

The Ottawa Hunger Crisis



Ottawa Food Bank



1 in 4 households in our city are food insecure.

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We acknowledge that the Ottawa Food Bank operates on the traditional, unceded, and unsurrendered territory of the Algonquin Anishinaabe Nation. This land has served as a gathering place and source of sustenance for the Algonquin people for countless generations.

In recognizing this land, we also recognize the deep relationships Indigenous communities have with food, land, and water. Indigenous food systems encompass more than the physical act of feeding; they embody a profound interconnectedness with the natural world. Colonization has disrupted these systems, impacting Indigenous food sovereignty through land displacement and the degradation of traditional resources.

As we address food insecurity today, we are reminded of the ongoing need to support and empower Indigenous communities to reclaim their rights to govern their own food systems. We commit to building respectful relationships and supporting pathways toward equitable access to food, land, and resources.

The Alarm Rings On

As we mark the 40th anniversary of the Ottawa Food Bank, it's time to reflect on the past and confront the reality of today.

This year, we've seen historic highs—not in celebration, but in the overwhelming number of individuals and families relying on emergency food assistance. Severe food insecurity is now at unprecedented levels in our city.

At the heart of our work is the belief that food is a basic human right. Yet, every day, thousands of our neighbours are denied this right. While we remain committed to serving the community, we face difficult choices. Record-breaking demand has forced us to prioritize, making trade-offs that no community should ever have to consider.

The community has shown immense generosity, providing 98% of our funding, but this is not a sustainable solution. Less than 2% of our funding comes from the government, and this disparity is simply untenable. We are calling on all levels of government to recognize food insecurity for what it is—a crisis—and to treat it with the urgency it demands.

Food banks are a part of the solution for food insecurity and are currently an essential service. But we are not funded as such. As affirmed by the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 25)**, food is a human right. And yet, we rely on a charity model and community generosity to sustain this fundamental right—making for a fragile system. We are experiencing that precarity now. With donations of food and funds trending down due to the economic impacts felt by all, and the rising number of visits, the food banking system in Ottawa is at a breaking point.

Until we see a level of government investment that matches the scale of the problem, and policies that truly reduce poverty, we will continue to see residents turning to food banks and struggling to access the food they need. We will continue to see the worsening impacts on people's mental



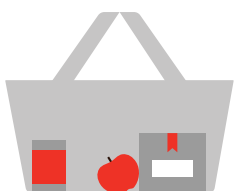
and physical health, reduced ability to work or learn, and ongoing housing loss. With so many children depending on food banks, these effects will have generational consequences.

Now, more than ever, we need bold action. We need the investment, sound policy, and commitment from our leaders that will allow us to provide not just emergency food support, but the hope of a future where no one has to wonder where their next meal will come from.



Rachael Wilson
Chief Executive Officer
Ottawa Food Bank

DEFINING FOOD INSECURITY



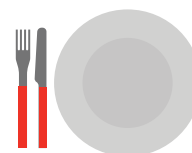
Marginal

- worry about running out of food
- limited food choices because there isn't enough money to buy more



Moderate

- compromise on the quality and quantity of food as a result of not having enough money



Severe

- eating less or skipping entire meals
- worst cases—not eating for an entire day or more

What We Do

We are more than a food bank. We are a network of 71 member agencies operating 98 food programs, united in the mission to end chronic food insecurity in Ottawa. Together, we provide groceries, meals, culturally appropriate foods, and wrap-around support. Through advocacy, we address the root causes of food insecurity and drive lasting change in our communities. However, as the food insecurity crisis deepens in our city, our network continues to do more with less.

LIVED EXPERIENCE

"I use food banks to meet the ever increasing need to cover all my basic needs and costs. Affording good, basic food is a constant worry, and many times a month, I go hungry to cover my housing and utilities."

2024 BY THE NUMBERS

1 in 4

Ottawa households faced food insecurity in 2023—up from 1 in 7 in 2022



37%

of network visitors are children

RECORD HIGHS

90%

increase
in visits
from 2019

2.4M

meals served, a 42.9% increase from last year

556,232

visits to member agencies within the network

500

visitors/hour at busiest network member locations

VOLUNTEER CONTRIBUTIONS



2,600+

volunteers

20,000+

volunteer hours

CALLING FOR CHANGE

Food is not a privilege; it is a fundamental human right

98%

community-funded

2%

government-supported

Ottawa Food Bank supporters continue to grow their contributions while government support languishes. We are calling on all levels of government, starting with our municipal leaders, to recognize food insecurity for what it is—a crisis—and to treat it with the urgency it demands.

Adapting to Changing Needs & Soaring Demand

Agencies in the Ottawa Food Bank network respond to unique community needs, offering everything from emergency food support to referrals for social services. This spotlight on three network members highlights the diversity of services and the dedication to meeting the needs of Ottawa's most vulnerable.



African, Caribbean & Black Wellness Resource Centre

[The African, Caribbean & Black \(ACB\) Wellness Resource Centre](#), founded in 2021 by Toni Jacob, is Ottawa's first hub dedicated to supporting the ACB communities. Initially a small food cupboard, it now serves nearly 1,000 families monthly, offering vital services that go beyond food assistance.

The African, Caribbean & Black Wellness Resource Centre provides health programs in collaboration with Ottawa Public Health, including screenings and vaccinations, along with senior social gatherings and youth programs. Employment support, including resume building and interview preparation, helps newcomers integrate into the Canadian workforce.

Toni's vision is personal: she created the centre to address the community's unmet needs, particularly around food insecurity and mental health. Despite its growth, the African, Caribbean & Black Wellness Resource Centre faces challenges in securing sufficient funding. Toni stresses the importance of government support to sustain grassroots initiatives for newcomers and long-time residents alike in the ACB community. "At the centre, people are family," Toni says. With the right resources, the African, Caribbean & Black Wellness Resource Centre can continue to empower more individuals and families in Ottawa's ACB community.

BGC Ottawa

As part of the Ottawa Food Bank network, [BGC Ottawa](#) provides a "home between homes" for over 4,500 children each year—many from households facing financial hardship. With food insecurity on the rise, children now make up 37% of those served by food banks in Ottawa. The Club's meal program, supported by the Ottawa Food Bank, has become crucial to ensuring kids have the energy and focus they need to survive and thrive.

"Our job is more than just meals—it's giving kids a safe space where they can feel they belong," says

Paul Beauchamp, Don McGahan Clubhouse Manager. From nutritious snacks to referrals for additional resources, BGC Ottawa meets families' needs beyond hunger, creating a supportive network for every child.

Despite rising costs and growing demand, BGC Ottawa's commitment to kids remains unwavering. "Seeing kids' smiles and families' gratitude keeps us going," Beauchamp says. "With the right support, these kids can achieve anything."



Care Centre Ottawa



[Care Centre Ottawa](#) is an emergency food bank that's become a lifeline for over 19,000 families annually, up from 27 families per month in its early days. As a member agency of the Ottawa Food Bank network, they see firsthand how food insecurity in our city is spiralling. "We describe ourselves as the land in between," says Lisa Fabian, Executive Director of Care Centre Ottawa. "We're here for people who find themselves stuck between where they are and where they want to be. The cost of living is outpacing income levels, and people are turning to us for more than just food—they're seeking dignity, support, and a sense of community."

At Care Centre Ottawa, like many in the network, the focus is on dignity and choice. Beyond addressing hunger, Care Centre Ottawa helps families navigate broader challenges whether that means accessing

resources for housing, employment, and other wrap-around support services.

Volunteer-turned-staff member Hanan Al'Helwa notes that many clients are working full-time yet struggle to get by. "People come here because they can't make ends meet—not just for food but for support to keep going."

Care Centre Ottawa stands as more than a food bank—it's a critical, embedded response in a city facing unprecedented levels of food insecurity. Care Centre continues to offer hope, dignity, and the practical support families need to move forward. But as demand grows, and without more support, resources are stretched thin, threatening the network's ability to meet the increasing need.

Snapshot of Poverty in Ottawa

Poverty and food insecurity are reaching new highs, and Ottawa's food security sector is struggling to keep up. A staggering 1 in 4 households in Ottawa are food insecure; a majority of Ottawa Food Bank users are now *severely* food insecure; and nearly 1/3 of Ontarians are struggling to meet their basic needs. The cost of living remains at historic highs with food, transit, and housing prices still rising. Frustratingly, wages and social supports are still not keeping pace and funding from any level of government is negligible, with only the municipal government providing 1.4% of our total budget. These issues have been compounding for years, and the fractures we're seeing will only grow until meaningful action is taken.

When action *is* taken to reduce poverty, health improves—for people across all income levels. Action taken today means a better quality of life for people in Ottawa years from now.

Severe food insecurity has nearly doubled among neighbours accessing the network since 2019.

47%

of severely food insecure Canadian adults
[delay, reduce, or skip medications](#) due to cost

**\$1,608 vs.
\$3,930**

annual healthcare costs for food-secure vs. severely food insecure Ontario households

Who is Experiencing Food Insecurity in Ottawa?

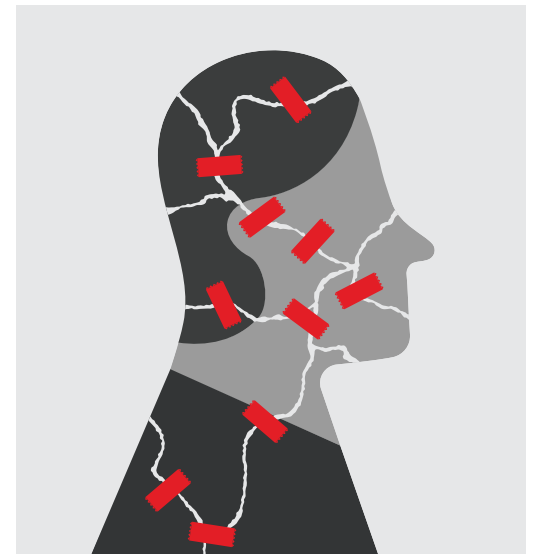
Lone parents, single people, people with disabilities and BIPOC community members are more likely to experience food insecurity in Ottawa and across the country, which continues to be reflected [among visitors](#) to food banks in Ottawa. This year, several trends stand out: more employed people are using food banks; an astounding 1/3 of our visitors are children; and levels of *severe* food insecurity have nearly doubled since 2019.

Last year, the Ottawa Food Bank network reported:

- 37%** of visitors are children and youth under 18.
- 42%** of visitors are single adults.
- 39%** of visitors primary income source is social assistance.
- 13%** of visitors primary income source is employment, a growing trend.
- 45%** of visitors live in private housing (rent or own).

Newcomers to Canada who have been in the country for ten years or less are increasingly vulnerable to food insecurity. In 2024, 25.9% of food bank visitors in Ottawa were newcomers to Canada, up from 16.3% in 2019. This includes refugees, international students, migrant workers, and recent immigrant families. Among these groups, refugees, international students, and migrant workers are particularly affected, with 51–59% in Ottawa reporting high levels of food insecurity. Many newcomers face additional barriers, including unstable employment, irregular work hours, inadequate housing, and limited access to medical benefits—factors that amplify the impacts of rising living costs. Unemployment, low wages, and race- or status-based discrimination make achieving stability difficult, particularly within the first few years of arrival, placing recent immigrant families at even higher risk.

Food insecurity does not discriminate. As a network, we are committed to inclusive, community-focused support for anyone affected by food insecurity in Ottawa, regardless of how long they have been in Canada.

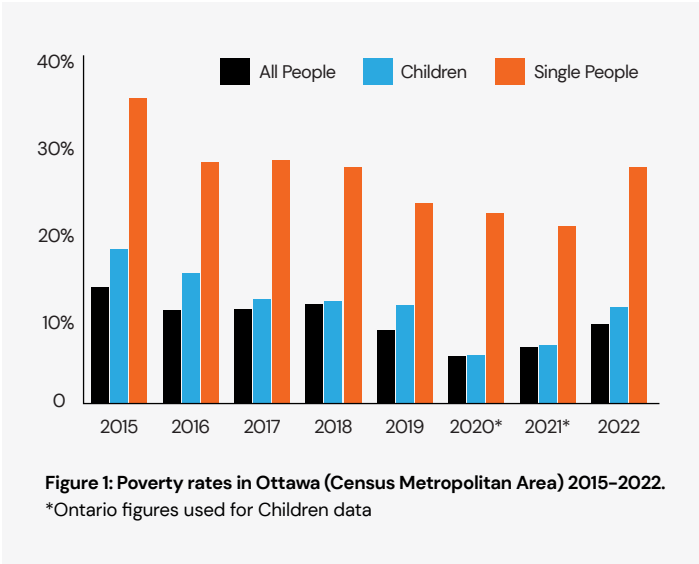


LIVED EXPERIENCE

"I came here as a refugee and started studying, even though I was intimidated by the language. But I was shocked by how difficult it is to live here. Now, I have to choose between finding a job and giving up my studies, or drowning in debt to continue pursuing my dreams."

New Insights into Depths of Deprivation

It comes as no surprise that Ontario received a D- on their poverty report card from Food Banks Canada in 2024. Poverty rates in Ottawa, like many other parts of the province, have been on the rise since 2020, signalling a deepening crisis. Growing economic disparity is particularly impacting vulnerable populations, with single individuals hit hardest. After substantial progress on child poverty was achieved through provincial and federal child benefits, Ontario is now losing ground. The poverty rate among children living with a single mother has risen most sharply. Systemic issues like inadequate wages and rising costs of living are pushing more people into poverty.



Market Basket Measure

Canada’s official poverty line, the Market Basket Measure, doesn’t consider contexts like disability, assets, or debt. The MBM level of poverty was 9% in 2022—yet food banks are busier than ever. According to the Material Deprivation Index—levels of poverty are significantly higher—with 28% of Ontarians experiencing some material deprivation, and 17% experiencing a high level of deprivation.

DEFINING MATERIAL DEPRIVATION

means not being able to afford some items that are desired or necessary to lead a decent life.



SCOPE OF POVERTY IN OTTAWA (2022)

9%

of Ottawa’s population lived in poverty

27%

of single people were living in poverty, up 22% in 2022

11%

of working-age adults were in poverty

11%

of children were living in poverty*

*Ontario figure used; sample size provides more consistent and reliable data.

The Unsustainable Cost of Living

The cost of living remains unsustainably high—fewer and fewer folks can make ends meet and more people than ever are relying on the network for food. In 2022, Canadians experienced the biggest increase in major expenses—housing, transportation and food—since 1982. Expenses continued to rise last year, albeit more slowly. Across the country, rent went up by 6.5%, and the mortgage interest cost index experienced the largest increase ever. Even with Ontario’s minimum wage increase, the minimum wage still falls far below the living wage. These conditions are actively driving Ontarians into poverty.

Social assistance *still* isn’t keeping up, either. For a family of four on Ontario Works, 111% of their income is spent on housing and food—leaving nothing for any other necessary costs like daycare, clothes, or utilities. After paying for food and rent, a single pregnant person receiving Ontario Disability Support is left with a deficit of \$360. Despite the cost of living crisis, help from the municipal government is limited. Public transportation is getting more expensive and the supply of affordable housing is in crisis. In fact, there are zero available units that cost no more than 30% of the city’s lowest incomes.

LIVED EXPERIENCE

“The amount I receive on Ontario Works is terrible—\$600 a month is not enough for me, a single mom with two kids, 12 and 10, to survive. We rely on food banks, but it’s never enough and doesn’t last. We need more support; people are starving.”

HOW NETWORK MEMBERS ARE FARING

Needs Surge, Capacity Diminishes

In 2023, member agencies and food programs within the Ottawa Food Bank network faced unprecedented challenges as demand surged, marking the highest food bank use in the network’s history. The sector is struggling to keep up. Some now report up to [500 visitors per hour](#), with many turning people away weekly. Most worry about meeting food needs and desperately require additional funding. Unsurprisingly, most members report needing more staff, and many need over 100 additional volunteer hours to meet demand.

Despite raising over \$31 million, the Ottawa Food Bank had to dip into reserve funds—an unsustainable measure. The rising costs of goods and services are creating what ImagineCanada identifies as a three-pronged impact on front-line nonprofits: increased demand for services, higher operating costs and waning donations. The bottom line? Donations are changing and government funding is negligible. Despite dipping into reserves and endlessly passionate network members—we simply cannot keep up with the need.

Rising living costs and stagnant incomes leave many struggling to keep up.

HOUSING

4.5%

year-over-year rent increase for a 2-bedroom apartment in Ottawa (2023)

0%

affordable housing stock available

FOOD

61%

severely food insecure in Ottawa in 2024, up from 32% in 2019

\$1,244

monthly cost of eating healthy for a family of four in 2023, up from \$863 in 2019

WAGES

\$17.20

minimum wage

\$22.80

living wage

NEW RECORDS SET

40 years

of food banking in Ottawa

13%

increase in visits to member agencies from last year

51k+

monthly visits in October 2024, the highest number recorded in our history

The Role of Municipal Government in Addressing Food Insecurity

Food insecurity is not just a statistic; it's a lived reality for many of our neighbours. Our community has stepped up. We call on our governments to do the same—to provide urgent relief *and* invest in policies that address the root causes of poverty.

With the approval of the 2025–2029 Poverty Reduction Strategy, our municipal government has the power and responsibility to prioritize funds ensuring everyone in Ottawa has food on the table. It can contribute to long-term solutions through investment in transit, affordable housing, recreation, literacy and local social services. Investments such as these can reduce the cost of living, increase purchasing power, and improve access to employment opportunities—for all residents of Ottawa. Municipalities also have access to other levels of government—allowing them to access funds and put pressure on provincial and federal governments to do more. Municipalities are uniquely positioned to respond to the needs of their communities.

When people experience hunger, they are poorly positioned to pursue and succeed in employment, secure stable housing, and they are more vulnerable to exploitation. By prioritizing food insecurity within poverty reduction strategies, Ottawa can implement targeted programs that not only provide immediate relief but also tackle the root causes of poverty.



Food Bank Strain vs. Municipal Support

A NETWORK RUNNING ON EMPTY

500

visitors/hour at peak demand at some network locations. Typical traffic is 1–10 visitors/ hour

65%

of network members worry about meeting food needs (up from 56% in 2021)

78%

network members report needing more staff

LANGUISHING INVESTMENT

\$31.1M

food and funds raised by the Ottawa Food Bank in 2024

87%

of network members report needing more funding in 2024, up from 36% in 2021

1.4%

funding to the Ottawa Food Bank from the City of Ottawa (\$442,026)

An Immediate Call for Emergency Relief

Food is not a privilege—It's a human right. But today, **1 in 4 households in Ottawa face food insecurity.**

We are calling on the municipal government to fully fund the [Poverty Reduction Strategy](#) to fully achieve the identified outcomes, with a critical focus on the food security pillar. The Ottawa Food Bank and the network of 71 member agencies and 98 food programs are committed to supporting our community, but we cannot do this alone.

We applaud the City of Ottawa for recognizing food security as a foundational part of poverty reduction. Fully funding this ambitious strategy would not only improve community health but address generational poverty, alleviate the immense strain on social services, and create a safer, more resilient Ottawa.

This isn't just about food; it's about stability, health, and opportunity for every resident. Without urgent investment, we risk the stability of our entire community.

While this funding will help Ottawa's food banks address the immediate crisis, tackling the root causes of poverty requires action at all levels of government. That's why we endorse [Feed Ontario](#) and [Food Banks Canada](#)'s calls to action to drive systemic change—including ensuring adequate social supports, expanding affordable housing, and strengthening income security measures. These actions are critical to addressing poverty at its core, building long-term resilience and reducing reliance on emergency food services. We urge the City of Ottawa to join us as a stronger advocate for advancing food security in our community.



WHAT IS THE RETURN ON INVESTMENT?

- ↑ Homelessness prevention
- ↓ Children going without food
- ↓ Emergency services spending
- ↓ Crisis response costs
- ↓ Healthcare spending
- ↓ Justice system expenses
- ↓ Community safety costs
- ↑ Academic achievement
- ↑ Earning potential

We invite you to be part of this change: share this report with your neighbours, family, friends, and colleagues — and let your elected officials know why ending food insecurity matters to you.

Visit ottawafoodbank.ca/advocate to learn more.

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METHODOLOGY

The Hunger Count survey is sent out to food banks in March of each year by the federal association, Food Banks Canada. The data collected is generally demographic information, such as age, sex, and household make-up. It also includes some optional psychographic questions such as source of income, education, and housing type.

March is chosen as it is an unexceptional month, without predictable high or low use. Data is collected from our network of 71 member agencies and 98 food programs using a database called Link2Feed. Data collected through Link2Feed is non-identifiable and the Ottawa Food Bank is not privy to clients' individual private information.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the dedicated network of 71 member agencies and 98 food programs whose unwavering efforts ensure that each community in Ottawa has access to emergency support, and nutritious food, every day. To the passionate staff, committed volunteers, generous donors, and helpful neighbours who support our mission — we thank you for your collective contributions and for joining us as we advocate for change.

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There's no Ottawa Food Bank without Ottawa.