports identify opportunities to improve the effectiveness of this program and provide stronger support for individuals trying to re-enter workforce and sustain employment.

Strengthen stability and resilience

Food security is national security. As discussed earlier in the report, when people cannot afford their basic necessities or, even more significantly, begin to lose hope, the resulting pressure can extend beyond individual households and into the wellbeing of the community. Without intervention, this can also lead to social unrest, instability, and vulnerabilities that eventually weaken the province and nation. To truly build resilience and a stronger Ontario, investments must go beyond emergency supports to include life stabilization and community-based opportunities. To strengthen communities and Ontario's resilience, Feed Ontario recommends that the Province:

- **Increase the Low-Income Individuals Families Tax Credit (LIFT) for Ontarians earning less than $50,000 and make a portion of it refundable**: LIFT provides tax relief to low-income Ontarians; however, it is only accessible to approximately 1 in 3 low-income workers, as those with such low incomes are unlikely to pay provincial income taxes in the first place. By increasing the benefit and making a portion of it a refundable tax credit (i.e. payable even if no tax is owed), the Province can both increase its impact and help even more workers who are trying to earn enough for today's cost of living and get back on their feet.[49]
- **Ensure national building projects reduce poverty and increase opportunity:** The Government of Ontario has committed billions of dollars in new infrastructure investments as part of its nation-building priorities. These projects present an opportunity to create quality jobs and new opportunities for low-income Ontarians trying to regain stability. To strengthen communities today and build resilience for the future, these projects must include firm commitments to apprenticeship opportunities, liveable wages, and access to essential worker benefits such as health care and retirement or pension plans.

Conclusion

Since the launch of Ontario's 2020–2025 Poverty Reduction Strategy, poverty rates have continued to rise, food bank use has doubled, and homelessness has become an increasingly urgent issue. While food banks have been relied upon to help fill gaps in the province's social safety nets, the scale of poverty and hunger has now far surpassed their capacity. As the last line of defence for many people and families before homelessness, addressing these issues is urgent and requires coordinated, systemic solutions that only governments can provide.

Ontario has a clear opportunity to lead a new approach to poverty reduction that includes strengthening social support programs, addressing the affordability crisis, and implementing a new and comprehensive poverty reduction strategy that recognizes the complexity of these challenges. These investments are not only the right thing to do, but are essential to the health and wellbeing of the province and the provincial economy.

By taking focused and coordinated action now, the Province can reverse current poverty trends and build the foundation for a stronger and more resilient Ontario.

A letter from the CEO

For nearly a decade, Ontario's food bank network has faced record-high demand, and this year is no exception. With more than 1 million people turning to food banks for help, we have seen firsthand how the affordability crisis continues to push more and more families from "just getting by" to "barely holding on."

And we see something else too. We see how deeply hunger is hurting Ontario. We see how hunger hurts people and families. We see how hunger hurts neighbourhoods and communities. And we see how hunger is hurting our collective wellbeing, weakening our resilience, and putting increasing strain on public systems that will ultimately lead to bigger challenges for people and our province.

To Ontario's elected officials and Members of Provincial Parliament:

You are in the strongest position to heal the hurt that hunger causes. Every day, we hear from people and see in public polls that what matters most to Ontarians is affordability, healthcare, and safe communities where everyone can thrive. These priorities are not separate from food insecurity; they are directly connected to it. As detailed in this report:

- When food bank visits go up, homelessness follows.
- When food bank visits go up, healthcare costs increase.
- When food bank visits go up, communities feel the pressure.

Luckily, the opposite is also true. When people and families have the income they need to afford the cost of living, food bank visits go down and Ontario grows stronger.

Food banks are doing everything they can to help people, but they cannot solve hunger or the affordability crisis. This can only be done through good public policy that prioritizes people. With targeted investments and coordinated action across all levels of government, our elected officials can reverse this trend and build a strong, resilient province for everyone.

To the people of Ontario:

We want you to know that we see you. We see the parents skipping meals so that their children can eat. We see the seniors stretching one bag of groceries over an entire week. We see the hardworking Ontarians standing outside of food bank doors because their paycheques no longer cover both rent and groceries in a given month.

We see how hard each of you are working to make ends meet. And we want you to know that you matter and that your voice matters.

Feed Ontario believes that we can end food insecurity and poverty in Ontario, but that healing the hurt hunger causes only begins when everyone has a roof over their heads and food in their stomachs.

Let's work together to build this future and a strong, resilient province for everyone.

Sincerely,

Carolyn Stewart
CEO, Feed Ontario

Methodology

The primary data from Hunger Report 2025 was collected from the following sources:

Link2Feed data

Feed Ontario member food banks use the cloud-based intake system Link2Feed to track client data and visits. Aggregate, anonymized data from food bank visits was pulled from 676 member food banks and affiliate agencies for the period of April 1, 2024 to March 31, 2025 to develop a picture of demographic data and trends in food bank use for Ontario. Visits to other programs, like meal programs (e.g. breakfast programs and soup kitchens), were excluded from the analysis, as they do not collect unique client data in the same way. Many hunger-relief organizations operate independently from the Feed Ontario network, making the total unique individuals and visits in this report an underestimate of the number of Ontarians turning to food banks.

For a full list of Feed Ontario direct member food banks, visit feedontario.ca

Visitor survey

Feed Ontario partnered with member food banks in Cochrane, Elliot Lake, Waterloo Region, Stratford, and Wiarton to survey food bank visitors during the month of June 2025 to gain a deeper understanding of the situations faced by those households whose primary source of income was Ontario Works, the Ontario Disability Support Program, or employment. A total of 184 surveys were completed in person and online. Visitors who participated in this survey were invited to fill out an additional qualitative survey to share more of their thoughts in their own words. Participants were informed that the surveys were optional and would not impact their eligibility to use food bank services.

Member Survey

Feed Ontario conducts an annual survey of its 140 direct member food banks each spring to learn more about food banks' capacity, service models, and chief concerns.

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