



THE FOOD BANK OF YORK REGION'S  
**REPORT ON FOOD  
INSECURITY 2023**

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### About the Food Bank of York Region

The Food Bank of York Region (FBYR) serves as the food collection and distribution hub for York Region. In this capacity, the Food Bank of York Region collects and delivers surplus food to local food pantries, schools, community housing, shelters and other non-profit agencies that provide meals and food in their programs. In 2023, FBYR served a network of 83 non-profit agencies and community organizations, delivering over \$9 million worth of perishable and non-perishable food. Our network provided food services to 32,000+ individuals in 2023.

### About this Report

The 2023 Food Bank of York Region's Report on Food Insecurity provides an analysis on the state of food insecurity based on numerous sources and surveys. This report reflects findings published by Food Banks Canada, Feed Ontario, Statistics Canada, Daily Bread Food Bank, and PROOF Institute. This report also provides insights to food insecurity in York Region through an analysis of data gathered in 2023 by the Food Bank of York Region's network of non-profit community partners, utilizing the Link2Feed client intake system.



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# Defining Food Insecurity

**Food insecurity** has been broadly defined as the inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints. In Canada, food insecurity is measured on a spectrum ranging from concerns about running out of food, lacking money to purchase sufficient or quality food, to having to skip meals and going hungry.<sup>1</sup>

**Food security** is defined as the condition whereby people have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs for an active and healthy life.<sup>2</sup> The UN's Sustainable Development Goal 2, Zero Hunger, has as its goal to "End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and to promote sustainable agriculture" by 2030.<sup>3</sup>

"What is food insecurity? It's many things. It's parents who skip a meal once a week so their kids can eat," says Rasheeda Qureshi, executive director of Seva Food Bank in Mississauga. "It's also people who have to choose between buying groceries or paying their rent on time. It's anyone who doesn't know how they'll get their next meal—and that number is growing."

— Wing Sze Tang, [How Food Banks in Canada work and why they're necessary](#),  
United Way, Greater Toronto

# A Profile of Food Insecurity in 2023

Canada's major food bank associations—including Food Banks Canada, Feed Ontario and Second Harvest—have been sounding the alarm regarding the unprecedented rise in food insecurity throughout 2022 and 2023.

Food Banks Canada reported that food banks usage in Canada saw a 32 per cent increase in March 2023 in comparison to the same period in 2022, while food bank visits increased by 78 per cent compared to 2019.<sup>4</sup> The report went on to state, “While our last two HungerCount reports should have been heard as blaring alarm bells for governments in our country, it appears that they were ignored.”

Feed Ontario reported that food bank use in Ontario increased by an unprecedented 38 per cent from April 2022 to March 2023. This marked the seventh consecutive year that food bank use has increased in Ontario, and the largest single-year increase ever recorded by the Ontario food bank network.<sup>5</sup> The share of people experiencing difficulty meeting necessary expenses has continued to trend upward to where Statistics Canada reported that more than one-third (35%) of the population was living in such a household.<sup>6</sup>



“The year 2023 posed significant financial challenges for Canadian families, one of the toughest in recent memory,” stated Dr. Sylvain Charlebois, Director of the Agri-Food Analytics Lab at Dalhousie University. The 2024 Food Price Report predicted that “In 2024, it is probable that Canadians will continue to experience the strain of food inflation, compounded by increasing costs of housing, energy, and various other expenditures.”<sup>7</sup>



# Why Food Insecurity?

In 2023, Canadians continued to contend with the highest rates of general inflation recorded since 1991—with the increase in costs for essentials such as food and shelter exceeding the overall rise in the cost of living.<sup>8</sup> According to Food Banks Canada’s large-scale survey, the top reasons people accessed a food bank in 2023 were food costs, housing costs, and low wages or not enough hours of work.<sup>9</sup> The ongoing trend of food insecurity in 2023 has been traced to:

**1) Spike in costs for food and rent, and lack of affordable housing.** Statistics Canada reported that food prices rose 7.8 per cent on average in 2023, while renters paid 6.5 per cent more for rent.<sup>10</sup> A Toronto survey found that 74 per cent of food bank users were paying over half their income on housing, while 25 per cent were spending their entire income on housing costs.<sup>11</sup>

**2) Income Gap:** Wage increases have not kept pace with the rise in cost of living. The income gap widened for the lowest income households, the only income group to reduce their average disposable income in 2023.<sup>12</sup> Food bank clients reported a 17 per cent decrease from 2022 in income left per person, per day after rent and utilities.<sup>13</sup>

**3) The Erosion of Social Assistance:** While the cost of living has been rising year-over-year from 2020 to 2023, provincial social assistance rates have not kept pace. The income provided to social assistance recipients falls well below the poverty line and does not provide sufficient support to afford even a basic standard of living.<sup>14</sup>

**4) Precarious and Low-Wage Work:** People who are employed at low wages or in precarious work continued to be a growing demographic of food bank visitors. Despite an unemployment rate of 5.4 per cent in 2023—the second lowest since 2000<sup>15</sup>—there was a 37 per cent increase in Ontario food bank visitors who cited employment as their primary source of income.<sup>16</sup>

“Food insecurity is an important marker of material deprivation and a social determinant of health... By the time someone in a food-insecure household visits a food bank, they have often exhausted other means of staying financially afloat, including asking loved ones for help, skipping meals, missing bill payments, and stretching out medications.”

— Amy Ripley, [Household food insecurity: it’s not just about food](#), Canadian Public Health Association

# Food Insecurity and Health

The prevalence of household food insecurity in Canada is a critical issue for numerous reasons, one of the foremost of these being that food insecurity is a potent social determinant of health. People living with food insecurity are much more likely to suffer from chronic physical and mental health problems and are more likely to need health care services, and have higher rates of hospitalization and an elevated risk of dying prematurely.<sup>17</sup> In particular, Ontario Disabilities Support (ODSP) recipients were found to be at the greatest risk of their health worsening and experiencing disproportionate levels of hardship as the costs of living increase.<sup>18</sup>

Children have historically been—and continue to be—the highest-risk age group for food insecurity in Canada. Children under 18 years of age comprised 30% of food bank users in Ontario (including York Region) in 2023. There is a disproportionate representation of children in food banks, given that they represent only about 20 per cent of the general population.<sup>19</sup> Food insecurity is detrimental to children's health and wellbeing, and social and academic development, and has been linked to poor health and higher prevalence of illness.<sup>20</sup>

Nearly fifty per cent of food bank visitors surveyed in Ontario indicated that health conditions or disabilities prevented them from being able to work, an indicator of the correlation between food insecurity and health.<sup>21</sup> While seniors aged 65 years and over represent a relatively small percentage of food bank users, they are more likely to have greater health care needs, and additional medical expenses can become less affordable.





# Food Insecurity in York Region

With a population of nearly 1.2 million at the last census, York Region presents as a region of perceived affluence and wealth, with the highest rate of home ownership (82 per cent) in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA).<sup>22</sup> Despite reports of growth in York Region's economy,<sup>23</sup> 8.8 per cent of households in York Region at the last census were low-income,<sup>24</sup> a number which has likely risen in the past two years due to the rising costs of living.

The lack of affordable housing continues to be a key issue, with supply not keeping pace with population growth.<sup>25</sup> A local UNESCO policy report calculated that the cost of a single bedroom apartment and a nutritionally appropriate diet would more than consume the entire income of low-income households in larger centres such as York Region.<sup>26</sup>

Reports in the region indicate that the continuously rising cost of living has led to an increase in residents relying on financial assistance and social supports, and more people accessing food banks due to financial constraints.<sup>27</sup> Food banks have seen an increase in the number of households with employment income seeking food assistance. More than one in six Ontario food bank users in 2023 reported employment income,<sup>28</sup> which was likewise observed in York Region in 2023.

“Many people in the region are struggling to put food on the table, resulting in a surge in demand for food assistance throughout our network,” said Alex Bilotta, founder and CEO of the Food Bank of York Region. “Rising costs of rent and food have rendered low-income and working-poor households vulnerable to food insecurity, as well as seniors, school-aged children and people dependent on social assistance.”

— [York Region food bank donations needed for holiday celebrations](#),  
*Newmarket Today*, Dec. 15, 2023

# 2023 York Region Food Program Access

The Food Bank of York Region (FBYR) is committed to providing food relief for York Region's most vulnerable residents in collaboration with our network of 80+/- community organizations. (See listing of [FBYR's community partners](#).) FBYR provides a central hub to collect and redistribute healthy surplus food to non-profit organizations throughout the region that provide food services to at-risk residents.

The following statistics have been collected from 83 community partners, which include food banks, food pantries, school food pantries, shelters, and other food assistance providers in York Region. While these statistics cannot provide a complete picture of the state of food insecurity in York Region, they offer insights regarding food bank use and the demographics of individuals accessing food assistance services.

Municipality	Individuals Served	Households Served
Aurora	2,154	737
East Gwillimbury	375	167
Georgina	3,747	1,297
King	62	62
Markham	5,626	1,871
Newmarket	8,085	2,218
Richmond Hill	7,739	3,202
Vaughan	3,953	1,537
<b>Totals</b>	<b>31,741</b>	<b>11,091</b>



## Statistics For Individuals Accessing Food Services



### Age:

Based on 28,897 respondents

0-17 years old	<b>29.7%</b>
18-30 years old	<b>17.3%</b>
31-64 years old	<b>43.7%</b>
65+ years old	<b>9.3%</b>

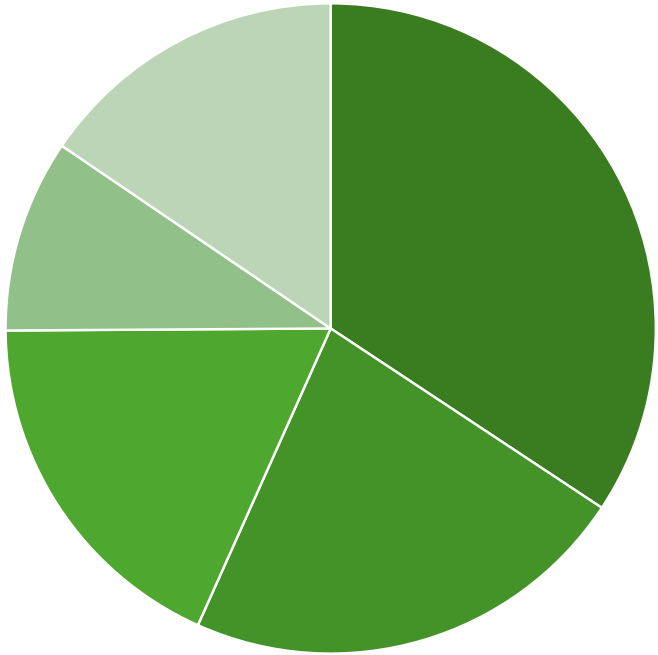


### Gender:

Based on 28,578 respondents





Male	<b>46.6%</b>
Female	<b>53.3%</b>
Other	<b>0.1%</b>





### Household Demographics:

Based on responses from 10,917 households

	Single Person Households	<b>34.3%</b>
	Two Parents	<b>22.4%</b>
	Single Parents	<b>18.2%</b>
	Couples With No Children	<b>9.6%</b>
	Other	<b>15.5%</b>



### Primary Income By Household:

Respondents represent 6,074 households

Government Benefits*	<b>41.7%</b>	Pension/OAS	<b>12.1%</b>
No Income	<b>23.2%</b>	Other	<b>5.3%</b>
Employee Income	<b>17.7%</b>		

\*Government benefits include EI, OW, ODSP, OSAP, CCB, CRB



### Housing Status:

Respondents represent 6,195 households

Private Rental	<b>69.1%</b>	Group Home/Shelter	<b>1.8%</b>
Social Housing	<b>19%</b>	On the Street	<b>0.3%</b>
Own Home	<b>4.6%</b>	Other	<b>5.2%</b>

# Growing Strain on the Food Bank System

Numerous food banks have reported record-breaking demands for food assistance, extending beyond their ability to meet the need. Second Harvest conducted a survey in 2023 of over 1,400 charitable food programs Canada-wide. Their report found that these frontline organizations, currently struggling to keep up with demand, expected to serve over a million new people in need of food relief in 2024.<sup>29</sup>

Food banks are being stretched to the limit as they struggle to serve more people requiring food relief, acquire more food, and recruit more volunteers to meet the growing need.

*We cannot let today's record-high food bank use become 'the new normal.' We cannot let hunger become normal. As a province, we must work together to advocate for the future that we want. A future where everyone has the income and supports that they need. A future where no one goes hungry.*

— Feed Ontario

In response to skyrocketing demands for food assistance, food banks have continued to expand their services to provide more food to more people in need, reaching previously unimaginable levels.<sup>30</sup> If food banks are to continue to provide immediate, effective food relief, they will require access to more surplus food, more funding, infrastructure, volunteers, and ongoing operations support.

## **End Poverty to Address Food Insecurity**

*Food is a basic human right, but when times are hard, food charities step up to try to meet this basic need. Intended to be a short-term response to the economic recession in the 1980s, food charity has become a permanent fixture due to government funding cuts to social service programs over the last four decades. Right now, food charities are facing more demand than ever.*

— Morgan Sage, [We need to end poverty to end food insecurity](#). Toronto.com, April 26, 2023.



# Recommendations

Despite numerous calls to action from emergency food providers across Canada in 2022, the rise in food insecurity continued virtually unabated in 2023, as the statistics presented in this report indicate. Food insecurity is “embedded in a web of issues associated with poverty”,<sup>31</sup> which must be addressed to bridge the growing gap between income and the cost of living for low-income households.

The Food Bank of York Region supports the following recommendations to address food insecurity in Ontario.



## **Recommendation 1: Strengthen Social Assistance Programs**

A progressive erosion in social assistance programs has been reported in numerous studies and identified as one of the major causes of food insecurity.<sup>32</sup> Statistics Canada found that the families most vulnerable to food insecurity were those relying on some form of social assistance as their major income source.<sup>33</sup> In 2023, 34 per cent of York Region food bank visitors indicated social assistance (Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program) as their primary income.

**We support the following recommendations from PROOF Institute, Food Banks Canada and Feed Ontario, that the province of Ontario:**

- Take steps to improve Ontario’s social safety net to effectively reduce food insecurity and poverty.<sup>34</sup>
- Improve social assistance by increasing the financial support provided through provincial social assistance programs and indexing them to inflation.<sup>35</sup>
- Increase the income support available through Ontario Works and ODSP to meet a minimum income standard.<sup>36</sup>

## Recommendation 2:

### Address the growing disparity between income and the cost of living

Poverty and food insecurity are driven by the inadequacy of household resources and as such improving the financial circumstances of food-insecure households is critical.<sup>37</sup> Studies of people accessing food banks indicate that a growing percentage of food bank users are low-income earners amongst the working population.<sup>38</sup> Minimum wage has not kept pace with the cost of living, nor does it ensure food security for low-wage, short-term or contract workers.

The increasingly high cost of housing disproportionately impacts lowest income households, most of whom pay over 50% of their income on rent and utilities.<sup>39</sup> Over 88 per cent of food bank users surveyed in York Region are renters. Over 75 per cent of Ontario food bank survey respondents reported having less than \$100 left each month after housing costs, and 22 per cent had housing costs that exceeded their monthly income.<sup>40</sup>

### We support the following recommendations of York Region, Food Banks Canada, and PROOF Institute, that the province of Ontario:

- Address the disparity between income and the cost of living, given that a rapidly increasing number of food-insecure households rely on employment incomes.<sup>41</sup>
- Progressively increase minimum wage to a living wage to address the vulnerability of households reliant on employment incomes that are unable to make ends meet.<sup>42</sup>
- Build and introduce new affordable housing units and work to make the existing market more affordable for low-income households.<sup>43</sup>

## Recommendation 3:

### Support the food assistance sector to address increase in demand

Reports on food insecurity in 2023 highlight the overwhelming increase in demand that food banks have faced this past year. While leaders in the food bank sector continue to advocate for long-term solutions to poverty, the food insecurity gap continues to widen. In 2023, food bank use increased in Ontario by 38 per cent—the highest single-year increase on record.<sup>44</sup>

It is critical that food banks and other food assistance providers receive support to continue to provide a safety net for people experiencing food poverty. People's immediate need for food relief cannot be put on hold while public policy and lasting solutions to poverty are explored.

### We recommend that:

- Local and provincial government provide support to the emergency food assistance sector to equip them to respond to the surge in demand for food assistance.
- The role of food banks in providing emergency relief be acknowledged and supported as an important measure to address food insecurity in collaboration with the local community.
- Government at all levels support food rescue programs to reduce Canada's burden of avoidable food waste by ensuring that it is recycled to food-insecure households through food bank services.



## Conclusions

In 2023, we witnessed disturbing trends in the ongoing rise of food insecurity, including a decrease in the quantity of groceries purchases by Canadians, which Dr. Jim Stanford (Centre for Future Work) highlighted as “a sign of stress and hunger in Canadian households.”<sup>45</sup> Food banks across Ontario are seeing a significant influx of people seeking food assistance. Meanwhile the number of people living in households struggling to afford food due to lack of purchasing power have increased to the highest levels on record.

Second Harvest reported that more than one-third of the 1,400 food charities in Canada that they surveyed had to turn people away or add them to waitlists due to lack of food supplies to meet the rapid increase in demand.<sup>46</sup> Food banks are one of the last lines of defence for people facing food insecurity, and it is critical that they receive the support and funding needed to address the unprecedented rise in food insecurity and the growth in demand for their services.

The Food Bank of York Region and the many food banks and pantries and food assistance programs we partner with in York Region work tirelessly to alleviate food insecurity in our region. We and our network of food providers are committed to continue to distributing food relief to bridge the food insecurity gap. However, a collaborative effort is critical to reduce food insecurity, and to ensure that every person in York Region has access to food security, which is a fundamental human right.

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The Food Bank of York Region is a registered charitable organization  
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