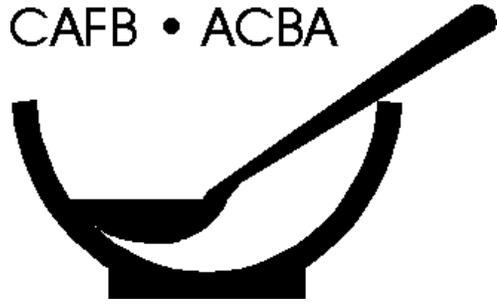


Canadian Association of  
FOOD BANKS

Association Canadienne des  
BANQUES ALIMENTAIRES

CAFB • ACBA



# **HungerCount 2000**

## ***A Surplus of Hunger***

***Canada's Annual Survey of Emergency Food Programs***

***Prepared by Beth Wilson  
with Carly Steinman***

***For the Canadian Association of Food Banks***

***October 2000***

I would like to express my appreciation to the hundreds of food bank volunteers and workers, CAFB staff members, provincial co-ordinators and volunteers who contributed to this study. I would especially like to thank Carly Steinman for her hard work, tenacious effort and original contributions to this project.

# HungerCount 2000

## *A Surplus of Hunger*

### **2000 Food Bank Facts**

- 726,902 people in Canada received emergency groceries from a food bank during the month of March 2000 – almost double the 1989 figure;
- despite reports of economic prosperity, food bank use continues to climb showing a 1.4% increase since 1999;
- growing food bank lines provide no evidence for government's assertion that "Canada has successfully moved the food security agenda"<sup>1</sup>;
- almost 40% of food bank recipients were under the age of 18;
- while food banks in Ontario and Quebec served the largest number of people, Newfoundland had the highest rate of food bank use as a percentage of provincial population at 5.9%;
- most food bank recipients were receiving social assistance; many others were working poor, receiving disability income or other income support such as Employment Insurance; some had no income at all;
- the first food bank in Canada opened in 1981; today, there are at least 615 food banks with an additional 2,213 agencies helping hungry people across the country;
- 267 food banks with 38 agencies operate in communities of less than 10,000 people;
- 77 new food banks opened in Canada within the past 5 years;
- most food banks provide a 3 to 4-day supply of groceries and restrict requests for assistance to once per month;
- 49% of food banks had to take special measures because they either ran out or were running out of food during the month of March – 3% turned people away empty-handed.

# HungerCount 2000

## *A Surplus of Hunger*

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Despite reports of renewed economic prosperity<sup>2</sup>, the number of people in Canada turning to food banks for help has shown no sign of letting up. During the month of March 2000, 726,902 people received groceries from Canadian food banks because they didn't have enough to eat. Since 1989, food bank use has risen more than 92%. Even more dispiriting, children continue to be over-represented in food bank lines. While just over one-quarter of Canada's population is under 18<sup>3</sup>, almost 40% of food bank recipients were children. In 1989, the House of Commons unanimously passed an all-party resolution to end child poverty by the year 2000.<sup>4</sup> The number of children relying on donated food in Canada has increased more than 85% since then.

Food bank use has continued to climb over the last four years. In the past five years, 77 new food banks have opened their doors, suggesting that the economic gains of recent years are not reaching Canada's poorest families. Instead, many food bank workers report an increasing depth of poverty among the families they assist. Although Newfoundland experienced a slight decline in food bank use over the past year, this province continues to show the highest rate of food bank use as a percentage of provincial population at 5.9%. Consistent with previous reports<sup>5,6,7</sup>, most food bank recipients receive social assistance. However, food

banks also report an increasing number of working poor, people receiving income from disability programs, those with other forms of support such as Employment Insurance and Canada Pension Plan, and some with no income at all.

As the number of hungry people and the depth of poverty increases, food banks are less and less equipped to meet the need. This year, 49% of food banks had to take special measures because they ran out or were running out of food. Some were forced to turn people away empty-handed.

When food banks can assist people, there are usually limits to that assistance. Most food banks provide a 3 to 4-day supply of groceries and can only offer assistance once per month. While some food banks operate throughout the week, others are open as little as 2 hours per month. As non-profit organizations, food banks first opened in Canada to address a temporary problem by providing short-term assistance. As drastic cuts to social programs compromise the health and well-being of many citizens, demands on food banks have escalated. Largely volunteer-run and community-based, food banks cannot be Canada's answer to the hunger problem.

Most Canadians are aware of the extent of the hunger problem in Canada and view government as largely responsible for finding solutions. In a recent in-

dependent poll conducted for the Canadian Association of Food Banks by Totum Research, 78% of Canadians consider the hunger problem quite serious or very serious. Seventy-eight percent believe that government cutbacks and inadequate social programs are having a moderate to high degree of impact on the need for food banks. Sixty-three percent of Canadians think that the government has a great deal of responsibility for solving the problem.<sup>8</sup> Yet, policies of the federal government, such as cuts to transfer payments and the elimination of national standards for social assistance programs, have exacerbated Canada's hunger problem.

When government has discussed domestic hunger, the extent of the hunger crisis has been understated and the specific strategies established to end hunger have been inadequate to address the problem. In a progress report to the Committee on World Food Security, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada described the hunger crisis as follows: "While growth has returned to the Canadian economy, there

are still some people who are significantly poorer than others and, as a result, prone to food insecurity."<sup>1</sup> Such descriptions do not accurately reflect the growing number of people living in grinding poverty or the widening gap between the rich and the poor in our country.

While affordable housing is inherently linked to hunger and food insecurity, Canada's Action Plan for Food Security<sup>9</sup> fails to include goals to create a national housing strategy or even any affordable housing. The plan makes no mention of affordable childcare, a major barrier to employment for single-parent families. There is no reference to national standards that would prevent provincial governments from setting social assistance benefits at below subsistence levels, and little discussion of living wage job creation – all measures that would go a long way to eradicating hunger and poverty in Canada. If government will not acknowledge the extent of the hunger crisis and take action toward the eradication of poverty in our affluent country during these prosperous times, when will they?

## **INTRODUCTION**

The HungerCount study is an annual survey of Canada's food banks: non-profit organizations without government funding that provide people in need with groceries. The HungerCount survey was first conducted in 1989 when food bank workers were beginning to recognize the extent of hunger in Canada. It has been conducted annually since 1997. We conduct the HungerCount study to gauge the progress of government in its commitment to address hunger and poverty. The year 2000 marks what was to be a significant occasion. In an all-party unanimous resolution, the House of Commons in 1989 committed to end child poverty by the year 2000.<sup>4</sup> This year's HungerCount report provides a yardstick to measure how far from the mark government has fallen from realizing that goal.

## **METHOD**

As a national organization representing food banks serving 90% of the country's food bank recipients, the Canadian Association of Food Banks (CAFB) has continual contact with food banks and provincial associations across the country. Through these contacts, we identified 615 food banks operating in Canada. A food bank is an organization that provides the public with emergency groceries either directly or via support agencies. A support agency is an organization that regularly receives groceries from a food bank for distribution to the public.

In January 2000, the CAFB mailed HungerCount surveys to each food bank in Canada. The HungerCount survey is a one-page, 14-item questionnaire assess-

ing emergency grocery program and meal program use during the month of March 2000. In addition to contact and basic operating information, we asked food bank staff to report the number of adults, children and households receiving groceries and the number of prepared meals served during the month of March 2000, income sources of food bank recipients, coping strategies used if food banks ran out or were running out of food during the month of March 2000, and trends in food bank use for their area. Food bank staff were asked to count each person receiving groceries only once regardless of the number of times clients received food during the month. March is selected because it is an unexceptional month, without predictable high or low food bank use patterns.

CAFB board members and food bank staff, most of whom have worked in food banks in their respective provinces for several years, acted as provincial coordinators. Completed surveys were returned to provincial coordinators who verified information and returned the surveys to the CAFB office. Through telephone contact, CAFB staff and provincial coordinators attempted to collect information from the remaining food banks who had not responded to the survey. In some cases where actual figures were not available for a particular food bank, provincial coordinators provided estimates based on newspaper reports, previous food bank use and population statistics.

Table 1 shows the number of food banks in Canada and the number and percentage responding to the 2000 HungerCount survey, including the number of their affiliated agencies.

**Table 1.**  
**Food banks in Canada and 2000 HungerCount Participation**

	<b># food banks not including agencies</b>	<b># of food banks responding to 2000 HungerCount</b>	<b>% of food banks responding to 2000 HungerCount</b>	<b># of agencies of responding food banks included in results</b>
Canada	615	547	88.9	2213
British Columbia	85	79	92.9	170
Alberta	70	63	90.0	230
Saskatchewan	19	17	89.5	43
Manitoba	25	16	64.0	221
Ontario*	237	209	88.2	451
Quebec	20	14	70.0	1030
New Brunswick	59	58	98.3	0
Nova Scotia	41	34	82.9	68
Newfoundland	47	45	95.7	0
Prince Edward Island	5	5	100.0	0
Yukon	2	2	100.0	0
NWT	3	3	100.0	0
Nunavut	2	2	100.0	0

\* Although 88.2% of Ontario food banks responded to the survey, additional information was collected through follow-up phone calls. Ontario figures represent 98% of the provincial population.

Although the Manitoba participation rate is lower than rates for other provinces, data reflect food bank use for the majority of the population. With a 64% participation rate, Manitoba food banks improved their participation in the survey substantially compared to last year when less than 40% of Manitoba food banks took part. Manitoba's largest food banks are included in the survey. Efforts are ongoing to improve contact with non-participating rural food banks. In Quebec, more than 200 organizations provide food relief but most are not considered food banks. The vast majority of emergency food programs are operated through 12 large food bank networks referred to as Moissons, all of which participated in the survey. The Moissons distribute groceries to over 1000 support agencies that run emergency food programs. In Ontario, 88.2% of food

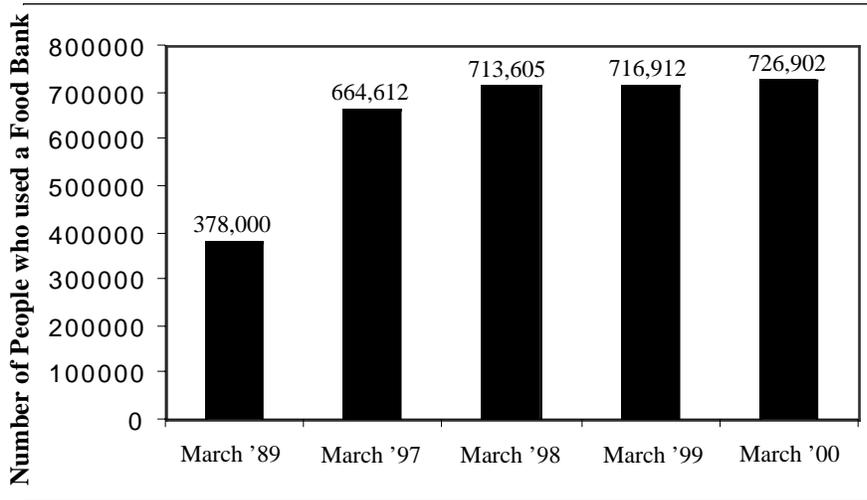
banks completed HungerCount surveys. Through follow-up phone calls to food banks and estimates based on prior use patterns, population statistics and newspaper reports, Ontario provincial coordinator Sue Cox was able to provide food bank use data covering 98% of the provincial population. Using data from Newfoundland Community Sharing Association, provincial coordinator Eg Walters provided a total figure for food bank use for the St. John's and surrounding area, resulting in a 95.7% participation rate.

Even with an 88.9% overall participation rate, results likely provide a conservative estimate of food bank use. Coupled with the fact that many people hesitate to visit a food bank due to negative stigma, the number of people going hungry or at risk of hunger is probably considerably higher. Providing support for this

notion, a recent report from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth found that many families in need turned to family and friends for assistance rather than a food bank.<sup>10</sup>

Ontario and Quebec served the largest number of people. Due to their smaller size, Prince Edward Island and the territories are not shown. Prince Edward Island and Northwest Territories food banks reported a rise in food bank use over 1999 figures. Food bank use in Nunavut and the Yukon showed a slight decrease.

**Fig. 1. One Month of Canadian Food Bank Use 1989 - 2000**



Food bank use in Nunavut and the Yukon showed a slight decrease.

Figure 3 shows the rate of food bank use relative to provincial and territorial populations over the last four years. While Newfoundland food banks reported a decrease in the number of people receiving groceries since 1999, they continued to show the highest rate of food bank use as a percentage of population at 5.9%.

## RESULTS

### Food Bank Use

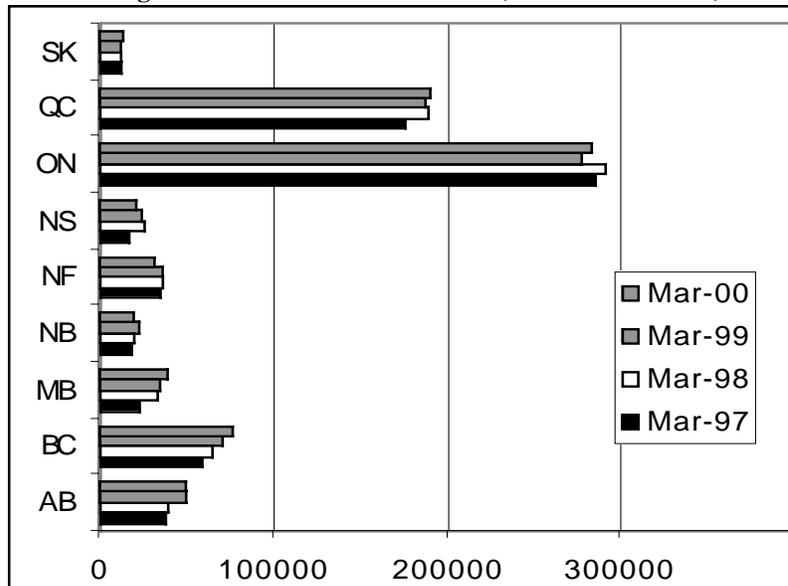
Figure 1<sup>a</sup> shows the dramatic rise in the use of emergency grocery programs since 1989 – an increase of more than 92%. Despite reports of renewed economic prosperity<sup>2</sup>, Canadian food bank lines continue to grow.

Table 2 shows the number of people using food banks by province and territory with child and adult figures for food banks where available.

Figure 2 illustrates the total number of people using food banks by province. Not surprisingly, food banks in

Ontario and Quebec served the largest number of people. Due to their smaller size, Prince Edward Island and the territories are not shown. Prince Edward Island and Northwest Territories food banks reported a rise in food bank use over 1999 figures. Food bank use in Nunavut and the Yukon showed a slight decrease.

**Fig. 2. Provincial Food Bank Use (Absolute numbers)**



**Table 2.**  
**Total Number of People Assisted by Food Banks**

	<i>All Food Banks</i>		<i>Food Banks Reporting Age Breakdown*</i>				
	<i>Total Assisted</i>	<i>Provincial Share (%)</i>	<i>Households</i>	<i>Adults</i>	<i>Children</i>	<i>Total assisted</i>	<i>Number of Food Banks</i>
British Columbia	75,987	10.5	15,891	41,542	25,009	66,551	66
Alberta	48,975	6.7	14,930	26,880	19,876	46,756	58
Saskatchewan	12,865	1.8	5,193	6,838	5,776	12,614	14
Manitoba	38,737	5.3	16,674	20,714	17,789	38,503	11
Ontario*	283,110	38.9	65,455	185,853	97,257	283,110	**
Quebec	189,518	26.1	16,290	99,380	73,444	172,824	12
New Brunswick	19,890	2.7	8,073	10,247	5,605	15,852	33
Nova Scotia	20,917	2.9	6,913	12,092	8,715	20,807	31
Newfoundland	32,057	4.4	664	967	680	1,647	9
PEI	3,541	.5	969	1,876	1,665	3,541	5
Yukon	304	.04	57	61	43	104	1
NWT	782	.1	not reported	296	486	782	3
Nunavut	219	.03	28	58	61	119	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>726,902</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>151,137</b>	<b>406,804</b>	<b>256,406</b>	<b>663,210</b>	<b>244</b> <b>+Ontario</b>

\* Ontario age breakdown figures are based on geographic areas covering 10,240,762 of the provincial population. Household numbers are based on fewer food banks than adults and children numbers.

## Meal Programs

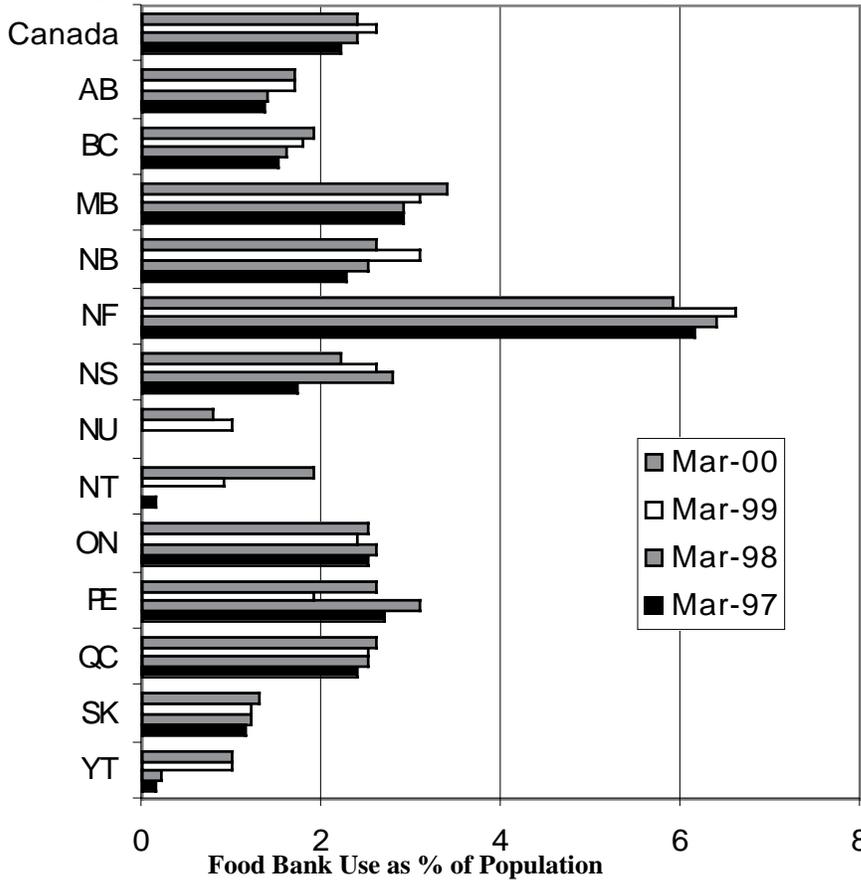
In addition to operating emergency grocery programs, 105 food banks reported serving prepared meals to the public. Among these 105 food banks, 96 provided a total number of meals served during March 2000. In addition, a comprehensive total was calculated for the Greater Toronto Area through the assistance of the Toronto Food Policy Council.<sup>11</sup> During the month of February 2000, the Toronto Food Policy Council conducted an exhaustive study of food relief programs in the Greater Toronto Area. We were able to use this data to provide a more accurate reflection of meal program use in Ontario. During March 2000, 2,779,292

meals were served in food banks across Canada. In comparison, 1,832,746 meals were served during March 1999<sup>b</sup>. In part, this change is due to better reporting for the Greater Toronto Area. However, it also represents an increase in actual meals served. In a comparison of 65 food banks that provided meal totals for 1999 and 2000 HungerCount surveys, excluding food banks in the Greater Toronto Area, we found an increase from 1,432,794

a The 1999 estimate of food bank use in Canada has been revised since the release of the 1999 HungerCount report due to a misreported figure and the collection of new data.

b Due to the collection of new information and a misreported figure, the 1999 total for meals was revised.

**Fig. 3 Provincial/Territorial Food Bank Use (% of pop.)**



and other food bank studies<sup>12</sup>, children continued to be over-represented in food bank lines across Canada. Based on 398 food bank surveys and additional information gathered from follow-up phone calls in Ontario, we found that 38.7% of food bank recipients were children under the age of 18. In contrast, just over one-quarter of the Canadian population is under the age of 18.<sup>3</sup> While provincial and territorial results varied, children remain over-represented in food bank lines in every province and territory in Canada.

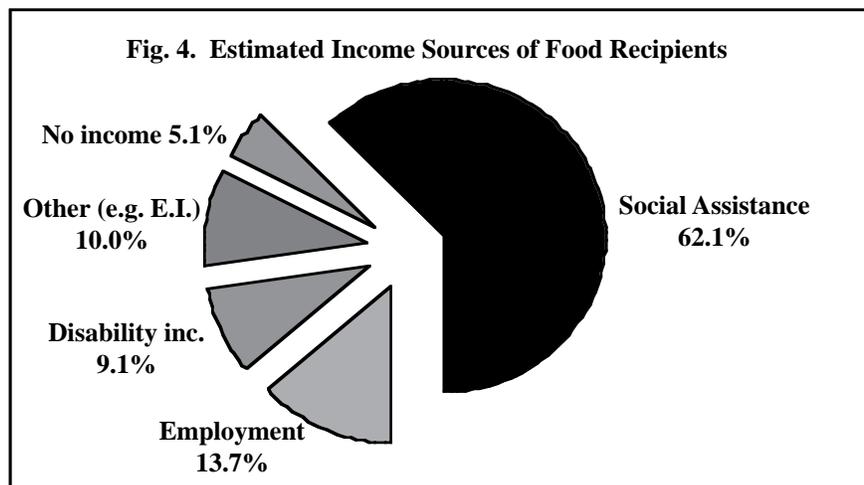
meals served in March 1999 to 2,003,935 meals served in March 2000. Still, current data most likely underestimate the total number of prepared meals served in Canada since the HungerCount survey is a study of food banks rather than meal programs. Many hostels, soup kitchens and shelters are not included in this study.

### Food Bank Recipients

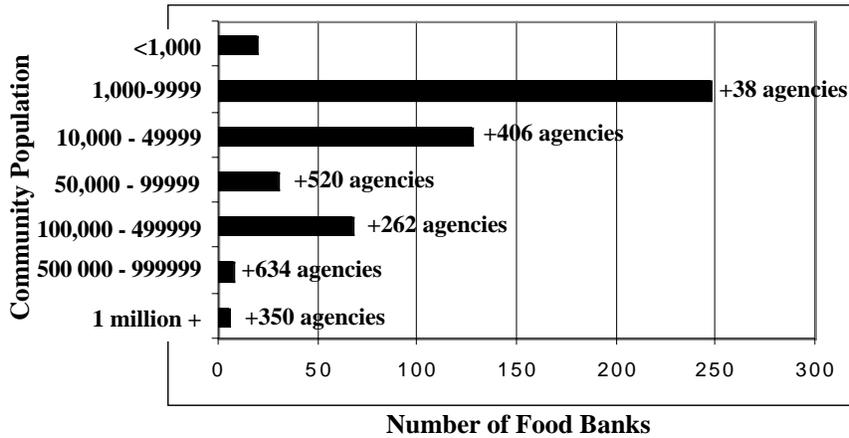
Similar to previous HungerCount reports<sup>5,6,7</sup>

and territory in Canada.

Figure 4 shows the breakdown of food bank recipients' source of income using estimates provided by 262 food banks, weighted by total number of people served



**Fig. 5. Food Banks By Community Population**



in grocery programs. Similar to previous years<sup>5,6,7</sup> and other food bank studies<sup>12</sup>, the majority of food bank recipients were receiving social assistance. However, estimates suggest that substantial numbers of people were working poor, receiving income through disability programs, other income support programs such as Employment Insurance and the Canada Pension Plan; some had no income at all. Similar to last year's estimates, food banks in Alberta reported the lowest percentage of clients receiving social assistance at 40% and the one of the highest percentages of working poor at 26%. Food banks in Manitoba and Prince Edward Island reported even higher percentages of working poor at 31.4% and 45%, respectively.

**Food Bank Operations**

Despite the proliferation of food banks across Canada, people often have misconceptions about how food

banks operate. Most Canadian food banks do not receive any government funding or United Way support. They are non-profit organizations operated largely through the generosity of volunteers. While it is impressive to see what food bank volunteers have accomplished, the volunteer nature of food banks make them vulnerable to instability.

Food banks sometimes cut back on hours of operation or close their doors entirely not because of a lack of need in their area but rather due to changes in the ability of volunteers to continue to provide needed assistance.

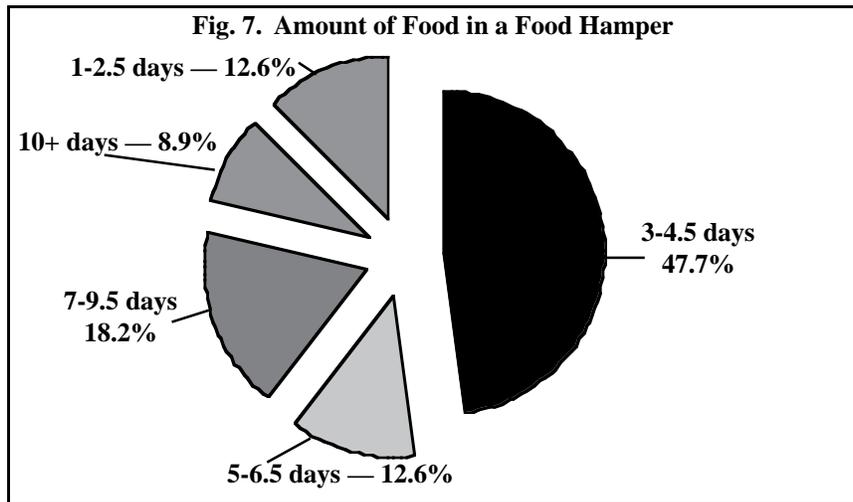
Figure 5 shows the number of food banks and supporting agencies operating in communities with varying populations based on food banks participating in the survey. In contrast to myths that poverty and hunger are restricted to large urban centres, we identified 267 Canadian food banks with 38 agencies operating in rural

**Fig. 6. Number of Food Banks by Years in Operation**



areas with populations of less than 10,000. These food banks also assist people from adjacent rural communities where food banks do not exist.

Figure 6 shows the number of food banks that opened their doors within the



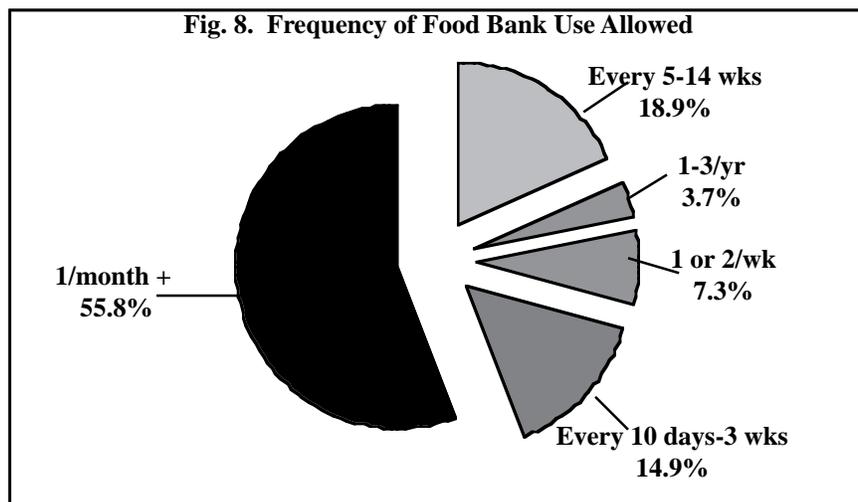
past 5 years, more than 5 years to 10 years, and more than 10 years ago. Figures are based on 473 food banks where information was available. During the past 5 years, a period of relative economic prosperity, 77 new food banks opened in Canada.

Food banks vary widely in their hours of operation. While some keep regular hours throughout the week, others are open as little as 2 hours per month. Many food bank workers have reported an increase in the depth of poverty of their clients, resulting in greater need for their assistance. But most food banks have had to restrict the

amount of food they can provide to people in need and the frequency of use allowed due to insufficient supplies of groceries.

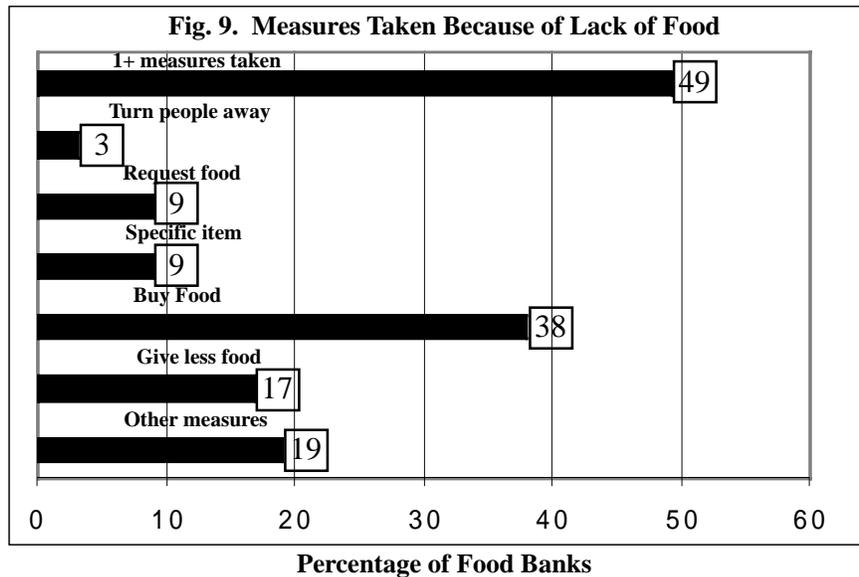
Figure 7 shows the amount of food provided to people in need based on 417 surveys. An additional 9 food banks reported that amount of food is based on individual need rather than a uniform hamper size. Most food banks provide a 3 to 4-day supply of groceries. Some food banks are only able to provide 1 or 2 days worth of food. Food banks that provide larger supplies of groceries often have more restrictive rules around frequency of food bank use,

only allowing people to visit once every couple of months. Figure 8 shows the frequency of food bank use allowed based on 419 surveys. An additional 16 food banks determined frequency of food bank use based on individual circumstances. Most food banks limit the number of times people can receive assistance to once per



month. Some food banks only provide groceries once or twice per year.

Figure 9 shows the percentage of food banks that had to resort to special measures either because they ran out or were running out of food during the month of March 2000. Based on data from 440 surveys, almost half of the food banks reported taking some measure to avoid running out of food. Most resorted to buying food when they usually do not or to buying more food than usual, to avoid turning people away at the door. Other measures reported included holding additional food drives, increasing fundraising activities and praying. Some



food banks rationed existing supplies, providing needy families with less food than usual and requested groceries or specific items from other food banks. A few food banks were forced to turn hungry people away empty-handed.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Food Bank Use in Canada**

At a press conference following a Group of Seven finance ministers' meeting in July 2000, Finance Minister Paul Martin spoke with optimism about the Canadian economy: "There's no doubt the Canadian economy is firing on all cylinders. We are doing very well on virtually every indicator, in the midst of a record period of growth with very strong job creation and inflation well within check."<sup>2</sup> Yet with all cylinders firing, more people in Canada are turning to food banks for help. As a measure of extreme poverty, food bank use reveals the failure of the economic boom to reach those most in need.

Studies of food insecurity, poverty and income inequality are consistent with our finding of increased food bank use. Conservative estimates suggest that between 8% and 10% of Canadians experience hunger or are at risk of hunger.<sup>13</sup> Last year, the National Council of Welfare reported a poverty rate of 17.2% with 5.1 million people living under Statistics Canada's Low Income Cut-Off.<sup>14</sup> Child poverty was even higher at 19.6% affecting over 1.3 million children. Among single-parent mothers, the poverty rate was 57.1%. In addition to high rates of poverty, researchers have reported an increasing depth of poverty among Canadian families and

greater inequality among the rich and the poor.<sup>15</sup> While Canada continues to hold the top ranking on the United Nation's Human Development Index, a measure that reflects average living standards, literacy rates, and life expectancy, we continued to fall on the UN's Human Poverty Index.<sup>16</sup> Canada's place on the Human Poverty Index represents our country's treatment of the poor compared to other industrialized nations. This year, Canada fell from 9<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> place among 17 countries.<sup>17</sup> Our current ranking is reflected in the growing numbers of people turning to food banks for assistance.

Local studies of food bank recipients in the Greater Toronto Area<sup>18</sup> and in Edmonton<sup>19</sup> suggest that many adults and children continue to go hungry and miss meals despite the assistance of a food bank. In a recent Toronto study of food bank recipients, 48% of adults and 33% of children went hungry at least once per week. In an Edmonton study, 48% of food bank recipients reported difficulty meeting the nutritional needs of their children at least some of the time. In that study, 46% of parents and 18% of children missed meals due to a lack of food. In our study, almost half of food banks reported taking special measures because they ran out or were running out of food. Many rationed limited supplies and some turned people away empty-handed. Nutritional studies of food bank recipients have demonstrated the inadequacy of diets reliant on donated food.<sup>20</sup> Food banks cannot be the answer to Canada's hunger problem.

Most Canadians are aware of the extent of the hunger problem in Canada and view government as largely responsible for finding solutions. In a recent survey conducted for the CAFB by Totum

Research, 78% of Canadians considered the hunger problem quite serious or very serious, 78% rated government cutbacks and inadequate social programs as having a moderate or high degree of influence on the need for food banks, and 63% thought the government had a great deal of responsibility for solving the problem.<sup>8</sup> Using comparative data from previous years, researchers also found an increased awareness and concern among Canadians regarding the hunger problem. Today, more than ever, Canadians are looking to government for solutions.

## **Rural and Urban Realities**

Due to the visibility of homeless individuals on city streets, people sometimes imagine that hunger and poverty are solely the problems of large urban centres. Yet, many food banks operate in small rural towns and villages, serving local and neighbouring communities. We located food banks operating in communities so small their town or village was not separately listed in Census data. Although food bank workers are committed to maintaining client confidentiality, using food banks in rural communities can be especially difficult for families concerned about privacy issues. In large cities, anonymity may be easier to maintain.

## **Regional Perspectives**

To provide a sense of regional issues central to food bank use, we invited provincial coordinators and food bank staff to report on local trends.

### **British Columbia**

Food banks in British Columbia continued to experience an increase in use

over the past year. While the majority of food bank recipients

**"I am amazed at the qualifications people have, but still no work."  
(BC food bank worker)**

were receiving social assistance, provincial coordinator Robin Sobrino reported an increase in working poor clients. She commented, "BC food banks are struggling to meet the demand in their own communities. They do not have enough food resources to provide support to their low income clients." Vancouver food banks experienced a record number of people needing help over the winter. The number of people requesting assistance has doubled in just five years.

### **Alberta**

In Alberta, food bank use showed a slight decrease of 3.6% over the past year, no doubt due to the strong oil economy. Yet, need and depth of poverty remained high in this province. Provincial coordinator Debbie LaRocque reported a disturbing trend where food bank clients of 5 to 10 years ago were beginning to return in need of assistance.

**"People that are in an emergency situation seem to be more desperate than before. This has led us to have staff trained in Crisis Management."  
(Alberta food bank worker)**

With one of the largest percentages of working poor, Debbie commented on the nature of many new jobs – "part-time, low paying with no benefits". Low minimum wage and social assistance rates have contributed to the poverty of most food bank recipients in Alberta.

### **Saskatchewan**

Saskatchewan food bank use remained virtually unchanged with 329 more people seeking assistance this year compared to last. The farm crisis continues to impact on families reliant on the sector.

**"People feel it is related to the farm crisis and the economy"  
(Saskatchewan food bank worker)**

### **Manitoba**

In Manitoba, food bank use continued to increase over the past year. Provincial coordinator Susan Swatek reported a slight decrease in the number of children age 6 and under, but at the same time, there was an increase in the number of children 7 to 13 years old,

**"The same story, low income, compensation has been cut off, disability doesn't stretch far enough."  
(Manitoba food bank worker)**

working families and first time clients. Many clients cannot afford a telephone, creating a substantial challenge to finding employment. In Winnipeg, an estimated 30 to 40% of food bank recipients did not have a telephone.

### **Ontario**

In Ontario, food bank use has increased marginally over the past year. In 1995, the provincial government made a 21.6% cut to social assistance rates. Food bank use increased drastically when cuts were implemented and has not decreased to pre-1995 levels. Provincial coordinator Sue Cox commented on the growing number of food bank recipients who are working poor, seniors and people with no income at all. A lack of affordable hous-

ing remains central to the problem of hunger in Ontario.

**"We see an increase in the number of low income families and an increase in the stress level."**

(Ontario food bank worker)

## Quebec

Slightly more people used a food bank in Quebec compared to last year. While food bank use shows no signs of letting up, provincial coordinator Gay Hamilton reported a decline in the pool of food bank volunteers in Quebec, making food banks less able to provide for people during more demanding times.

**"When people have finished paying for their expenses (rent, medicines) there is almost nothing left to buy food with."**

(Quebec food bank worker)

## New Brunswick

Although food bank use figures for New Brunswick were lower than totals for 1999, this decrease is due to improved reporting rather than an actual decline in food bank use. Despite a drop in unemployment levels, New Brunswick food bank use shows no signs of abating. Food bank workers reported increasing numbers of working poor, seniors and young people using food banks and a greater depth of poverty among the working poor. They pointed to a lack of affordable housing, high rent and heating costs and a low mini-

**"Many are laid off from well paying jobs due to closures of business."**

(New Brunswick food bank worker)

mum wage rate as factors affecting their clients.

## Nova Scotia

Food banks in Nova Scotia reported a small decrease in use over the past year.

**"Housing is too expensive. Sick people have fewer means to pay for medication and transport to hospital."**

(Quebec food bank worker)

Yet need remained high. According to provincial coordinator **D i a n n e Swinemar,**

the majority of food bank recipients were single individuals with the second largest group of recipients varying by region. In the regions of Antigonish, Colchester, East Hants, Cumberland and South Shore, couples with children were the second largest family type. In the Cape Breton and Valley regions, single parents were very closely followed by couples with children as the second major group of recipients. Dianne commented on the inadequacy of social assistance rates to provide basic necessities of food and shelter.

**"We are seeing those not entitled to EI because of not enough work weeks."**

(Nova Scotia food bank worker)

## Newfoundland

Food banks in Newfoundland experienced a slight decrease in use over the past year. Provincial coordinator Eg Walters commented on improved economic conditions, resulting in greater employment. Despite this favourable news, Newfoundland

**"The high cost of fuel has had a great impact this past winter."**

(Newfoundland food bank worker)

continued to have the highest rate of food bank use as a percentage of provincial population at 5.9%.

### Prince Edward Island

Food bank use continued to increase in Prince Edward Island over the past year. Provincial coordinator Bev Jennings reported more working poor, young people and seniors using the food bank. She pointed to reduced Employment Insurance benefit rates as part of the problem many clients face.

*“More working poor,  
less money from EI,  
more young people and seniors”  
(PEI food bank worker)*

### The Territories

Food bank use in the Yukon remained stable, while the Northwest Territories showed an increase and Nunavut showed a slight decrease in use. Few food banks operate in Canada’s north. One food bank worker told the CAFB that when their food bank runs out of food, they have a hunt and share what they catch with the community. More traditional means of sharing may explain the lack of food banks in the area. The high cost of shipping food to the north may also contribute to the lack of food banks. Standard food bank operations may not be economically or logistically viable in the territories.

### Federal Commitments to Eradicate Poverty and Hunger

In response to poverty and hunger in Canada, the federal government has made several commitments. As a United Nations member country, Canada is re-

sponsible for upholding the 1948 UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Declaration refers to basic needs as a human right: “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.”<sup>21</sup> Through its endorsement of the 1976 UN Covenant on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights, the Canadian government made a commitment to the “right of everyone to an adequate standard of living ... including adequate food, clothing and housing and the continuous improvement of living conditions”.<sup>22</sup> At the 1996 World Food Summit, Canada recommitted to the “right of everyone to have access to safe and nutritious food, consistent with the right to adequate food and the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger”.<sup>23</sup> Domestically, the House of Commons passed a resolution in 1989 promising to end child poverty by the year 2000.<sup>4</sup> Despite a long line of promises, the number of people in Canada relying on donated food to meet basic needs continues to rise and children continue to be over-represented in food bank populations. Promises have not translated into effective action.

In 1998, the federal Food Security Bureau released the Canada Action Plan for Food Security<sup>9</sup>, as a response to Canada’s commitment to the 1996 Rome Declaration on Food Security.<sup>23</sup> In Commitment 2 of the Declaration, Canada agreed to: “... implement policies aimed at eradi-

cating poverty and inequality and improving physical and economic access by all, at all times, to sufficient, nutritionally adequate and safe food and its effective utilization". While the Plan acknowledges the link between poverty and food insecurity, few concrete recommendations to reduce poverty are provided. They endorse existing programs such as the National Child Benefit (NCB), which provides support to mostly working parents and largely excludes welfare-poor families. Much of the plan is directed at further consultation and research, despite the existence of many reports documenting poverty and hunger in Canada.<sup>5-7,13-15,18,19</sup>

Last year, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada released a progress report describing measures taken by government and civic society toward the Canada Action Plan's goal of domestic and international food security.<sup>1</sup> The authors claim: "Since the World Food Summit and the completion of Canada's Action Plan for Food Security, Canada has successfully moved the food security agenda. Efforts have taken place at all levels of Canadian society, and by a variety of actors, to address food security concerns and, more specifically, to target our social programs to those most in need." Working on the front-lines, food bank staff find no evidence to suggest a successful movement of the food security agenda in Canada. In the two years since the release of the Canada Action Plan, federal government has made no move to address the inadequacy of social assistance programs or the lack of affordable housing in Canada – both major barriers to achieving domestic food security.

## **Social Assistance**

Consistent with other studies<sup>5-7,12</sup>, most food bank recipients received social assistance benefits. In the past few years, we have witnessed radical shifts in the direction and focus of social assistance programs across Canada. While many people are aware of the role of provincial governments in cuts to social assistance rates and the proliferation of so-called "workfare" programs, the role of the federal government has been less recognized. Prior to April 1996, cost-sharing arrangements and transfer payments for social assistance, education and health care were regulated through the Canada Assistance Plan (CAP) and the Established Program Financing Act (EPF).<sup>14</sup> On April 1, 1996, the Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST) replaced CAP and EPF. This change resulted in the introduction of block funding which removed provincial requirements to maintain funding levels for specific programs, leaving social assistance benefits vulnerable to cuts. The introduction of CHST also resulted in the loss of national standards for welfare, including measures established to ensure adequate social assistance rates and prohibit mandatory work-for-welfare programs. The loss of CAP created an environment that allowed provincial governments to make deep cuts to social assistance benefits and institute workfare programs. In addition, the federal government reduced transfer payments to the provinces, resulting in less money for social programs and providing a justification for social assistance cuts. Social assistance programs were particularly vulnerable, as they may have appeared less relevant to middle class Ca-

nadians. While federal transfer payments have declined drastically, their importance to poor households has increased in significance.<sup>24</sup> In 1981, transfers made up 38.2% of total income for households in the lowest income quintiles; by 1997, transfers were 90.0% of their total income. Federal cuts have contributed to increased poverty among welfare-poor and working-poor families.

Despite Canada's international commitment to prohibit mandatory work for welfare assistance<sup>22</sup>, workfare schemes have become central components of most social assistance programs across the country. Workfare programs not only violate international commitments prohibiting forced work for welfare, they also undermine Canadian commitments to ensure an adequate standard of living for all citizens since the failure to participate can result in the loss of welfare assistance.

As the income maintenance program of last resort, people who lose their benefits are likely without other resources and may become homeless and destitute. Consistent with an emerging population who have lost their social assistance benefits, we find an increasing number of food bank recipients without income of any kind and increased use of prepared meal programs.

Ideologically, workfare programs are based on pejorative notions of social assistance recipients as lazy and dependent. Taxpayers and social assistance recipients are constructed as two distinct groups, where taxpayers contribute economically and substantively to society while social assistance recipients do not. Threats of losing their meagre welfare incomes are perceived as necessary steps to "motivate" social assistance recipients

to engage in work. Food bank studies have demonstrated the fallacy of this logic. In a recent study<sup>18</sup>, researchers found that 40% of Toronto-area food bank recipients had more than 15 years of work experience. Twelve percent were employed but did not earn enough to afford housing and an adequate diet. In times of need, these workers who have paid into social welfare systems find themselves abandoned by those systems and blamed for their circumstances. These realities are absent from the ideology underlying workfare legislation.

Practically, workfare programs have failed to deliver an adequate standard of living for many participants. Much of the training provided has been aimed at employment in the lower-paying, unstable job sector: "... we witness the emergence of a large group of social assistance recipients who are excluded from mainstream jobs and related income, and who move from training to social benefits and back again."<sup>25</sup>

Rather than create sustained, meaningful and economically sufficient employment, workfare programs have largely resulted in a new class of "working poor", as those people who do move off of workfare move into low-paying, minimum wage jobs. Food bank reports of growing numbers of working poor clients are consistent with this analysis. Foremost, social assistance programs must provide recipients with an adequate income to meet the basic needs of life while providing supports to help people gain greater self-sufficiency in the long term. Current systems do not appear to meet either objective.

### **Affordable Housing**

Lack of affordable housing remains a central issue for food bank recipients. In

Edmonton, 68% of families using food banks spent more than 30% of their income on housing.<sup>19</sup> Fifty-four percent of Edmonton families turning to the food bank for help live on less than \$1000 per month. In Toronto, 64% of food bank recipients spend more than half of their income on housing.<sup>20</sup> Dollars remaining are insufficient to cover food, transportation and other necessities. In Edmonton, not only are food bank recipients at risk of homelessness but 28% of families using the food bank had been homeless in the past five years. In Toronto, food bank recipients with housing are often only able to maintain substandard units.<sup>26</sup> These studies have also found that some food

bank recipients are not able to pay to heat their homes. In addition, many food bank recipients do not have telephones, representing a significant barrier to finding employment and a compromise to personal safety.

In Table 3, we examine the adequacy of minimum wage, social assistance and disability support programs for single individuals across Canada. The table shows average rental costs for 1-bedroom apartments and vacancy rates in 10 major cities in Canada, the monthly earnings for people with full-time minimum wage jobs, individuals receiving social assistance and those receiving provincial disability support, and rental costs as a per-

Table 3. Housing costs for minimum wage workers, social assistance recipients and disability program recipients

City	Avg montly rent for 1-bedroom apt. (October 1999) <sup>27</sup>	Gross monthly minimum wage (% toward rent) <sup>28</sup>	Monthly provincial welfare income (% toward rent) <sup>29</sup>	Monthly provincial disability income (% toward rent) <sup>29</sup>	City vacancy rate <sup>27</sup> (October 1999)	Unemployment rate (seasonally adjusted, March 2000) <sup>30</sup>
Vancouver	\$685	\$1144 (59.9)	\$507 (135.1)	\$774 (88.5)	2.7	7.0
Calgary	\$602	\$944 (63.8)	\$401 (150.1)	\$557 (108.1)	2.8	4.9
Regina	\$460	\$960 (47.9)	\$441 (104.3)	\$651 (70.7)	1.4	4.6
Winnipeg	\$458	\$960 (47.7)	\$446 (215.2)	\$666 (68.8)	2.8	5.3
Toronto	\$770	\$1096 (70.3)	\$520 (148.1)	\$930 (82.8)	.8	5.7
Montreal	\$470	\$1104 (42.6)	\$490 (95.9)	\$712 (66.0)	3.3	8.3
Fredericton	\$438	\$920 (47.6)	\$264 (165.9)	\$558 (78.5)	1.5	9.7
Halifax	\$527	\$912 (57.8)	\$369 (142.8)	\$714 (73.8)	3.6	9.7
St-John's, Nfld.	\$473	\$880 (53.8)	\$90 (525.6)	\$697 (67.9)	9.3	17.6
Charlottetown	\$438	\$896 (48.9)	\$443 (98.9)	\$684 (64.0)	5.0	11.5

centage of income. It is important to note that minimum wage figures represent gross rather than after-tax, take-home incomes, and that average rental costs are based on all 1-bedroom apartments (in privately initiated rental apartment structures of three units or more) rather than all *available* units, which may be considerably more expensive.

Families that pay more than 30% of their income toward shelter are considered to have a core housing need and to be at risk of homelessness.<sup>31</sup> In the following table, average housing costs are in excess of 30% for all minimum wage earners, and social assistance and disability program recipients. Most social assistance rates are insufficient to even cover the full cost of housing, much less food or other necessities. It is no surprise that the majority of food bank recipients receive social assistance or that a growing number of working poor and people receiving disability support are seeking help from food banks.

In December 1999, the federal government committed \$753 million toward homelessness initiatives.<sup>32</sup> However, none of these funds were earmarked for the development of permanent housing. Amidst criticism over the lack of a national housing strategy, Federal Coordinator for Homelessness Claudette Bradshaw announced that

**"I have no intention of doing studies on homelessness.**

**We've been studied and studied and studied, I've always said**

**"I could fill every elevator on Parliament Hill with the studies that have been done on child abuse, poverty..."**

**We've been studied. I don't want to travel across Canada to study."**

**Claudette Bradshaw  
Federal Coordinator for Homelessness**

these funds were a first step in the fight against homelessness. In September 2000, federal, provincial and territorial housing ministers met in Fredericton to discuss the second step.<sup>33</sup> At the close of the meeting, Federal Minister Responsible for the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation Alfonso Gagliano announced the government's plan to conduct further research and consultation, despite the existence of volumes of detailed and costly housing research conducted over the past decade.<sup>34-39</sup> No new funds were committed, no national strategy released, and no targets for the creation of affordable housing units set.

At the same time, the federal surplus was calculated at \$12.3 billion.<sup>40</sup> Municipal leaders estimate the total cost of an effective national housing strategy at \$2 billion per year for 10 years.<sup>41</sup> The federal government has shown that it can raise the funds but lacks the political will to address this crisis. The creation and implementation of a national housing strategy is crucial to the lives of homeless people and

those pre-homeless individuals and families in food bank lines across Canada.

### **More Children in Food Bank Lines**

In 1989, the House of Commons through an all-party unanimous resolution committed to end child poverty in Canada by the year 2000.<sup>4</sup> Government has not

only failed to realize this goal, child poverty and the number of children relying on donated food have increased substantially since then.<sup>5-7,14</sup>

In 1997, the federal government introduced the NCB, a program to help low income families with children.<sup>42</sup> The Canada Child Tax Benefit (CCTB) became the centrepiece of the NCB system. Current funding levels provide a \$1805 benefit for a family's first child and \$1605 for each subsequent child.<sup>43</sup> This year, the government indexed the CCTB to keep the benefit from losing value with rising inflation. Still, the CCTB as a measure to address child poverty is deeply flawed. With the exception of Newfoundland, New Brunswick and Manitoba, provincial governments treat the CCTB as income and clawback the benefit from welfare-poor families. The Manitoba provincial government announced this year that they would stop the clawback for the most recent funding increase of the CCTB.<sup>44</sup> They also announced further measures to begin to address inequities for welfare-poor families. Yet, most of Canada's poorest families do not receive any support from the CCTB. Some provinces use the clawbacked funds to provide children's programs that benefit families from a wider income spectrum. Welfare-poor families cannot afford to lose any benefits for their children in order to support families with more resources than themselves. The federal government has a responsibility to assist Canada's poorest families.

In September 2000, the federal government committed \$2.2 billion in early child development programs over the next five years.<sup>45</sup> Provincial governments have the power to decide how funds will be spent within four priority areas: "1) pro-

mote healthy pregnancy, birth and infancy, 2) improve parenting and family supports, 3) strengthen early child development, learning and care; and 4) strengthen community supports." It is unclear how this program will affect the quality of life of families without sufficient income to pay the rent and feed their children. If the CCTB provides any indication of the priorities of most provincial governments, we may see the introduction of programs that do not significantly impact on the lives of welfare-poor children. Current talks focus on health care spending, but lack of resources to ensure a nutritionally adequate diet is not recognized as a health care issue. Governments must come to recognize how inadequate social programs pose a health care threat to many.

## Conclusion

Access to adequate and nutritionally sound food is a human right denied many people in Canada. The majority of Canadians recognize the extent of the hunger problem and support government action to address it. If Canada is to fulfill its international commitments, government must address the systemic problems underlying hunger and food insecurity. Hunger in affluent Canada is a national crisis requiring action at all levels of government. Our elected representatives must create affordable housing through a national housing strategy, employ national standards to address the inadequacy of social assistance and disability support programs, and to improve supports for the working poor including affordable childcare. If government will not take action now with all cylinders of the Canadian economy firing, when will they?

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