FOOD BANKS IN CANADA: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Linda Yadlowski
Research Assistant

Luc Thériault
Senior Social Policy Researcher

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Room 464 Education Building, University of Regina
Regina, SK, Canada S4S 0A2 (306) 585-4117
http://www.uregina.ca/spr
social.policy@uregina.ca
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Introduction

Food banks have proliferated in Canada to encompass over 905 food bank locations since the inception of Canada's first food bank in Edmonton in 1981 (CAFB, 1997; Oderkirk, 1992). Defined as charitable organizations that collect and redistribute donated food (Oderkirk, 1992), food banks were first established as emergency relief for those in need of food. Seventeen years later, food banks have become an integral part of contemporary Canadian society. According to the Canadian Food Bank Association (CAFB), food banks are operating in 465 communities located in every province and territory across Canada and are helping over three million individual Canadians at least once a year (CAFB, 1997). The increasing numbers of food banks not only underscore the spreading poverty throughout the country but, perhaps more poignantly, point to the magnitude of child poverty. Evidence suggests that over 40 percent of all Canadian food bank users are children (Lochhead and Shillington, 1996; Oderkirk, 1992).

There is, however, significant controversy over the issues of whether food banks should even exist and who should be responsible for rectifying the growing problems of hunger and poverty within our society. Many critics contend that as long as food banks are providing food for the needy, the government is waived of its responsibility to ensure that food security remains a fundamental human right for all Canadians.

At this time, we feel there is an important need for valid, up-to-date empirical information on food banks and their clientele, especially given the enormous increase in the number of food banks and the difficulties food banks encounter in acquiring enough food to distribute to a growing have-not population. New and accurate information could help to correct many public misconceptions about food bank clients and about how food banks are being used. Furthermore, advocacy toward increased government action to address the problems of poverty and hunger would better be served with up-dated information on Canadian food banks.

In this regard, a study on the Regina and District Food Bank has been initiated by Dr. Luc Thériault of the Social Policy Research Unit in the Faculty of Social Work, University of Regina, Saskatchewan. This study, which is a continuation of previous research on food banks, is intended to provide information on the Regina and District Food Bank clients, the patterns of food bank use, and other social services food bank clients are using. It is hoped that this research will yield valuable insights on hunger and poverty that lead to policy recommendations.

This paper is a literature review that constitutes the first part of a two-part research report. This paper presents an overview of the key themes found in the English-language literature on food banks. These themes include the development of food banks, the increased use of food banks with the spread of poverty (touching upon the demographics of food bank clients and food distribution), other related programs offered by food banks, health issues, and ideological views on food banks and their roles. It is to be noted that the academic literature

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1 See in particular the work conducted by Graham Riches (see Bibliography).
2 Programs other than the distribution of food hampers.
on food bank issues is underdeveloped and that social activists and journalists have written much of what is reviewed here. Having set the stage with a literature review, we will then present, in a second forthcoming section of the report, the results of a comprehensive empirical analysis of food bank usage in Regina.

Food Banks: A Reality Across Canada

The primary role of food banks is to co-ordinate the collection of food from multiple sources, relying entirely on donations of food and money from individuals and a variety of organizations, such as churches, businesses and community service organizations. The food is then distributed to the needy in the form of food hampers (Regina and District Food Bank, 1997).\(^3\) Hampers are usually limited to about 12 basic items, including bread, breakfast cereals and dried pasta (Jensen and Wickens, 1990; Tower, 1991).\(^4\)

The St. Mary’s Food Bank in Phoenix, Arizona, founded in 1967, reportedly is the first food bank established in North America (Blooos, 1996). Canada’s food banks were originally set up as a temporary emergency relief measure to the economic recession of the 1980s. The first Canadian food bank appeared in Edmonton in 1981. Since then, there has been an enormous proliferation of charitable food agencies across Canada and food banks have become established institutions in most Canadian cities (Jensen and Wickens, 1990; Webber, 1992; Oderkirk, 1992).

The Regina and District Food Bank, which is the focus of our study, was established in 1982. According to the General Manager, Ed Bloos, the Regina and District Food Bank is considered to be Canada’s second or third oldest food bank (Blooos, 1996). Its mission is to “enhance human dignity by eliminating chronic hunger and alleviating poverty in our society” (Regina and District Food Bank, 1997: 3). The food bank collects and distributes food to soup kitchens, other agencies and directly to the needy. People in need receive fair treatment by receiving equal amounts of food of a similar quality, and they can also access a variety of other services and resources such as education and life skills programs.

A non-profit organization governed by a volunteer board of directors, the Regina food bank does not receive nor does it request financial assistance from the provincial or federal government for operating expenses (Regina and District Food Bank, 1997).\(^5\) However, the City of Regina provides an annual grant of $27,000 to support staffing costs of a co-ordinator and facilitator as well as in-city transportation expenses. Otherwise, the Regina and District Food

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\(^3\) Hampers are baskets of groceries meant to supplement meals for a specified number of days.

\(^4\) The size of an order depends on the number of people in the family and on the availability of food. A family of three may receive 1 can of vegetables (or fruit, stew, pasta), 1 can of soup, 1 package of pasta (or rice, noodles, Kraft dinner), 2 dozen vegetables, 1 dozen eggs (or meat, peanut butter, fish, pork and beans), 2 loaves of bread, 2 packages of buns, 2 pastry items, and 5 pounds of potatoes. Children under 12 receive milk powder and/or juice. Children under five receive fresh whole milk and/or juice. Baby food, pablum and formula are also available (Regina and District Food Bank, 1997).

\(^5\) Operating expenses include food distribution but not education. Thus, the food bank is willing to accept financial assistance for educational (life skills courses and job training) purposes (personal communication with Ed Bloos, 1997).
Bank relies mainly on volunteer labour for its daily operations (personal communication with Ed Bloos, 1997).

In order to receive food from any food bank, clients usually have to have their orders issued through a referral agency (Tower, 1991). In Regina, 200 churches and social agencies make referrals to the food bank (Regina and District Food Bank, 1997). To prevent abuse of the system, Regina-based food bank clients must present a valid Saskatchewan Hospitalization Card each time they pick up an order. The Regina and District Food Bank will allow orders to be picked up every seven days (Regina and District Food Bank, 1997). Other food banks may only allow a pick-up (a visit) every two weeks or so, depending on their capacity to cope with the demand.

The Regina and District Food Bank is a member of the Canadian Association of Food Banks (CAFB) which was formed in 1988 as a national coalition of organizations that gathers food for redistribution to people in need. The CAFB represents food banks serving 80 percent of food bank recipients in Canada. As with most of its constituent food banks, the CAFB is a community-based entity relying on the help of volunteers and supporters (with only two part-time paid staff nation-wide) and receiving no financial support from any level of government (CAFB, 1997). The CAFB co-ordinates donations of food and transportation to member food banks and relies on the donated services of transportation companies, such as CP Rail, to distribute food across Canada. This arrangement facilitates the sharing of resources nation-wide, and reduces the time donated food spends in transit (Campbell, 1997a; Robertson, 1997). The CAFB has become the sole distributor of food donations from a number of major food companies, and it has received financial assistance from Kraft Canada Inc. to conduct HungerCount 1997, a survey of the extent and causes of hunger (CAFB, 1997; Sager and Devellis, 1997).

The Increase in Food Bank Utilization in an Era of Poverty

Hunger in Canada is a symptom of poverty—the real problem behind the use of food banks (Mayor’s Board of Inquiry, 1989; Webber, 1992). The following brief section on poverty in Canada may help to shed further light on the extent of food bank utilization in this country.

Although the quality of life in Canada’s cities has been described as high, the number of Canadians facing extreme poverty is increasing (Lochhead and Shillington, 1996; Ross and Shillington, 1989). According to Lochhead and Shillington (1996), the average poor family in Canada in 1994 had an income more than $8,000 below Statistics Canada’s Low Income Cut-off. The National Council of Welfare claims that, in 1990, 14.8 percent of Canada’s

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6 There are also provincial associations in most provinces, including Saskatchewan.
7 For instance, excess grains from Western Canada can be shipped to Eastern Canada (Tower, 1991).
8 Such companies include Kraft, Kellogg’s Quaker Oats and Campbell Soups (Campbell, 1997b; Robertson, 1997). These companies provide food banks with adequate but unsellable food stuffs (Robertson, 1997).
9 A recent independent ranking of the world’s most liveable cities placed four Canadian cities among the top 12 world-wide (Lochhead and Shillington, 1996).
population lived below the "poverty line."\textsuperscript{10} Of this group, most were acutely poor (Jensen and Wickens, 1990; Webber, 1992).

As many as 95 percent of food bank recipients rely on social assistance for their incomes (Regina and District Food Bank, 1997; Oderkirk, 1992; Woodard, 1995). Yet even the employed are not free from the risk of hunger. Approximately half of the Canadians who live below the poverty line are members of the working poor (Jensen and Wickens, 1990; Webber, 1992). Since their food costs average 20 to 40 percent of their net income, the working poor cannot often afford to feed themselves adequately (Toronto Food Policy Council, 1997). The literature cites a variety of factors such as rising taxes, unemployment, soaring rents in many Canadian cities, and cuts in governments’ social spending to help explain why people are living below the poverty line and why they may resort to visiting a food bank (FoodShare Metro Toronto, 1989; Ross and Shillington, 1989; Jensen and Wickens, 1990; Carter, 1993; MacAdam, 1995; Cosh, 1996; Woodard, 1997).

Various social groups are now touched by poverty. Single-parent families headed by women are particularly affected, experiencing three to four times the poverty rate of all other family types (Internet Xpressions, 1996). Young people are also in a difficult situation. According to the National Council of Welfare, half of those aged 16 to 24 live below the poverty line (cited in Jensen and Wickens, 1990: 59). Woodard (1995) reports that a majority of food bank recipients in Calgary are younger than 30—despite the great deal of job creation going on in that city.

A most disturbing trend is the increase in child poverty. In 1994, one-in-five Canadian children under the age of 18 was living in poverty (Lochhead and Shillington, 1996; Webber, 1992). According to the Canadian Association of Food Banks and other experts, parents or guardians of an estimated 560,000 Canadian children rely on food banks for food assistance (Underwood, et al., 1990; Oderkirk, 1992; Hatton, 1992). Not surprisingly, children are said to constitute nearly half of all people assisted by food banks and, of the remaining half, most are believed to be under 30 (Hatton, 1992; Munro, 1993). Some of the highest poverty rates for children under the age of five are found in Saskatoon, Winnipeg and Montreal (CAF,B, 1997; Lochhead and Shillington, 1996).

The recent establishment of food bank outlets on Canadian university campuses is further testimony to the burgeoning need for food assistance due to increasing poverty rates among various segments of the population. On the national level, the number of students using food banks is estimated to be between one and three percent of the total enrolled university population. The University of Manitoba’s Food Co-operative served at least 430 people during the 1993 academic year. Although the percentage of students using food banks is still small, the

\textsuperscript{10} Canadians are deemed to be living below the poverty line when they have to spend more than 58.5 percent of income on the essentials of life: food, clothing, and shelter. In rural areas, that line ranged from $8,759 for a single person to $17,377 for a family of four. In cities with a population of more than 500,000, where the cost of living is higher, the line was $12,867 for a single person, and $25,525 for a family of four (Jensen and Wickens, 1990: 60).
contribution made by food banks cannot be underestimated. For some students, the availability of food banks may be key to their academic success and financial future (Westaway, 1993).

Food Bank Clients and the Patterns of Food Bank Use

Many misconceptions about food bank clients exist in our society. Despite the fact that there is a myriad of reasons for food bank use, rigid stereotypes persist. Some commentators, who in reality have had little contact with food bank clients, contend that most food bank users are drunks, and poor money managers (Handel, 1995; Sheremata and Holden, 1996; Carter, 1993). It is true that some food bank users (e.g., young single parents) may have poor life skills. However, most individuals resorting to food banks do so because they are experiencing food insecurity. They do not rely on food banks because they are lazy or incompetent, but simply because they do not have enough money. This fact is borne out by a mayoral commission conducted in 1989 by the City of Regina. The Commission found that lack of money was the main reason for visits to the Regina food bank. It argued: “Poverty—insufficient income—is clearly the cause of hunger and not waste, not mismanagement, not laziness, not ignorance about nutrition, and not blatant neglect of children” (Mayor’s Board of Inquiry, 1989: 35).

Far from being lazy or incompetent, many clients creatively make ends meet. When studying the use of food banks among women, for example, Tarasuk et al., (1998) found that in an effort to minimise experiences of absolute food deprivation, women employ a range of strategies and demonstrate remarkable resourcefulness. Some of these strategies include delaying payment of bills, giving up telephone and other services, selling possessions, as well as seeking charitable food assistance. In speaking about food recipients in Toronto, Cox (1995) reported that 75 percent walk or hitchhike because they had neither a car nor the money for the transit system. Furthermore, one third of these recipients could not afford a telephone and, in the last three years, over 10,000 had lost their cars and 4,400 had lost their homes. The criticism that food bank clients should give up some of life’s luxuries is clearly unfounded. In fact, many users do just that and still need food bank assistance. In short, evidence refutes the common belief that the poor are less honest, less industrious or less responsible than the rest of the population (Long, 1988).

The perception that food banks always serve the same members of society is also erroneous given the fact that about 40 percent of the clients only visit food banks once a year (Schuster, 1995: 13). However, some households particularly at risk of food deprivation do have extended histories of food bank usage. Tarasuk et al., (1998) found that the longer it had been

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11 In fact, results obtained by Tarasuk et al., (1998) in their study of food banks users, indicate that most women (71 percent) reported no alcohol consumption on any of the 24 hours dietary recalls, dismissing the contention that most food bank users are drunks (Tarasuk, et al., 1998: 9).
12 According to University of Calgary’s Bagley: “Food banks are a useful supplement to the welfare state for [people who are] bad organizers of their resources” (Jensen and Wickens, 1990: 61).
13 The ‘food insecure’ are those without adequate personal and community resources to afford an adequate and personally appropriate diet.
since a woman first sought food assistance, the more severe her reported household food insecurity and the more frequently she had sought charitable food assistance over the past 12 months.

In studying the patterns of food bank use, concerns about abuse of the food bank system inevitably arise. Some people such as Penelope Rowe, Executive Director of the Community Services Council in St. John's, wonders if food banks do not generate their own demand; that is, the more food banks there are, the more people will use them (see Jensen and Wickens, 1990: 61). On the other hand, it must be kept in mind that due to the stigma attached to food bank utilization, most people do not use food banks unless they are desperate (Slakov, 1992; Tarasuk et al., 1998). Hence, while some abuse is being reported in food banks, it is not significant (Gandy and Greshner, 1989). Indeed, some food banks are able to keep potential abuse in check by administering a means test that requires that applicants prove they cannot afford food (Jensen and Wickens, 1990).

While abuse of the system is a concern, an equally important consideration is the individual in need who does not access available food bank services. Food bank operators, in particular, need to know the reasons why some people do not seek assistance from their agencies, especially if those operators are to successfully help meet needs (FoodShare Metro Toronto, 1989).

Ethnicity seems to be one factor affecting food bank use. A survey conducted by FoodShare Metro Toronto (1989) of one hundred food agencies across Metro Toronto concluded that people of ethnic and racial minorities rarely visited food agencies.\textsuperscript{14} For many ethnic communities, the food that is available through food banks is not usually a part of their traditional diet and in some instances is considered culturally inappropriate. A second factor is the language and culture barriers with which the clients must contend. Third, more recent immigrants are often reluctant to use food banks because of the social stigma attached; that is, they do not want to be seen as reliant on “social programs” (FoodShare Metropolitan Toronto, 1989).\textsuperscript{15}

Other reported reasons why individuals do not frequent food banks include: the unnecessary invasion of privacy because many food bank organizations ask personal financial questions; food is too personal a need to be asked for (FoodShare Metropolitan Toronto, 1989; McAdam, 1995); and the inaccessibility of food banks and other food agencies (Oderkirk, 1992). In addition, some ethnic communities such as the Portuguese still believe that their primary sources of help in times of need are the family and the church. Members of these communities contend that they successfully dealt with poverty long before food agencies (FoodShare Metropolitan Toronto, 1989). In sum, it is important to recognize that using a food bank is an unpleasant option for most people and that relying on this stigmatizing sys-

\textsuperscript{14} The situation might be different in other Canadian cities however.

\textsuperscript{15} Many racial and ethnic communities tend to protect themselves from a poor public perception. There appear to be cultural pressures to avoid food agencies or be very secretive about using them in these communities (FoodShare Metropolitan Toronto, 1989).
tem of charitable food assistance can have a tremendous psychosocial impact (Tarasuk et al., 1998).

The Sheer Size of Food Bank Operations

The sheer size of food bank operations reflects the extent of poverty in contemporary Canadian society. The partial collapse of the safety net and the accompanying high levels of poverty have produced an increase in the numbers of charitable food agencies as well as in the number of people seeking assistance from them. Food assistance is now occurring on a scale not witnessed since the Great Depression (Tarasuk et al., 1998; Oderkirk, 1992; Webber, 1992). According to the CAFB (1997: 1), there are presently 905 food bank locations across Canada.\(^\text{16}\)

In Toronto, one of Canada’s richest cities, there are 200 food distribution programs (Jensen and Wickens, 1990: 59). In addition to schools, churches and community groups which organise their own grocery distribution projects, Metropolitan Toronto has three major food banks (Daily Bread, North York Harvest and Second Harvest) helping to supply food to most of the Metropolitan area food agencies (FoodShare Metro Toronto, 1989: 21). Toronto’s Daily Bread Food Bank alone handles about 500,000 pounds of donated food a month. Another large Ontario food bank, the North York Harvest Food Bank in Ontario, distributes approximately two million dollars worth of food each year to more than 35 non-profit feeding programs. Its annual operating budget is $250,000 (Lungen, 1997a: 14). In Saskatchewan, the Regina and District Food Bank distributed 44,883 hampers in 1996. On average, one week’s supply of food is distributed to approximately 8,500 people every month, with nearly 4,000 of these recipients being children.\(^\text{17}\) Approximately 75 tons of food are distributed monthly and approximately 2,200 Christmas Hampers are given out each year (Regina and District Food Bank, 1997).

The number of people receiving assistance from food banks has rapidly increased over the decade. One and one-quarter million people sought assistance in 1989 but more than double that number were helped in 1997 (Tarasuk et al., 1998; Webber, 1992). Results from HungerCount 97 show that 669,877 people received emergency food assistance in March 1997, representing 2.2 percent of Canadians (CAF B, 1997:1).\(^\text{18}\) The greatest rate of food bank use is reported in Newfoundland, Ontario, PEI, Quebec and New Brunswick (CAF B, 1997). In Regina, the number of food bank clients increased from 211 adults and 246 children in May 1983, to 4,095 adults and 3,574 children in March 1995. On average, four new families visit the Regina and District Food Bank for the first time every working day (Regina and District Food Bank, 1994; Handel, 1995; Schuster, 1995).

\(^{\text{16}}\) There are currently thirteen food banks in Saskatchewan, ten of which are members of the Provincial Food Bank Association (Dept. of Social Services, 1997).

\(^{\text{17}}\) Some of these people are double-counted.

\(^{\text{18}}\) Children were found to be grossly over-represented and accounted for 41.9 percent of the total number of people assisted (CAF B, 1997:1).
Related Programs Offered by Food Banks

In addition to the collection and distribution of food, some food banks, including the Regina and District Food Bank, offer a variety of services and programs. Daycare, laundering facilities and a bargain centre (where used clothing and furniture can be purchased) are some examples of the auxiliary services provided. Courses and job training (particularly in retail, computers and the food industry) are available through the Life Skill Centre at the Regina and District Food Bank, which also undertakes fund-raising and promotions and is involved in public awareness and advocacy activities (Regina and District Food Bank, 1997). Specific programs the Regina and District Food Bank offer include Grow-A-Row, Hunt for Hunger, Let’s Talk Turkey, Dairy Farmers fresh milk donations, Grain donations and Grow Regina (Regina and District Food Bank, 1997). Services and programs such as these are increasingly common in many food banks.

Recently, Regina Education and Action on Child Hunger (REACH), the Regina and District Food Bank, the City of Regina Social Development Division and Saskatchewan Social Services partnered to develop a Regina Food Security Project. It will provide practical options for some families to increase food security through public gardens, good food boxes, etc. Essentially, this project aims to help people help themselves by allowing them to take more control of their lives (Regina Food Security Project, 1997).

Other community-based projects in which food banks might participate are school nutrition programs, community gardens, food markets and kitchens and buying clubs and cooperatives. Ensuring a community-identified balance between price, accessibility and nutrition is a fundamental component of all of these projects (Toronto Food Policy Council, 1997).

School nutrition programs (which offer breakfast, lunch and snacks) have been implemented in schools in response to concerns over child hunger (Underwood et al., 1990; Tarasuk et al., 1998). Although such programs are seen as an effective means for poor families to augment their limited resources and feed their children, research indicates that few mothers actually participate in these feeding programs (Tarasuk et al., 1998).

As they become more common in universities, food banks are implementing new projects. For instance, as well as carrying out coin collection and food drives, the University of Manitoba has begun to set aside agricultural land on campus for students to grow their own food (Westaway, 1993). The Simon Fraser University food bank holds an “adopt a student fam-

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19 Grow-A-Row encourages gardeners to plant an extra row to harvest for donation to food banks. Hunt for Hunger asks hunters to donate excess game meat. Let’s Talk Turkey is an annual fund-raiser to pay for 2000+ Christmas hampers. The Dairy farmers program encourages them to donate fresh whole milk for children under five. The Grain donation program asks farmers to make donations of grains at their elevator. Grow Regina is a community garden project in which the Regina & District Food Bank is a partner.

20 Food security exists when all citizens have access to an appropriate, affordable and nourishing diet (Toronto Food Policy Council Discussion Paper #2, 1994: 3).

21 Families are provided with the opportunity to access nutritious, fresh, locally grown, fairly priced and dependable sources of food (Regina and District Food Bank, 1997).
ily” food drive at Christmas. It also directs students towards available bursaries and provides information about free entertainment and community events (Slakov, 1992).

Some food banks have begun to supply ethnic foods compatible with the traditional diets of ethnic clientele. To better address the issue of the lack of culturally specific food banks, programs such as Stop have been implemented. Stop is a fine example of a successful ethnic-oriented bilingual service that encourages Latin American people in need to use the food bank (FoodShare Metropolitan Toronto, 1989). One food bank in Montreal has even extended its services to address the needs of the growing AIDS population requiring food assistance (Montreal Gazette, January 20, 1994).

Food Banks and Health Issues
The effects of poverty and low income on health and social well-being have been well documented (Tarasuk et al., 1998; Tarasuk and MacLean, 1990). In this section we will look briefly at those effects and the potential interventionist role of food banks.

Nutritious diet is essential not only for normal growth and development, but also for the prevention of disease (Spasoff, 1987; U.S. Surgeon General, 1988 cited in MacRae, 1997: 7). It has been shown that many chronic diseases and conditions, including cardiovascular disease, hypertension and stress, cancer, diabetes, anaemia, and some infections in children, are related to nutrition (U.S. Surgeon General, 1988; Health and Welfare Canada, 1988 cited in MacRae, 1997: 7). Furthermore, it is estimated that 71 percent of deaths, including one third of cancer deaths, fall into disease categories having strong associations with diet (MacRae, 1997: 7).

The study conducted by Tarasuk et al., (1998) found women in households with severe food insecurity to be at particular risk for nutritional inadequacies. An assessment of the women’s dietary intake revealed inadequate levels of iron, magnesium, vitamin A, foliate, protein and zinc. Calcium intake levels were also well below recommended levels.

Income, a major determinant of health status, is also a variable correlated with food security. Low-income people are generally less healthy than those people in middle- and upper-income brackets. The former are more likely to have diabetes, suffer from anaemia or be overweight (Toronto Food Policy Council, 1997; Canadian Family Physician, 1991). In addition, Low Birth Weight (LBW) babies are most common amongst women who experience poverty and food insecurity (City of Toronto Department of Public Health, 1995 cited in MacRae, 1997: 9; Underwood, et al., 1990; Canadian Family Physician, 1991). For instance, in Canada in

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22 As well as for maximum work output, optimal mental functioning, physical stamina, and the ability to concentrate and learn (Toronto Food Policy Council Discussion Paper #3, 1997: 20).
23 Tarasuk et al., (1998) found that very low incomes and low educational levels were associated with obesity among the Canadian women in their sample.
24 Mothers in low-income groups tend to have a lower protein diet and lower intake of nutrients, compared with high income mothers (Ontario Medical Association, 1987, Toronto Department of Public Health, 1993 cited in Toronto Food Policy Council Discussion Paper #3, 1997: 23). However, women of other economic classes are also at risk of LBW. In 1990, 44 percent of all pregnant women in Ontario, regardless of socio-economic status,
1986, the percentage of LBW babies in the lowest income neighbourhoods was 1.4 times as
great as in the highest income neighbourhoods (Shah, et al., 1987 cited in Toronto Food Pol-
icy Council, 1997: 23). Indeed, LBW is the single most important cause of infant death, and
infant mortality rates among children from impoverished homes are twice the national aver-
age (Underwood et al., 1990: 64).

What is also significant is that, along with nutritional problems, children raised in poverty are
more likely to suffer infectious diseases and psychosocial problems and to be hospitalised
been shown that, in comparison with more affluent children, poor children are less healthy,
have lower levels of educational attainment, live in more precarious environments and par-
take in riskier practices. The short-term effects of hunger and poverty-related nutritional defi-
ciencies on children include in-attentiveness, hyperactivity or restlessness (Underwood et al.,
1990: 64). And, “Over the long term, child poverty significantly endangers a child’s oppor-
tunity to grow and to develop into a healthy, self-reliant adult” (Lochhead and Shillington,
1996: 9).

Food banks can play a crucial role in feeding poor children and helping to ensure their
healthy development. At the same time, food bank intervention may well be a factor in di-
minishing the future occurrence of costly, chronic health-related problems. Unfortunately,
this preventive function of food banks is, for the most part, unrecognised by public health
authorities.

Political Views of Food Banks and Their Role in Society

Food banks and their role in society are hot political issues, especially as the issue of hunger
becomes a growing concern for social activists, various caring individuals, and the public at
large. When they appeared in Canada in the early 1980s, food banks represented, in a sense, a
return to a private answer to ensuring the well-being of disadvantaged citizens. That is, indi-
ciduals, rather than the state, were now trying to ensure the right to food security for the poor.
As such, food banks were perhaps at first better accepted (at least ideologically) by the politi-
cal right than by a political left who preferred public services. This was paradoxical in that
many progressive individuals had front-line involvement in the creation of food banks in
Canada.

Views pertaining to food banks have remained as varied amongst Canadians as views on
poverty itself. Those people who see poverty as a necessary plague and who adhere to the
adage that “the poor will always be with us” more readily accept the presence of food banks
as an integral component of our “social security” system. Some of these people believe that
the poor and hungry are so few in number that the issue is moot (Handel, 1995; Carter, 1993).
In fact, Christopher Bagley, a Professor of Social Work at the University of Calgary, goes as
far as to claim that the only really poor people in Canada are its Aboriginals (see Jensen and
Wickens, 1990: 60). Others think that the presence of food banks in a developed country such
received inadequate prenatal nutrition (less than 2300 calories) (Ontario Ministry of Health, 1997 cited in To-
as Canada represents a collapse of the welfare safety net and that hunger and poverty should not be tolerated. They hold our elected leaders responsible for guaranteeing adequate living conditions for all (Riches, 1986b; Webber, 1992).

Long (1988) views hunger as symptomatic of several interconnecting problems, all of which have an effect on food bank use. These problems include insufficient affordable housing, unemployment, an inadequately trained work force, inadequate incomes, inadequate rates of social assistance, an ineffective refugee system in Canada, and above all, a failure to tend to the garden of social security (Saskatchewan New Democratic Party Caucus, 1989; Long, 1988).

Compelling arguments have been put forward in the past few years attesting that Canadian fiscal and social policies have either abandoned or discriminated against poor families—those for whom the policies were originally instituted as safeguards against poverty and unemployment (Riches, 1997b; Schuster, 1995; MacAdam, 1995). In his book *Food Banks and the Welfare Crisis*, Riches argues that the emergence of food banks was a result of the failure of social assistance and unemployment insurance to meet the needs of the poor: “Since 1981 food banks have been operating in Canada. What is more, they have become engaged in feeding (directly and indirectly) hundreds of thousands of Canadian citizens for whom the public safety net has proved inadequate” (1986b: 4).

Opposing the view that the public safety net has failed is Walter Block, an economist and senior research fellow at the Vancouver-based Fraser Institute. Block blames Ottawa for spending too much, rather than too little, on social programs: “The welfare system impoverishes the poor because it takes away their initiative and incentive to work. We should substitute government welfare with private charity and concentrate our efforts on increasing productivity, which creates jobs” (Block cited in Jensen and Wickens, 1990: 62).

Professor Bagley agrees with Block, contending that

the welfare state is good enough that no one starves, no one lies in the street and freezes to death. You could argue that there is no real poverty in Canada, just some people who don’t have as much as the average person, because some of them are poor spenders. They cannot manage their lives and are only marginally efficient (Bagley cited in Jensen and Wickens, 1990: 60).

Some analysts blame Ottawa for the worsening difficulties of the poor (Schuster, 1995). But other experts emphasize that all levels of government have refused to take leadership roles in ensuring food security for everyone (Jensen and Wickens, 1990, FoodShare Metropolitan Toronto, 1989). While it is apparent that there is no consensus on where to assign responsibility, most people, including social workers and others who work with the poor, share the view that more job creation is preferable to increased welfare payments.

Some commentators have moved the debate away from issues pertaining to government income security programs to argue, instead, that hunger in Canada springs fundamentally from
a reliance on an oligopolistic food system in which food is treated as a commodity susceptible to market fluctuations. This system is said to have considerable effects on the cost of food (Warnock, 1978, Coffin et al., 1989; Winson 1992 cited in Toronto Food Policy Council, 1994: 8). In a food system where food is controlled by a few large corporations, individuals, and especially the poor, have little or no influence on what food is available, from where, at what price, and of what quality.

In fact, and paradoxically, people with low incomes usually pay more for their food and have fewer quality food retail outlets available to them. Thus it is not only the cost of food, but also the accessibility to quality food that limits the food choices for poor individuals and families (Travers, 1993; Toronto Food Policy Council, 1994). This is a consequence of food being considered, in a market economy, a consumer product and not a human right (Food-Share Metropolitan Toronto, 1989).

Should Food Banks Continue, or Should They be Closed?

The previous sections have given us some idea of the range of (often conflicting) views found in the literature and in public debates on food banks and the issues of hunger, poverty and social welfare. At some point the debate goes as far as to ask whether food banks should even exist and whether they should be closed!

On the one hand, food banks are helpful in the short-term and assist many families and individuals in emergency situations. Food banks help welfare recipients and others living below the poverty line to stretch their income by reducing the amount of money they have to spend on groceries (Jensen and Wickens, 1990). On the other hand, there is the troubling question about the institutionalisation or permanency of such food programs: when the voluntary sector responds to the problems of poverty, is there then not less pressure on governments to create long-term policies which would make food banks obsolete (Food-Share Metropolitan Toronto, 1989)? This is a question frequently asked in the literature, and a concern shared by many food agency administrators, personnel and volunteers.

Many critics see government as being overly reliant on food agencies to supplement social welfare benefits (Long, 1988). Lack of government initiatives and the devolution of responsibility to private non-profit food agencies are reflected in the practices of various social service departments. For instance, the Alberta Department of Social Services allows social workers in Edmonton to make referrals to food agencies when the recipients’ social assistance cheques run out (Long, 1988). This is also common practice at Saskatchewan Social Services.

The food distributed by food banks was initially meant to supplement people’s diet and was never intended to be the principal source of food in their diet. Although we might assume that assistance from food banks alleviates some of the absolute food deprivation individuals and families experience, the fact is that food deprivation occurs in spite of food banks and in spite of the host of other strategies implemented to augment scarce household resources (Tarasuk et al., 1998). A study on food bank clients in Metropolitan Toronto revealed that over half of
the respondents regularly go without food for a day (Toronto Department of Public Health, 1994 cited in Toronto Food Policy Council, 1997: 22). This study lends further support to the notion that community-based systems of charitable food assistance, while helpful in the short-term, are ineffective in compensating for inadequate rates of social assistance and Employment Insurance benefits.

Despite the varying opinions and on-going debate over the pros and cons of food banks, the reality is that these food agencies are not likely to soon disappear. According to Ed Bloos, Director of the Regina and District Food Bank, the presence of a food bank in Regina is more necessary now than it was when the food bank first opened (Bloos, 1996). A few food banks (such as the Halifax Food Bank) have threatened to close their doors as a way of forcing the government to take political responsibility. But most food bank officials feel they can advocate for change and, at the same time, provide for those who need their assistance. Many of those who work with food bank agencies are spurred by strong convictions about the social injustice poverty inflicts (FoodShare Metropolitan Toronto, 1989). They also realise that food banks can only offer a stop-gap solution. Other than providing the public with knowledge about poverty and advocating for the poor, the efforts of those working with food banks do not adequately address the root causes of hunger (Slakov, 1992; Long, 1988). In this sense, the food bank dilemma is very similar to that of critical social workers who would like to change the system but are too busy working to alleviate the misery of their clients.

**Solutions?**

Are there solutions to the growing problem of hunger and the resultant proliferation of food banks? To ensure that food banks do not become a permanent fixture in this country, the traditional view from the Left is that government must accept responsibility and improve income support programs to meet the needs of all Canadians (Report on the National Conference on Hunger, 1986; Doyle and Watson, 1986). Changes to social assistance rates and regulations (such as increasing welfare amounts and eliminating penalties for additional income), and increases to the minimum wage to ensure that it is adequate have also been suggested (FoodShare Metropolitan Toronto, 1989). In addition, government action is being demanded in order to change the financial situation of students who comprise a growing segment of the food bank clientele. Since 1984, the Canada Student Loan cost of living allowances have been frozen even though the national cost of living has risen 41.6 percent.

Rather than focusing their arguments on the need for better-financed income security programs, some observers tackle the problem from the other end and stress that we must avoid the large socio-economic costs incurred by poverty. They point out the tremendous psychological, social and financial costs associated with hunger and poverty. The costs for social services, hospitals, courts and prisons, the work not done, the goods not produced, the goods not bought, the taxes not paid, the wasted potential, and the lives lost because of poverty are incalculable and affect society in a variety of ways (Long, 1988). Chronically sub-optimal

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25 The documentation of extensive food insecurity among households reliant on social assistance programs illustrates the serious inadequacies of current social assistance benefit levels. Social assistance benefits need to be set at levels which ensure that families are capable of meeting their essential needs (Tarasuk et al., 1998).
diets of low-income groups, for instance, contribute to observed inequalities in health (Tarasuk et al., 1998). Estimates of avoidable mortalities and costs associated with poor nutrition show that millions of dollars could be saved annually. Yet, public health activities that might help prevent poor nutrition have always been poorly funded compared to other health care services (Toronto Food Policy Council, 1997). Better funding for preventive activities would, in the view of the Toronto Food Policy Council, be more productive than the many campaigns encouraging individuals to make healthy personal lifestyle choices.

What most commentators do agree upon is that specific attention must be given to young infants. The provision of food supplements to poor undernourished pregnant women in developed countries has successfully increased birth weights. Given the costs associated with hospitalisation of LBW infants in a developed country like Canada, significant savings could be realised with better prenatal intervention programs (Toronto Food Policy Council, 1997). Through their capacity to reach poor mothers in ways that the public authorities cannot, food banks might be important contributors to the delivery of preventive programs for expectant mothers. However, this contribution would likely require closer relations between food banks and public health authorities than what now exists.

Aside from the provision of better income security programs and a greater emphasis on preventive health, especially for the young, an often-neglected solution to reducing the need for food banks is to increase the number of affordable housing units for low-income earners. Increased access to these units tends to free up income that then can be reallocated to purchasing foodstuffs.

In the meantime, food banks could take some further steps to improve their services. They could, for instance, become even more sensitive to racial differences and ethnic cultures and request cross-cultural non-perishable food donation during food drives (FoodShare Metropolitan Toronto, 1989).

**Conclusion**

Charitable food bank agencies were first established as a response to the economic recession of the early 1980s. They were intended to be emergency short-term relief organizations. Years later, however, the number of both food banks and food bank clients have increased dramatically and food banks have become a nation-wide phenomenon found in every Canadian province and territory.

Rather than being recognised as victims of poverty, food bank clients are blamed and erroneously stereotyped as uneducated, lazy ‘drunks’ who do not know how to manage their money. In reality the profile of the food bank client is complex and changing. Food bank clients now encompass the university-educated and dual-earning families. Food bank clients are young and old. While many food bank clients are on social assistance, working poor can also be found among food bank clientele.
Food banks are viewed by most of their administrators and volunteers as a “band-aid” solution to the problem of poverty. Critics blame the government for having allowed the public safety net to collapse. Inadequate social assistance rates, disappearing employment insurance protection, low minimum wages and a restructuring economy have been blamed for the ever-increasing number of those forced to use food banks. Many voices from the Left are asking governments to take responsibility for the problems of poverty and hunger in Canada and to stop depending on food banks to shoulder the burden.

The extreme socio-economic costs of allowing hunger and poverty to continue are likely underestimated, as are the personal and emotional impacts on individuals and families requiring food bank assistance. At the personal level, for instance, not being able to provide for one’s family is humiliating and can entrap one in a downward cycle of dependency and self-defeatism.

In the final analysis, the existence of food banks for the food insecure is symptomatic of an era which has witnessed the neo-liberal assault on social welfare, combined with the limits of the Keynesian welfare state to properly serve those who fall by the wayside in this time of economic restructuring. New perspectives and strategies to address the problems and needs of these people are hard to come by, and the reliance on the older model of private charity exemplified by food banks, while commendable, is proving insufficient. This is the uneasy position in which we now stand—between hope and doubt.
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