SOCIAL SERVICES CLIENTS AND THEIR FOOD BANK USE IN REGINA:
An Exploration

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PREFACE

This paper constitutes the second part of a two-part research report. The first part, co-authored with Linda Yadlowski, was published in October 1998 as a working paper by the Social Policy Research Unit, University of Regina, under the title *Food Banks in Canada: A Review of the Literature*. The present text is based on information provided by Saskatchewan’s Department of Social Services and by the Regina and District Food Bank Inc. The interpretation and conclusions contained herein do not necessarily represent those of the Government of Saskatchewan, the Saskatchewan Department of Social Services or the Regina and District Food Bank Inc. The author would like to thank Ed Bloos and Doug Scott for making this study possible.
I. INTRODUCTION AND HISTORY OF THE RESEARCH

Graham Riches (1997) estimates that, since 1995, 2.5 million people a year receive food from charitable food banks. Yet, the food bank is a seriously understudied phenomenon. Few studies have presented hard data on the characteristics of users (age, sex, ethnicity, etc.), on the pattern of use among food bank clients (e.g., occasional versus repeated use) or on the reasons why clients use this type of service. While food banks collect a certain amount of information for administrative purposes, they generally have neither the time nor the resources to conduct scholarly research on this material. However, food bank officials may show interest in having researchers use their data, provided that sufficient safeguards are in place in the study design to guarantee confidentiality in the treatment of the information.

* * *

Interest in researching, in some depth, the profile of clients using Regina’s food bank arose during an informal interview with Ed Bloos, General Manager of the Regina and District Food Bank, in September 1997. In this interview, Mr. Bloos indicated that the community has several misconceptions about who uses Regina’s food bank, and how it is used. He estimated that 40 percent of the people relying on the food bank do so only about once a year and that about 40 percent of all clients are single mothers. This contrasted, in his view, with a public perception of the food bank being used mostly by the same group of single men who visit again and again.

Bloos insisted that the majority of the Regina and District Food Bank clients do not need the service all the time (every week). (This statement was contrary to what Marlene Webber (1992: 45) had suggested in her book Food for Thought.) Bloos also estimated that between 85 and 95 percent of his clients received social assistance (SAP). He added that information collected by Saskatchewan food banks seems to indicate that, of the 78,000 or so people receiving social assistance in the province, about 25,000 use a food bank each month.

In October 1997, discussions were held with Ed Bloos regarding the possibility of conducting a research project on the characteristics of Saskatchewan Social Services clients using Regina’s food bank. It was proposed to use the limited information contained in the food bank’s computerized database and to augment it with information from the Department of Social Services’ Automated Client Index. Matching data from the two systems would be possible given that both the food bank and the Department of Social Services use a Health Service Number (HSN) to identify clients. A new database would be created through this matching process. It would not cover all food bank clients, but only those who would also appear in the Department’s Client Index. While some individuals would be “lost” in this fashion, a greater amount of information would be gained on the remaining individuals because the Client Index contains more elements of information than the food bank computerized record. The creation of the new database would permit, for the first time, an innovative large-scale descriptive investigation of people served by both the food bank and the Department of Social Services. The hope was that, through sub-group comparisons and other techniques, new information could be
uncovered to potentially help both the Department of Social Services and the food bank better understand their common clientele.

The proposal was received with interest at the food bank; however, the food bank director raised concerns about the confidential character of the information he was being asked to provide. He was also concerned that his organization could be criticized for passing this information along to a government agency (the Department of Social Services) without being properly authorized to do so. The researcher recognized these concerns as legitimate and discussions ensued over a few weeks. It was clarified that the information provided by the food bank would be used for research purposes only, that the work being done would focus only on trends and characteristics and that only aggregated data would be used in the reports. Assurances were provided that the information would not be used to monitor the use of Social Services by any specific individual client of the food bank.

At the end of October 1997, it was agreed that the food bank would provide the researcher with a copy of its client database, but that all names and addresses would first be erased from the record. In November 1997, an Application for Approval of Research Procedures was submitted to the University of Regina’s Research Ethics Review Committee. The Committee approved the application in December 1997, and the food bank’s information records were transferred to the researcher in January 1998.

II. EXPLORATORY RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The first aim of this research report is to produce a demographic profile of people who are clients of Saskatchewan Social Services and who use the food bank in Regina. The second aim is to further explore the characteristics of this population through a series of specific research questions:

*Is there a seasonal variation in food bank use?*
*Are changes in food bank use related to changes in the SAP caseloads in Regina?*
*How frequently do clients use the food bank?*
*Do repeat or multiple users have different characteristics from once-a-year users?*
*Are multiple users also heavier consumers of Social Services (measured by the number of involvements in different programs)?*
*To what extent are food bank users involved in Social Services other than SAP?*
*Are adult clients receiving SAP who have dependent children over-represented as food bank users; are they more intensive food bank users?*
*What proportion of young single mothers on SAP in Regina use the food bank?*

III. METHODOLOGY

At the beginning of the research process, in January 1998, the researcher was faced with several problems to be solved before proceeding with the investigation. The original information, provided in a PARADOX file by the food bank, covered a period beginning August 1993 and ending September 1997. However, important problems of reliability were found with information covering the months of September and October 1993. It
was decided to set aside information pertaining to those two months as well as the previous month, August 1993. It was also found that the information was incomplete for the month of November 1995 (a corrupted file problem), but in this case we chose to keep what we had. Hence, it can be said that this study covers food bank visits between November 1, 1993 and September 30, 1997. The study covers client visits during a 47-month period, with incomplete information for the month of November 1995.

Even for the months for which information was complete and seemingly reliable, the data was not provided in a form readily usable by the researcher. This was mainly due to the fact that the food bank’s unit of data collection is the client’s visit (“pick-up”) to the food bank, not the individual nor her/his household. This presented a serious challenge since the researcher wanted to be able to use the individual and/or the household (a proxy for “family composition”) as the units of analysis. Using the HSN of clients making pick-ups, individually and in combination with others, it was possible to construct two databases: one containing information on food bank users as individuals and another containing information on food bank users in household groupings. The database organized on the basis of individuals was then augmented with information contained in the Department’s Automated Client Index.

The food bank provided information covering 13,398 different individual clients. It was found that the Health Services Numbers for 794 of these food bank clients were invalid (misreported or wrongly recorded), leaving us with 12,604 individuals with a valid health number. With reason to believe that information on children had not been entered as consistently as for adults by the food bank personnel throughout the study period, it was eventually decided to remove all individuals under 18 years of age at the time of their last visit to the food bank. There were 2,930 of these individuals, thus leaving 9,674 food bank clients (aged 18 and over) with a valid Health Services Number. When these individuals were matched with the Department’s Automated Client Index, it was found that 849 (9%) of them had no recorded involvement with the Department of Social Services. In the end, there were 8,825 adult food bank clients who had been involved with the Department of Social Services in some way at some time in the past. The population of this study is therefore one that lies at the intersection of the interventions by Regina’s food bank and the Department of Social Services. This is the vast majority (91%) of food bank users.
Figure 1

Study Population: Adult Food Bank Users Involved with Saskatchewan Social Services in Regina

Regina Food Bank Adult Clients 1993-1997 (9,674)

Study Population (8,825)

Regina DSS Adult Clients Sept. 1996 (12,816)
IV. DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF SOCIAL SERVICES CLIENTS USING THE FOOD BANK IN REGINA

Of the 9,674 adult food bank users with valid health numbers, 8,825 or 91% have had an involvement with the Department of Social Services. Some of their basic demographic characteristics follow:

**Age and Sex Distributions of Adult Clients**

Although many users of the food bank are children under 18 years old, persons in this age group are excluded from the following analysis for reasons described earlier. The age
distribution of the study population ranges from 18 to 72 years, with a mean age of 33.9 and a median age of 32. About a quarter of adult clients (24.7%) are below the age of 25.

The shape of this age distribution closely resembles that of adult SAP beneficiaries in Regina. As compared to Regina SAP beneficiaries, the study population contains a slightly higher proportion in the younger age group (18 and 19 years old), as well as in the older age groups (45 to 49, 50 to 59 and 60+). In turn, it presents slightly lower proportions for people aged between 20 and 39.

Figure 3
Comparison of Age Group Distributions

Comparisons with the general adult population of Regina (1998 reveal that both the study population and the population of SAP beneficiaries over-represent those between 20 and 39 years and underrepresent the older age groups. The difference is striking for those 60 years and over. These folks represent nearly 20% of the general adult population in Regina, but only 3.6% of the study population (and only 2.3% of Regina SAP beneficiaries). Of course, part of this difference can be explained by the fact that few SAP beneficiaries are over 65 years old because other income security programs exist for seniors.

The study population contains roughly equal numbers of males (49.5%) and females (50.5%). In comparison, we find a somewhat higher proportion of females in the Regina adult SAP population (46.6% males versus 53.4% females), as well as in the general adult population of the city (46.5% males versus 53.5% females). Therefore, males seem slightly over-represented in the study population.
Proportion of Aboriginal Clients

People with aboriginal ancestry (status and non-status Indians, Metis and Inuits) represent almost half (49.1%) of the study population and are therefore largely over-represented.\(^9\)

Figure 4

![Diagram showing constitutional status of study population](image)

- Status Indian: 40%
- Non-Status Indian: 3%
- Metis: 6%
- Other*: 1%
- Non-Aboriginal: 50%

* Includes Unknown (.6%) and Inuit (.1%).

In comparison, adult aboriginal people represented 30.7% of all Saskatchewan Social Services clients in Regina in September 1996, whereas aboriginal people represented only 7.1% of the general population in the City of Regina in 1996, according to Statistics Canada (1998).\(^10\)

Household Composition

The study population of 8,825 adults who were both users of Regina’s food bank and clients of the Department represented 7,155 different household units\(^11\). Just over one-half of households (53%) contained children. Households with two or more adults and children were most common, accounting for 27% of households. These were followed closely by households headed by a lone female parent (23%). Households headed by a lone male parent accounted for only 3% of households. Single men formed the largest grouping of households without children (25%), followed by households of two or more adults without children (14%) and single women (8%).

Figure 5
The study population differs somewhat from the population of SAP cases typically found in Regina Region in that it contains more families with children. Using SAP data from September 1996 as a reference month, Figure 6 below compares the household composition of the study population to that of the Regina SAP population. While the proportion of lone parent households is similar in both populations (Study Pop.- 26% vs. SAP – 32%), the study population contains a much higher proportion of households with two or more adults and children (Study Pop.- 27% vs. SAP – 10%). The study population also contains many fewer single adult households than SAP (Study Pop.- 33% vs. SAP – 55%).

Figure 6
V. EXPLORATION OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Question 1: Is there a seasonal variation in food bank use?
It was speculated that food bank use might be higher during the winter months due to the unavailability of backyard garden produce, or it may rise with the publicity generated around annual food drives. Neither hypothesis was confirmed by the data, although a clear pattern of variation does appear. As demonstrated in the figure below, food bank use consistently peaks during March and May, and, to a lesser extent, in November. Food bank use is lowest in July, October, and the holiday months of December and January. Further investigation remains to be done to attempt to account for this pattern. The finding that food bank use actually declines during October and December is particularly surprising given that the food bank holds its two largest food drives during these months.
Question 2:  Are changes in food bank use related to changes in the SAP caseload in Regina?
It was expected that food bank use would vary directly with changes in the SAP caseload in Regina. Despite following the same general pattern over the 47 month study period (see Figure 8 below), variation in food bank use was found to be only weakly correlated with variation in the total SAP caseload ($r = .30$). Even weaker correlation coefficients were produced when comparing food bank visits against various subsets of the total SAP population like males and females, and aboriginal people and non-aboriginal people.
The only subset of the SAP population to produce a stronger correlation coefficient was the group of SAP clients who had been classified as “employable” \( (r = .36) \). This is understandable given that this portion of the SAP population does not include those who are intellectually or physically challenged and, therefore, fluctuates more than other subsets of SAP clients.
The relationship between changes in the SAP employable caseload and changes in the volume of food bank visits is more obvious when both are measured as three month moving averages, as in Figure 10 on the next page. Displaying measures of these services as moving averages smooths the trend lines by removing erratic month-to-month fluctuations, thereby allowing broad shifts in service use to become more apparent. When this is done it is clear that, despite a still weak correlation coefficient ($r = .32$), food bank use and employable SAP caseloads do fluctuate in tandem. More important, changes in food bank use seem to precede similar changes in the employable SAP caseload by a period of about two months. In fact, adjusting for a two month time lag improves the correlation between food bank visits and the SAP employable caseload noticeably ($r = .43$). This suggests that financially distressed persons may resort to visiting the food bank before applying for financial assistance. If this is the case, changes in food bank visits might actually be used to help predict changes in SAP usage. Further exploration of the relationship between food bank use and SAP is needed before coming to any firm conclusions in this regard.
Question 3: How frequently do clients use the food bank?
The frequency of use issue is an important one if we wish to better understand whom the food bank serves. Contrary to a common perception, it does not serve the same people over and over. To look at frequency of use, and for most of the remaining sections of this paper, 1996 is used as a reference year (N=4,513 clients). In that year, 26.6% of individuals in the study population used the food bank only once. Another 12.4% used it twice. This means that 39% of the users visited the food banks only once or twice in 1996. A majority of users (53.4%) visited the food bank 4 times that year or less. About 2/3 of the users (62%) used it 6 times or less, which is equivalent to once every other month or less. A little more than ¾ of the users (77.4%) visited the food bank 12 times or less, which is equivalent to once a month or less. Only an extremely small proportion of users (0.1% or 8 people) made the maximum allowable use of the food bank, that is 52 times during the year (or once a week)! The average number of visits to the food bank for all users in 1996 was 8.25. The frequency distribution of visits is presented in the histogram below (Figure 11).
Although women visited the food bank slightly more often on average than men (8.45 versus 8.04 times), the difference was small. When we look at the average number of visits in 1996 for different age groups, we find a striking tendency for people to use the food bank more frequently as they grow older. For instance, the average number of visits in 1996 was 5.4 for those aged 20 to 24 versus 12.2 for those aged 55 to 59. There is, therefore, a correlation ($r = 0.24$) between the age of the user and the frequency of use. This could be due to older users not having the same access to services or social support available to younger users outside of the food bank. Further research would be needed to confirm this.
Another interesting finding is related to food bank users of aboriginal ancestry. As we know, they represent almost half of the study population and are therefore highly over-represented in the pool of users. Yet, it is interesting to note that the average number of visits to the food bank by aboriginal adults in 1996 was a little less than that of non-aboriginal clients (7.9 versus 8.5). This difference is small but real. Hence, in proportion, there are many more aboriginal than non-aboriginal clients using the food bank, but aboriginal users tend to use it somewhat less frequently than do non-aboriginal users.

In terms of family or household composition, we can see in the next bar graph (Figure 13) that single women, single men, and households with two or more adults with children are categories with the highest frequencies of use in 1996. The lone male parent and the lone female parent categories have the lowest frequencies of use. When households are dichotomized between all those with children and all those without children, it is found that households without children have a higher average number of visits in 1996 (7.6 versus 6.9 for households with children). This runs contrary to the notion that clients might visit the food bank more often when children are members of their households. Perhaps households with children are more likely to receive assistance from other agencies?
Question 4: Do repeat or multiple users have different characteristic from once-a-year users?

The difference between the characteristics of repeat and once-only users of the food bank in a given year is another area worth investigating. Here, multiple (or repeat) users are those who visited the food bank at least twice in 1996 (73.4%), as opposed to those who made only one visit to the food bank in 1996 (26.6%). There was no difference in the sex distribution of the two groups (48.2% male, 51.8% female for both groups). In terms of age, however, the mean age of multiple users (35.9) was quite a bit higher that of once-only users (31.1). This difference is consistent with what has been said above regarding the relationship between age and the frequency of use. In terms of household composition, there were few differences between the two groups, except perhaps that the proportion of lone female parents was slightly higher among once-only users (21.7%) than among multiple users (18.6%). There was also little difference between aboriginal and non-aboriginal users in terms of their distribution in the once-only and multiple users groups, the proportion of aboriginal multiple users (75%) being slightly higher than that of non-aboriginal multiple users (71.5%). Overall then, except for age, there were few noticeable differences in the general characteristics of repeat and once-only users of the food bank in 1996.

Question 5: Are multiple users also heavier consumers of Social Services, as measured by the number of involvements in different programs?

Assessing whether multiple users of the food bank also “consume” social services more intensively than once-only users of the food bank is a difficult task to accomplish with
the data at hand. At least three forms of service utilization intensity can be distinguished. The first would refer, in fact, to the utilization of a variety of services. That is, the scope of the intervention. In this case, one would like to know how many different programs (or groups of programs) a person is involved with. The second form of intensity would refer to the frequency of the intervention. In this case one would like to know how often a person used (entered into) a particular program or group of programs. The third form would refer to the duration of the intervention. In this case one would like to know for how long the person used the program.

The scope of intervention

To look at the scope of intervention, four program groups were defined (financial services, family services, young offender services and community living services) and it was determined whether each individual was involved in one, two, three or all four of these program groups during the 1996 reference year. There was no concern, at this stage, about the frequency nor the duration of the involvements, only with their variety.

About three quarters of clients (74.3%) were involved in only one program group, 22.9% were involved in two program groups, 2.7% were involved in three program groups and only 2 individuals (0%) were involved in all four program groups. There were no large differences in this distribution between once-only and multiple users of the food bank. On average, once-only users of the food bank were involved in 1.26 program groups versus 1.29 for multiple users. Thus, it seems fair to say that in terms of scope or variety of programs used, there is no association between social services utilization and multiple/once-only use of the food bank.

The frequency of intervention

The social services information for this study is based on what is called an involvement in a program. An involvement has a start date (the file is open) and an end date (the file is closed). Whether the period between these dates is, say, 2 or 10 months, this time segment will be counted as ONE involvement. Hence, the number of involvements simply reflects how many times a file was open and closed and is therefore an imperfect measure of the frequency of intervention.

In fact, it is difficult to present a consistent interpretation of what this measure really means. For instance, a client who has been receiving SAP only for two (concurrent) months during 1996 would have one SAP involvement whereas a client who was receiving SAP for two periods of one month each (but not concurrent months) would have two SAP involvements for that year. Yet, both clients were receiving SAP during only two months of that year. It can become more complex. On one hand, you may have a client who has received SAP for six (concurrent) months in 1996 and who has therefore only one SAP involvement in that year. On the other hand, you may have a client who was in-and-out of SAP. He or she, for instance, received SAP only during three months, but non-concurrent months (e.g., February, April and June). This second client is counted as having had three SAP involvements in 1996 despite being in the program only
half the time of the previous person! These hypothetical scenarios are not necessarily frequent ones, but are presented here to remind the reader that results presented in this sub-section must be interpreted with caution at this stage.

The research compared once-only and multiple users of the food bank and searched for differences in the number of program involvements in 1996 in the different program areas. For family services, young offender services and community living services, no noticeable difference was found. This was also the case when looking at the total number of involvements in all programs covered.

However, two notable exceptions were identified in the important area of financial services (income security). Once-only users of the food bank in 1996 tended to have slightly more frequent involvements in the SAP program (1.38 in average) than multiple users of the food bank (1.27 in average). The correlation between number of food bank visits and the number of SAP involvements was weak ($r = -0.12$). A similar, but even weaker, result was found for the FIP program ($r = -0.04$) which is used much less than SAP. These results are interesting since they are contrary to what might be intuitively expected.

Yet, it remains difficult to know what to make of these findings, other than to say that they might indicate again that the links between the use of the food bank and the reliance on financial assistance from the Department of Social Service are complex!

**The duration of intervention**

In the four programs, a sizeable association with the frequency of use of the food bank was found only in the case of financial service involvements (SAP and FIP). Clients who used the food bank only once in 1996 had a life average of 119.4 cumulative weeks of nonconcurrent financial services compared to 157.5 such weeks for multiple users of the food bank. The correlation between once-only/multiple users of the food bank and the number of cumulative weeks of nonconcurrent financial service involvements stood at $r=0.09$. When the total number of food bank visits in 1996 is used (instead of the once-only/multiple users dichotomy) the strength of the association increases to 0.17.

This is to say that there is a weak association between the number of times a client visited the food bank in 1996 and the cumulative number of weeks of nonconcurrent financial service involvements this client had. To some degree, the more time an individual had spent receiving SAP (or FIP) the more likely he or she was to visit the food bank in 1996. While this relationship is weak, it tends to support the notion that the length of time for which financial assistance is received has a potential impact on the dependency of a person on the food bank service.

**Question 6: To what extent are food bank users involved in Social Services other than SAP?**

The SAP program is the largest and most costly program run by the Department of Social Services. In 1996/97 this program represented a little over 60% of the total Social Services expenditure in the province. Not surprisingly, it is also in this program that we find the most frequent involvement of Department clients who are using the food bank in
Regina. But in what other programs of the Department can food bank users be found? Table 1 (below) presents a breakdown of the involvements of these clients in some of the main programs offered by Saskatchewan Social Services.

Aside from the SAP income support program, Family Services are the most common types of involvements. A further exploration of Family Services shows that in 1996 there were 59 active foster care providers using the food bank in Regina. While this is a small number of people in the overall study population, it is perhaps not inconsiderable with regards to the total number of foster care providers in Regina in any given year. Moreover, with the current social and political concerns over child welfare in Saskatchewan and elsewhere in Canada, this unexpected finding might give ammunition to those arguing in favor of a re-examination of the adequacy of support given to foster care families.

### Table 1

**Regina Food Bank Adult Users Involvements with Saskatchewan Social Services in 1996**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program Group / Specific Program</th>
<th>N=4,513</th>
<th>%</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>At least one Financial Services involvement (SAP or FIP)</strong></td>
<td>98.6</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>At least one SAP involvement</td>
<td>98.1</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>At least one FIP involvement</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>At least one Family Services involvement (FS, CC, FY or IH)</strong></td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>At least one Family Service Involvement (FS)</td>
<td>22.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>At least one Child in Care involvement (CC)</td>
<td>2.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>At least one Foster Care Provider involvement*</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>At least one active Foster Care Provider involvement at the time of last food bank visit**</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>At least one Young Offender involvement (YA, YC, YI, YR or YS)</strong></td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At least one Youth Supervision Services involvement (YS)</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child Day Care Services involvement</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At least one Day Care Subsidy involvement***</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At least one Daycare Provider involvement****</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>At least one Community Living involvement (RC, RF)</strong></td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Since clients can be involved in more than one program at a time, the above categories are not mutually exclusive and percentages do not necessarily add up.

* This involvement indicates these persons (n=108) were approved to care for children who are under the responsibility of the Department of Social Services.

** As in the previous case, except these providers (n=59) were actually caring for a child under the responsibility of the Department of Social Services at the time of their last food bank visit (i.e., while they used the food bank).

*** This involvement indicates that these parents are eligible for a day care subsidy for their own children who are in a licensed day care home or facility.

**** This involvement indicates that this person is providing a day care service, usually in her/his own home.

**Question 7:** Are adult clients receiving SAP who have dependent children over-represented as food bank users; are they more intensive food bank users?
These questions are relevant at a time when much is being said in Saskatchewan and elsewhere about the key importance of child welfare. In Regina, 58% of adult SAP clients using the food bank had dependent children (2,593 out of 4,428) in 1996. In comparison adult SAP clients with dependent children represented only 45% of the total population of SAP adult clients in Regina (5,010 out of 11,119) in September of that year. This is to say that, as could be expected, adult clients receiving SAP who had dependent children were over-represented in the pool of food bank users in Regina.

However, among adult SAP clients who used the food bank in Regina, no evidence was found that would indicate that those with children were more intensive users of the food bank compared to those without children. It is clear that for adult SAP clients using the food bank there is no association between the frequency of use of the food bank and the presence of dependent children.

**Question 8: What proportion of young single mothers on SAP use the food bank?**

There is an assumption that young single mothers have inadequate life skills and therefore are more likely to be found among food bank clients. The results show that in Regina, in 1996, there were 2,870 single mothers receiving SAP, 862 of who used the food bank at least once that year. This means that about 30% of single mothers receiving SAP visited the food bank at least one that year. Among the young single mothers (less than 25 years old) this proportion was actually lower and stood at 23% (168 out of 730). Hence, the expectation was not met by the data and the age relationship noted earlier seems to hold for lone mothers. Perhaps older single mothers, like those caring for teenagers, have greater food and clothing needs and are in fact more likely to seek the help of the food bank?

**VI. SUMMARY**

The intent of this paper was, first, to provide a demographic profile of the clients of Saskatchewan Social Services who used the Regina and District Food Bank and, second, to explore the characteristics of this population through a series of specific research questions.

The study population was composed of 8,825 adult individuals who were clients of both Saskatchewan’s Department of Social Services and the Regina and District Food Bank during the study period (1993-1997) and for which valid information was available. It must therefore be remembered that the study population is at the intersection between the intervention of the food bank and that of the Department of Social Services in Regina. As the study population represents 91% of all adult food bank users in Regina, it can be assumed that it is fairly representative of adult food bank users in this city, but not necessarily of all clients of the Department of Social Services in Regina.

- In terms of its demographic profile, the study population is equally distributed between males and females, which means that there are slightly more males in the study population than would normally be expected. The age distribution of the study population closely resembles that of adult SAP beneficiaries in Regina, most people being 20 to 39 years old, and relatively few individuals aged 55 and over. People of
aboriginal ancestry are over-represented in the study population, even more than they are among the general clientele of the Department of Social Services. In terms of household composition, households with two or more adults and children are most common, closely followed by households of single adult males with no children and of lone female parents.

- The exploration of the study population with the research questions selected led to a number of interesting findings. A somewhat unexpected result was the absence of an increase in food bank use during the annual October and December food drives. A yet to be explained seasonal variation in use was observed with peaks in March, May, and to a lesser extent, in November.

- Another surprise was the weak correlation between variation in food bank use and social assistance (SAP) caseloads in the city. Even weaker correlation coefficients were found when food bank use was compared with various subsets of the total SAP population, except for employable SAP cases where the association was a little stronger. It was found that not only food bank use and employable SAP caseloads fluctuate in tandem, but more important, that changes in food bank use seem to precede similar changes in the employable SAP caseload by a period of about two months. Perhaps financially stressed persons resort to visiting the food bank before applying for financial assistance, and changes in food bank visits might help predict changes in SAP usage?

- The frequency of use issue was one of the most interesting aspects of this research. Using 1996 as a reference year, it was found that a majority of users visited the food bank 4 times a year or less, and that over 25% of users actually visited the food bank only once in that year. A striking tendency was for clients to use the food bank more often (with greater intensity or frequency) as they get older. Another interesting finding was that aboriginal users, while over-represented in the study population, tended to use the food bank on average a little less often in 1996 than non-aboriginal users. Also noteworthy, households without children used the food bank (on average) more frequently that year than households with children.

- In contrast, looking at the study population in terms of repeat versus once-a-year-only users (that is looking at the frequency of use as a dichotomous variable) did not reveal noticeable differences between these groups.

- From the Department of Social Services’ point of view, it was relevant to ask whether multiple (repeat) food bank users were also heavier consumers of social services. The exploration of this question led us to distinguish between the scope, frequency and duration of intervention. No difference was found in the scope (variety) of social services utilization of repeat and once-only users of the food bank. In terms of frequency of social services utilization, only financial services (SAP & FIP) were correlated (weakly) with the number of visits to Regina’s food bank in 1996. In terms of duration of intervention, there was some support for the idea that the length of time for which financial assistance is received might be associated with the frequency at which a client of the Department will seek food bank help.
• Aside from SAP (the principal income security program in the province), users of the food bank involved with the Department of Social Services in 1996 were mainly family services clients. That year, a small number of them (59 individuals) were foster parents actively caring for a child under Department responsibility when they visited the food bank.

• The specific findings regarding adult SAP beneficiaries with dependent children are twofold. On one hand, they were over-represented among food bank users. On the other hand, there is little to indicate that they used the food bank more intensively (with greater frequency) than did adult SAP beneficiaries without dependent children.

• About 30% of all single mothers receiving SAP in Regina used the food bank in 1996. The last surprise to come out of this database was that the proportion was actually lower (23%) among the younger single mothers (those 25 years old or less).

VII. CONCLUSION

In our view, this exploratory research represents an important exercise for at least three reasons. First, the food bank is an important type of third sector charitable organization that remains understudied in Canada. Although food banks have become well accepted and institutionalized in our communities, the literature on the subject is not extensive and is mostly non-academic (Yadlowski and Thériault, 1998).

Second, this particular study looks at food bank use over a period of time, which is essential if one is to explore whether certain beliefs about food banks are myths or realities. To elaborate this point, let us assume as probable that the acceptance of food banks in our communities rests on certain beliefs about who uses the food bank, how often and for what purposes, etc. For instance, a common belief about food banks is that they are a barometer of socioeconomic conditions in the community and that variation in their use is related to levels of economic hardship. If researchers want to assess this belief, they will likely need some trend data over time. Moreover, the “food bank as a social barometer” belief could be associated with a demand-driven model to explain the use of food banks. On the other hand, an alternative view could suggest that the supply of a free good creates demand, whether it is needed or not. Again, testing these opposing views can only be done properly with a longitudinal database.

The present study does not pretend to test models like these, but some of the questions explored can be related back to this demand versus supply debate. In the exploration of the first question, for instance, it was found that food bank use did not increase during food drives. The initial thinking was that it might -- based on the supply-side idea that people would use the food bank more often if they are more aware of it. The second question, on the other hand, led to the exploration of the demand-side assumption wherein changes in the SAP caseloads were taken to reflect economic conditions, and the focus was on a possible link with food bank use.
A third important aspect of this study is that it briefly looks at how people use government services in relation to the service offered by the food bank. This is evident in questions five and six where the research examined the interaction of public and third sector service use. While the attempt is very modest, exercises of this type are rarely undertaken.

In the end, this exploratory investigation has shed some new light on food bank utilization issues. Yet, much of what has been documented here requires further exploration, and further research on the subject is needed to clarify some of the findings. It is hoped that by reading this exploratory work, other researchers will be encouraged to join in this task.
ENDNOTES

1 Here is a list of the client-specific information that was provided to the researcher by the food bank: reported income source, health services number, sex of adults, number of adults in household, number of children 0 to 5 in household, number of children 6 to 12 in household, number of teens in household, total number of children in household, pick up date, weight of food received, family composition (type of household).

2 Here is an example of the easiest kind of problem we had to fix. The information on the gender of the adult clients visiting the food bank was not contained in a “sex” variable with two categories (male/female), but rather in two different variables (“male” and “female”) for which the information was coded as either “yes” or left blank. Obviously, these two variables were collapsed into one by the researcher.

3 It must be stressed that doing research with large administrative databases of this type can be time consuming and relatively inefficient when the information has not originally been entered nor organized for research purposes. Several technical difficulties were encountered upon trying to match the two sets of data into an arranged marriage.

4 Records of the Department of Social Services were searched to determine if food bank clients had ever been involved with the Department, no matter how long ago.

5 As the study represents as quasi-census, inferential statistics do not apply. Any observed differences are real differences. Statistical tests of significance are therefore not ported.

6 The Department of Social Services provides information on SAP caseload and beneficiaries on a monthly basis only. In this research, September 1996 is used as a typical reference month when data from the study are compared with the total SAP population in Regina.

7 References to Regina in relation to Social Services data refer to the administrative area known as Regina Region. Regina Region provides services to residents of Regina and surrounding area.

8 There are 5 missing cases for the sex distribution (n=8,820).

9 Non-aboriginal clients represent 50.3% of the study population. The Other* category in the chart is made of Inuits (0.1%), unknown status (0.2%) and missing cases (0.4%).

10 Statistics Canada acknowledges that this proportion is not very accurate and is probably underestimated.

11 Household composition for this population was found to be very fluid, with one in three persons appearing in more than one household over the four year observation period, and some persons appearing in as many as twelve different households. Household type was determined based on the most recent configuration of individuals.

12 For the analysis presented in this section data was substituted for the missing data on food bank visits during the months of November 1995 and January 1997. Food bank visits during these months were estimated to be the average of the number of visits occurring in the months immediately preceding and following them. For example, the estimate for November 1995 (1,629) was calculated as the average of the number of visits in October (1,650) and December 1995 (1,608).

13 The year 1996 was used as the reference year, because it is the year for which food bank records were most complete. A single reference year was used for two reasons. First, it is simply more convenient to speak about service use over a single year than over a 47 month period. The second and more important reason was to place a practical limit on the amount of data extracted from the Automated Client Index and used for this study. Even data on the use of the Department services over a single year resulted in exceptionally large data files. Had the files been any larger they would have posed more problems in terms of storage and manipulation.

14 N = 3206 households for 1996.

15 This is a very weak correlation (v = 0.039). It seems to contradict what was said, on page 18, about the frequency of use by aboriginal users. However, it must be remembered that question 4 deals only with a simple dichotomized variable for use. This does not take into account whether a person visited twice or 26 times in 1996.
REFERENCES

