

AN EXPLOSION IN THE USE OF FOOD BANKS IN TORONTO

Surges in the use of food banks by individuals and families signal increasingly tight budgets for those with relatively low incomes.

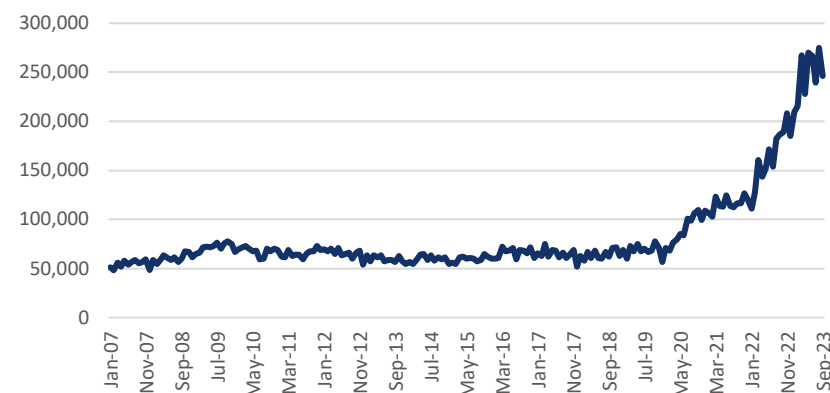
Families and individuals living with low income are frequently forced to adopt strategies to sufficiently “stretch” their income to enable them to meet their most basic needs. These strategies include renting the least expensive accommodation available, crowding more people into that accommodation than generally advised, and foregoing expenditures on comparative luxuries such as new clothing, entertainment, healthy eating, and dental care. Another strategy is to make use of a food bank. Receiving food from a food bank is one way in which an individual or family can make more income available for other needs including retaining housing. It is important for policymakers to understand and be aware of the need for people to adopt such strategies. Observing increased use of food banks and charities and observing increased crowding are clear signals to policymakers about the effectiveness of their income support policies and their efforts to create well-paid employment.

Increased use of food banks is a sign of rising rents and food prices and may be a harbinger of a future rise in homelessness.

The figure shows the number of client visits to the Daily Bread Food Bank in Toronto. In recent years, Daily Bread has accounted for over 85% of client visits in that city. Client visits represent the average number of people served in a month. If a family of three visits the food bank twice in the month, it is counted as six client visits in that month. Client visits therefore increase with the frequency of use by existing clients and with the number of new and existing households using food banks. The data represents the average number of clients served in each month from January 2007 to September 2023.

The steep increase in the number of client visits began in the spring of 2020, where this timing suggests a response associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Client visits temporarily plateaued in the fall and winter of 2021/22, but have continued a rapid growth since then, even though the economic dislocations associated with the pandemic have

Monthly Average of Client Visits, Daily Bread Food Bank, Toronto



Source: [Toronto Progress Portal](#). The data report the average number of client visits to the Daily Bread Food Bank. The data does not include client visits to other food banks and so is an undercount of client visits by people living in the City of Toronto.

largely disappeared.

For explanations of why client visits continued to grow so rapidly even during 2023, we need to look at reasons other than the pandemic. [Our research](#) suggests examining the rise in food prices, rents, and the failure of income supports to keep up with inflation, as main causes for tightening households’ budgets, which necessitated an increase in the number of client visits to the food banks.

We have focussed on Toronto because data is readily available over a long time period. But evidence from other [food banks](#) suggests recent growth in food bank use is not unique to Toronto. These data are useful to both researchers and policymakers for providing a real-time indicator of growing food insecurity. Like the proverbial canary in a coal mine, these data on the use of food banks provide an early warning sign of a deteriorating social safety net and may be a harbinger of future increases in homelessness.