

Relationship Between Food Banks and Food Insecurity in Canada

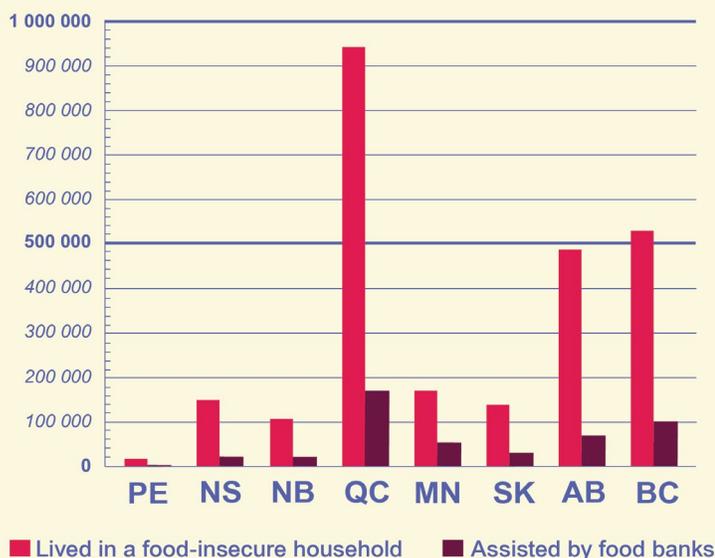
Food insecurity - the inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints - is monitored by Statistics Canada through the Canadian Community Health Survey. Based on the most recent national estimates from 2012, over **4 million Canadians are living in food-insecure households.**

Food insecurity is a serious public health problem in Canada because it negatively impacts physical, mental, and social health, and costs our healthcare system considerably.

Despite widespread recognition that food insecurity is first and foremost an income problem, policy responses in Canada have focused on food provision, with an emphasis on strengthening the charitable food sector¹.

The comparison of national statistics demonstrates a substantial disconnect between the number of people living in a food-insecure household versus those accessing a food bank.² In 2012, there were 5 times more people living in a food-insecure household than those accessing a food bank.² More recent data from provinces that measured food insecurity in 2015 - 2016 suggests that this large disconnect persists, with a 3- to 7-fold difference between the two statistics.

Number of individuals living in food-insecure households and number of individuals assisted by food banks, 2015-16



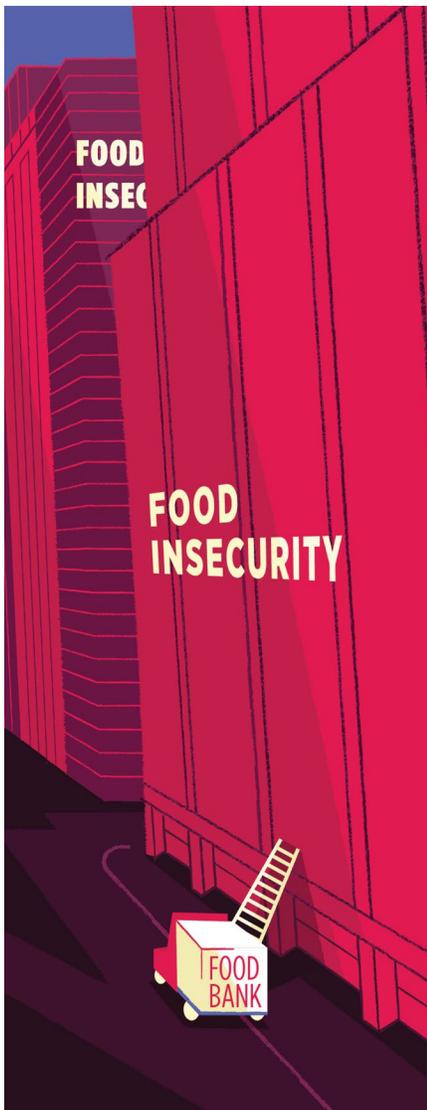
Data sources: Statistics on food insecurity estimated from the 2015-2016 cycle of the Canadian Community Health Survey. Statistics on food bank use represent provincial averages for the number of individuals assisted in March 2015 and March 2016 reported by Food Banks Canada in its HungerCount reports^{3,4}.

Using data from nearly 1,600 households living in New Brunswick, Ontario, Quebec and Saskatchewan, a recent study examined how common using a food bank is among households experiencing a severe level of food insecurity². The results showed that most severely food-insecure households did not report accessing a food bank. **Food bank use was one of the least common strategies employed by severely food-insecure households when they were short of money.** These households were much more likely to ask for financial help from friends or family and to miss bill payments. This suggests that most people who are struggling with severe food insecurity do not see food banks as a solution to their problem.

Probability of severely food-insecure households using food banks and other strategies when short of money



Data source: 2008 Canadian Household Panel Survey Pilot². Severe food insecurity was assessed with one question asking whether in the last 12 months household members ever had to eat less because they didn't have enough money to buy food.



While using a food bank may provide temporary food relief for those who access these programs, **there is no evidence that food banks are a solution to the very serious problem of food insecurity in Canada.** Research suggests that increasing the economic resources of low-income households reduces food insecurity⁵⁻⁹, providing a foundation for effective, evidence-based policy responses to this problem. Given the scale of the problem of food insecurity in Canada, governments' continued focus on improving and expanding food banks as a primary response to food insecurity is ill-founded.

References:

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