

# *Often Hungry*

**A look at Edmonton families turning to the food bank**

# *Sometimes Homeless*

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## **Summary**

- Fifty-four (54) per cent of Edmonton families turning to the food bank live on less than \$1,000 a month. Their average family income is \$1,097 per month.
- Seventy-one (71) per cent of families say they turn to the food bank because of ongoing money shortages. In addition to families that never have enough money, a smaller group, around 11 per cent, turns to the food bank when they face extra expenses, such as school fees or damage deposits.
- Twenty-eight (28) per cent of Edmonton families turning to the food bank were homeless some time during the past five years. The survey sample included included 65 homeless children. Forty-three (43) were under 12.
- Other families are near homeless. Seventy-five (75) per cent had been late with the rent, and 42 per cent had missed rent payments during the past two years.
- Many of these families are often without heat, power and phone. Nineteen (19) per cent of respondents have had their power cut off. Ten (10) per cent have had their gas shut off and 35 per

cent have had their phone disconnected.

- Seventy-three (73) of the families that turn to the food bank say they cannot afford to feed their children enough fruits and vegetables. Fifty-eight (58) per cent say they cannot afford enough meat for their children, while 41 per cent say they cannot afford enough dairy.

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***“The kids are growing and their appetites are growing. Now \$300 doesn’t last till the end of the month.”***

In March 1999, Alberta's food banks served 50,784 people, including 19,755 children. Who are these children? Why are they hungry? Alberta has one of the highest earning levels in Canada. In 1997, the average income for a two-parent family in Alberta was \$66,746. Why are some children living in families too poor to afford food?

Between April and May 1999, Edmonton's Food Bank and the Edmonton Social Planning Council conducted a study of families that turn to the food bank. *Often Hungry, Sometimes Homeless* is the result of that study.

This is the third Edmonton food bank study. We began in 1996 with a comprehensive study of food bank use in Edmonton. The study, one of the first and largest of its kind in Canada, involved focus group sessions and interviews with over 800 food bank recipients. The study revealed that, in 1996, one in 20 Edmontonians used food bank services.

Late in 1996, we released the final report, *Two Paycheques Away: Social Policy and Hunger in Edmonton*. In summer 1997, we conducted *A Return Look at Two Paycheques Away*, a smaller follow-up study that took a closer look at families turning to the food bank.

The follow-up study told us that families were turning to the food bank because they were too poor to make ends meet. Most of the families had ongoing money shortages. There was never enough money for food, rent and utilities.

***What caused your money and food shortages? "Extra field trips for school. I want the kids to feel they belong."***

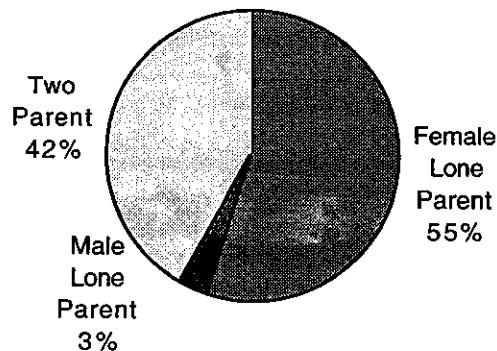


These Edmonton families were suffering from poor nutrition. The 1997 study showed that only one in six (16 per cent) of family heads reported eating the recommended servings of fruits and vegetables, grain products and milk products. Only one in four (25 per cent) ate the recommended servings of meat or its alternates.

In 1997, 61 per cent of parents reported going without any food for an entire day. More than one in four parents (26 per cent) reported their children missing meals an average of six times in the last month.

The latest 1999 study replicates the 1997 study, *A Return Look at Two Paycheques Away*. Like the 1997 study, *Often Hungry, Sometimes Homeless* looks specifically at families. We can see whether the situation has stayed the same, improved or changed since 1997. In some situations, we can compare all three years—1996, 1997 and 1999.

### Families Turning to the Food Bank 1999



Most families turning to the food bank are headed by young, female lone parents, with little education and young children. However, two-parent families also risk hunger and homelessness.

In recent years, there has been little change in the type of families turning to the food bank. The 1997 study reported that families receiving help through the food bank are mainly single-parent families, headed by women, which include young children under 12 years of age. The 1997 study found that two out of three families (66 per cent) were single parent families.

## **Methodology**

*Often Hungry, Sometimes Homeless* relied on face-to-face and telephone interviews with 100 respondents. Face-to-face interviews ensured the study included respondents without phones.

The study took place at various food bank depots, allowing a representative sample of food bank recipients to participate.

The sample:

- represented 241 children, 171 under 12 years of age. The average number of children per family was 2.41.
- 58 per cent of the respondents were lone parents. Three (3) were male lone parents, while the other 55 respondents were female lone parents.
- 78 per cent of the adult respondents were under 39.
- 53 per cent had less than a high school education.
- 24 per cent had completed high school.
- 12 per cent had some post-secondary education.
- 6 per cent had completed post-secondary education.

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**The Respondents Were Longtime Edmonton Families That had Lived in Edmonton an Average of 15 Years.**

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Northeast	38%
Northwest	28%
Central	13%
Southwest	13%
Southeast	8%*

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\* This does not reflect food bank demand in southeast but the number of people who took part in the survey.

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**Most Families That Turn to the Food Bank Live in Rental Accommodation**

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Rent	93% (30% rent subsidized housing)
Own	4%
Housing Co-op	2%

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### **Finding the Money**

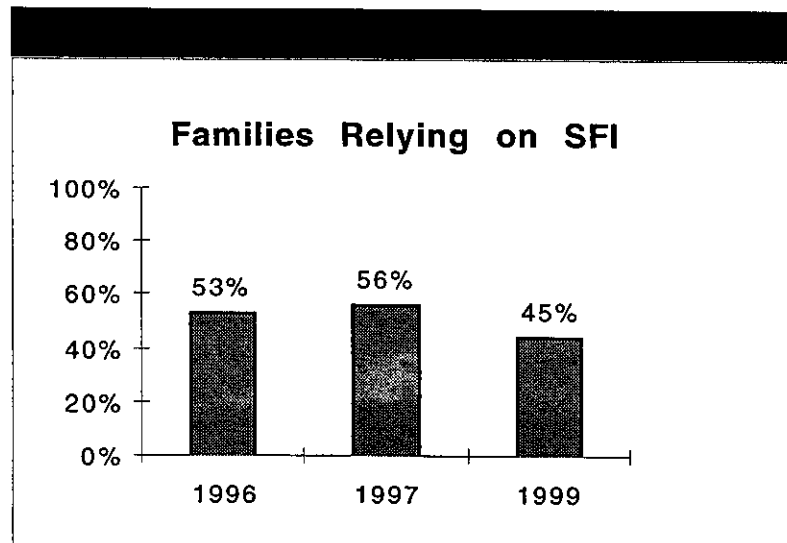
Nearly half the families turning to the food bank are on welfare, officially known as Supports for Independence (SFI). Forty-five (45) per cent of families say SFI is their main source of income, while another 4 per cent rely on SFI as secondary income.

Nineteen (19) per cent are working poor with low-paying jobs that don't pay enough to make ends meet. Eight (8) per cent rely on student loans. Six (6) per cent are receiving Employment Insurance. Five (5) per cent of respondents have no income. Two (2) per cent rely on Canada Pension and/or Old Age Security. Three (3) per cent rely on child support, and 3 per cent rely on Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH).

<b>Sources of Income</b>			
	1996	1997	1999
SFI	53%	56%	45%
Employment Insurance	3.3%	4%	6%
Student Loans	2.7%	6%	8%
No Income	7.5%	12%	5%
Working	14.1%	16%	19%

Fifty-four (54) per cent of families turning to the food bank live on less than \$1,000 month.

The average family income is \$1,097 per month. On average, families with one child live on \$970 a month, while families with two children live on \$1,006 a month.



From 1997 to 1999, there has been a drop of 11 percentage points in SFI families turning to the food bank. Since the 1996 study included a larger sample with unattached individuals and families, we can only make a clear comparison between the 1997 and 1999 years. However, we see a downward trend, reflecting the 63.4 per cent drop in the provincial welfare caseload from March 1993 to March 1998.

Seventy-one (71) per cent of respondents say they turn to the food bank because of ongoing money shortages. Only 1 per cent describe the problem as a money management issue.

Of the 71 respondents with ongoing money shortages, 24 say that they cannot meet their regular expenses. Nineteen (19) describe the problem as underemployment. Another 13 describe it as a lack of income. Fifteen (15) say they visit the food bank because SFI rates are inadequate.

Another 8 describe their problem as program delays. Half of those describe the problem as SFI delays.

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**Turning to the Food Bank Because There's Never Enough Money**

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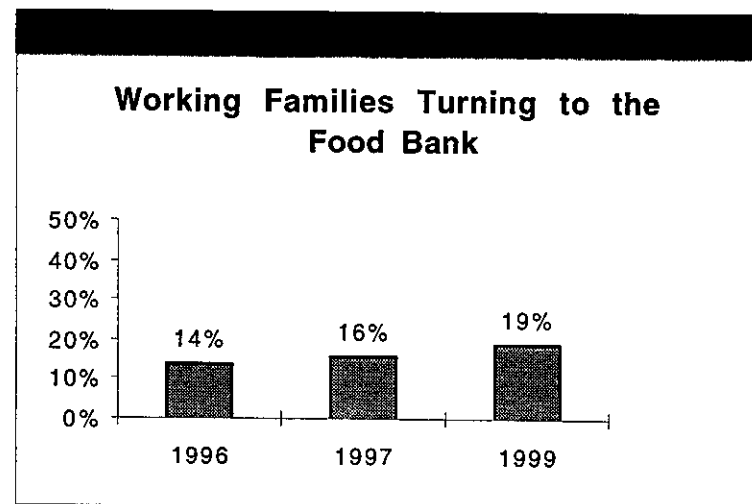
1996	1997	1999
67%	63%	71%

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In addition to families that face an almost constant struggle to make ends meet, a smaller group faces extra expenses, such as school fees or damage deposits. The sample included 100 families. Eleven of those families turn to the food bank because of extra expenses. Six (6) per cent attribute it to moving expenses. These families have no financial cushion or other supports to draw on when unexpected or large one-time expenses confront them. They turn to the food bank for temporary help or relief. In 1997, 25 per cent of respondents faced extra expenses.

***“My brother brought groceries one month and my parents gave us a care package. I am a student and my student loan isn’t high enough. My boyfriend is a seasonal worker and he didn’t get much EI last winter.”***

While we see a decrease in SFI families turning to the food bank, we also see a slight increase in working families needing help from the food bank. The move from welfare to working status has not solved the poverty problem for these families.





### **Visits to the Food Bank**

Sixty-six (66) per cent of respondents visited the food bank between one and five times during the past year. Nineteen (19) per cent visited the food bank between five and 10 times, while 12 per cent visited between 10 and 15 times. On average, families use the food bank 4.5 times during the year. In addition, 16 per cent of families receive help through soup kitchens and other meal programs. Twelve (12) per cent received between one and six free meals last year.

<b>Number of Times Turning to the Food Bank</b>		<b>(Average)</b>
1997	1999	
4.8 times a year	4.5 times a year	

### **Sometimes Homeless**

Twenty-eight (28) per cent of families turning to the food bank were homeless some time during the past five years. The sample included 100 families. The 28 homeless families included 65 children. Forty-three (43) were under 12.

Most of the families that became homeless stayed that way for one or two months. Twenty-one (21) of the 28 homeless families moved in with other family members. Three (3) families actually lived on the street.

***“One of my medications is not covered by SFI. I have to pay the \$75.”***

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**Average Family Income of Families  
Turning to the Food Bank**

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1996*	1997	1999
\$705	\$897	\$1,097

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\* The 1996 study included single unattached individuals and families.

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In 1999, poor families in Edmonton have more dollars every month. One reason is the Child Tax Benefit, now available to families not receiving SFI. Along with the increase, however, comes an increase in the cost of living. According to Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) reports, average rents in Edmonton increased 7.1 per cent between 1996 and 1998. CMHC predicts another 6 per cent increase for 1999.

Of the families that had been homeless, seven had been evicted.

Most of the families that turn to the food bank are dangerously close to becoming homeless. Seventy-five (75) per cent had been late with the rent, and 42 per cent had missed rent payments during the past two years.

Sixty-four (64) per cent moved in the past two years, while 20 per cent moved more than once.

<b>Reasons for Moving</b>	
Eviction	8%
Housing costs went up	12%
Found their own housing	15% (suggesting that these respondents had been sharing accommodation)

These families are so poor they can't pay the rent on time every month. Families turning to the food bank pay an average of \$424 a month for rent, plus \$99 a month for power, gas and water. In Edmonton, the average two-bedroom apartment rents for \$585, so these families are probably renting the cheapest accommodation available. The SFI shelter rate for a parent with one child is \$428—\$95 less than the minimum \$523 families must pay for rent and utilities.

***“What do I do when I am short of food?  
Grit my teeth and hang on.”***

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**Percentage of Income on Rent 1999**

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Less than 30%                      32% of families

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Between 30 & 70%                      62% of families

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More than 70%                      6% of families

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The Government of Canada considers families that spend more than 30 per cent of income on housing to be in core housing need.

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Since 1993, there has been a \$48 increase in the SFI shelter allowance. With the October 1999 increase in minimum wage, a person working 40 hours a week for minimum wage would gross \$20 more every two weeks—\$40 more a month.

When these families move, they often lose their damage deposits, making it difficult to find new housing. Of the respondents who had paid damage deposits, only seven (7) respondents (18 per cent) received all their deposit. Most had to argue or "fight" with their landlords to have it returned.

In addition, these families are often without heat and power. Nineteen (19) per cent of respondents have had their power cut off. Ten (10) per cent have had their gas shut off and 35 per cent have had their phone disconnected. Seventy-seven (77) per cent had been cut off because they couldn't make the payments.

To cope with the food shortage, parents skip meals. Barely half manage to meet their children's nutritional needs all the time.

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**Children Going Without Meals**

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Missed some meals	18%
1-2 meals	8%
3-5 meals	7%
6 or more	3%

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**Parents' Nutritional Needs Met**

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Day before survey	60%
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**Children's Nutritional Needs Met**

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Not met yesterday	25%
Never met	2%
25% of the time	11%
50% of the time	12%
75% of the time	22%
All the time	52%

## **Often Hungry**

Families that turn to the food bank often go without food. They also cut back on nutritional necessities, like fruit, vegetables and milk. Seventy-three (73) per cent say they cannot afford to feed their children enough fruits and vegetables. Fifty-eight (58) per cent say they cannot afford enough meat for their children, while 41 per cent say they cannot afford enough dairy.

The 1996 and 1997 studies gave us similar pictures. In 1996, one in two adults admitted going without food for an entire day. Sixty-nine (69) per cent said food was the first item cut from the budget. Only 3.7 per cent said they cut school expenses for their children.

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### **Parents Going Without Food for a Day or More**

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1996	1997	1999
53%	61%	46%

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### **Children Who Have Missed Meals in the Previous 30 Days**

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1996	1997	1999
17%	26%	18%

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***“Bills—We’re behind and trying to pay them off. There’s just not enough money to last the month.”***

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**Parents Going Without Food**

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An entire day                      46%

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1-2 days                              29%

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3-5 days                              12%

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6 or more                              5%

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### **Call to Action**

The food bank serves more than 13,372 children in one year. This latest survey suggests that about 47 per cent of those children are not getting the nutrition they need. These growing children aren't getting enough fruit, vegetables and milk.

More than one quarter of the families have been homeless during the last five years. Many more are near homeless. Seventy-five (75) per cent had been late with the rent, and 42 per cent had missed rent payments during the past two years.

In November 1998, the City of Edmonton, Alberta Family and Social Services and Alberta Municipal Affairs joined forces to form the Edmonton Task Force on Homelessness. The following May, the Task Force released *Homelessness in Edmonton: A Call to Action*, a report that acknowledged the seriousness of homelessness in Edmonton.

The Task Force conducted a day-long homeless count and found 836 homeless persons, including 70 homeless families and 112 homeless children.

While the Task Force conducted its study, the Edmonton Social Planning Council (ESPC) and Edmonton Gleaners Association (Edmonton's Food Bank) conducted *Often Hungry, Sometimes Homeless*.

Edmontonians continue to show their generosity through their donations to the food bank. Our generosity may ease some of the hunger problem today and tomorrow. However, this latest food bank

study shows that generosity alone cannot solve poverty and homelessness in Edmonton.

### **What You Can Do**

Edmonton's Food Bank recommends we continue to support Edmonton's Food Bank and other organizations that help Edmontonians who are hungry and facing food insecurity. At the same time, we need long-term solutions to poverty, hunger and homelessness.

**Ask** the Government of Alberta to review the Supports for Independence program to make sure benefit levels are high enough to meet families' basic needs.

**Encourage** the Government of Alberta to create comprehensive support programs for low-income working people. These programs could include a rent subsidy program and food vouchers to help those facing unexpected crises.

**Talk** to your school board and ask it to review its extra costs and user fees so poor children aren't going without food to participate in school activities.

**Write, telephone and talk** to all levels of government, asking them to work towards local, sustainable jobs which will pay a living wage. Ask governments to develop programs that encourage small-scale business development, full-time employment and jobs that call for a variety of skill levels.