



EXPLORING BARRIERS TO FOOD ACCESS:

INITIAL INSIGHTS AND PROCESSES FROM A
PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH STUDY

“EVERYONE IS
ONE CRISIS AWAY
FROM NEEDING
A FOODBANK.”

Participant Quote

“IT CAN BE EMBARRASSING.
SOMETIMES, I FORGET
ABOUT THAT. **I SEE THEIR**
SMILING FACES AND
ASSUME THEY ARE OKAY
STANDING IN LINE. ”

Reflection from a Peer Researcher

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: Addressing the Gap Between Those Experiencing Food Insecurity and Those Who Access Help	06
Addressing Stigma = Supporting Food Bank Access	08
Research for Change	09
What is Participatory Action Research?	10
Why Choose Participatory Action Research?	10
Benefits of PAR	11
– For Team Members and Participants	11
– For Organizations	11
Our Team	11
Why Peer Researchers Became Involved with the Project	12
The Research Process	14
Research Plan	14
Ongoing Collaborative Development	15
Project Vision	16
Project Goals	17
Short-Term Goals	17
Medium-Term Goals	17
Long-Term Goals	17
Recruiting Participants	17
Training	18
Data Collection	18
Field Notes and Memos	18
Data Analysis	19
What Did We Learn?	19
Factors Leading to Food Insecurity and/or Accessing a Food Bank	21
Reflections on the Experience of Food Insecurity	21

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Circumstances Contributing to Food Insecurity	24
– Facing a Crisis	24
– Challenges Related to Health Status	26
– Situational Factors	29
– Challenges Receiving Support (Social or Financial)	33
Decision to Access (or not Access) Help from a Food Bank	35
The Key Barriers to Trying to Access Help	39
– Physical Barriers	39
– Emotional Barriers	42
– Social Barriers	44
– Organizational Barriers	46
What Is Working Well?	51
– An Easy Intake Process	51
– Friendly and Welcoming Staff	52
– Quality of food and other items	53
– Offering choices	53
– Providing connections to further support and education	53
– Allowing volunteer opportunities	53
Other Suggestions from Participants to Improve Access	54
From Peer Insights to a Population-Based Survey: Results from a National Poll on Food Access Based on Themes Arising from Respondent Interviews	55
Finding Strength and Community	60
Personal Messages from Participants to People in a Similar Situation	61
Reflections from Peer Researchers	62
What Stood Out Most to Peer Researchers	64
Future Directions	66
Acknowledgements	67



“FOOD ACCESS IS CURRENTLY A SYSTEMATIC PROBLEM AND **WE, AS A SOCIETY, NEED TO ALTER THE THINKING AROUND THIS.** THE STIGMA, ANXIETY, AND EMBARRASSMENT OF NOT HAVING THE MEANS TO PROVIDE FOR YOURSELF OR YOUR FAMILY NEEDS TO CHANGE.”

Participant Quote

INTRODUCTION:

ADDRESSING THE GAP BETWEEN THOSE EXPERIENCING FOOD INSECURITY AND THOSE WHO ACCESS HELP

Far too many people in Canada experience food insecurity. According to Statistics Canada, food insecurity is inadequate or insecure access to food because of financial constraints. It is classed in severity as marginal, moderate, or severe¹ and encompasses a range of experiences that include worrying about running out of food, reducing food intake, and going for days without food because of lack of money.

In 2021–2022, over 18 per cent of people in Canada — almost 7 million people — lived in households that were experiencing some level of food insecurity — 1.1 million more people than the year before.²

The main barrier to food access in Canada is lack of income, and community-run organizations such as food banks exist to help support people who find themselves facing that barrier. Food banks provide an essential service to people who are facing hunger and need immediate support, but they are not a long-term solution to food insecurity. Furthermore, we know that the number of people who are experiencing food insecurity is higher than the number who are accessing community programs such as food banks. For instance, research from Feed Ontario showed that the number of households from their network accessing food banks was equivalent to 57 per cent of the total number of households in Ontario experiencing moderate to severe food insecurity.³

While there is ample anecdotal evidence about some of the potential reasons for this gap, few national studies empirically examine those reasons. Therefore, as part of Food Banks Canada's work to improve access to food to help meet immediate needs on the ground and identify gaps or barriers to service, we launched a national participatory action research (PAR) initiative that used the experiences of food bank clients and others with lived experience of food insecurity and poverty as primary data in the design and development of a research project to help inform this process. As is standard practice with PAR, people with lived experience — that is, the experts on the topic — participated in all aspects of the research process.

¹ Statistics Canada. (2023, May 02). Canadian income survey, 2021. *The Daily*

² Statistics Canada, Canadian income survey, 2021.

³ Ontario Association of Food Banks. (2018). *Hunger Report 2018 — A looming crisis*:

“SO MANY PEOPLE NEED HELP MORE THAN EVER BEFORE.”

Participant Quote

This report outlines:

- which aspects of PAR were used throughout the project,
- key processes, and
- important findings.

Our research findings provide some essential insights into why there is a significant gap between the number of people who are experiencing food insecurity and the number who reach out for help from a food bank. Participants identified several types of barriers that influence their decision to access — or not access — food banks, including emotional, social, physical, and institutional barriers. Emotional barriers — for example, guilt or shame — and social barriers — for example, stigma and discrimination — can dissuade people from reaching out for assistance to access food. Physical barriers — including transportation and accessibility challenges — create logistical challenges to securing food. Organizational barriers identified by participants included limited hours of operation, but participants also talked about the quality and quantity of food as being barriers. Results from a national population-based survey indicate that all these barriers are magnified for Indigenous, Black, and other racialized communities.

The findings also show what works well for people who need to access food banks. For example, friendly and welcoming staff, an easy intake process, and a choice of high-quality, nutritious food were all greatly appreciated by many of the participants who had accessed food banks. For people who are experiencing food insecurity but not accessing food banks, the national survey results indicate that these characteristics would have a very positive impact on reducing emotional and organizational barriers to access.

ADDRESSING STIGMA = SUPPORTING FOOD BANK ACCESS

While our findings demonstrate that the reasons behind food insecurity at the individual level can be very complex, solutions to improve access to food banks are very straightforward. Respondents emphasized repeatedly that the stigma, shame, and embarrassment that prevent so many people from accessing a food bank must be addressed. One way to do this would be to spread awareness that it is perfectly acceptable to access a food bank.

“WE NEED TO HELP PEOPLE FEEL LESS GUILTY AND EMBARRASSED ABOUT ACCESSING. I WOULD LOVE TO SEE ADVERTISEMENTS ABOUT NORMALIZING FOOD ACCESS. DON'T BE EMBARRASSED IF YOU NEED TO ACCESS THE FOOD BANK. **THAT'S WHY IT'S HERE.**”

Participant Quote

While normalizing food bank access may seem counterintuitive to many of those who advocate for systemic policy changes and do not want to let the government “off the hook,” input from many of the people who were interviewed for this project indicated that at the individual level, people facing food insecurity should be supported as much as possible to access the help they need.

RESEARCH FOR CHANGE

Our findings demonstrate the importance of including people with lived experience in research that affects them and recognizing the knowledge and insight they have that can contribute to change. Participants shared important messages for both organizations and people accessing food that could facilitate change on multiple levels.

As a starting point, Food Banks Canada recruited Untapped Accessibility to develop a practical accessibility and equity guide, [*Without Barriers, Stigma, or Fear: A Practical Guide to Accessibility and Equity for Food Banks*](#). This guide included input from the findings of our PAR study, and peer researchers were core members of the team who created it conducting the interviews with the organizations profiled and providing content and feedback.

“MAKE GOING TO THE FOOD BANK AS NORMAL AS GOING TO THE LIBRARY.”

Participant Quote

The guide builds on an earlier guide developed by Food Banks BC, [*A Guide to Accessibility and Equity for Food Banks*](#), and presents concrete, actionable steps that food banks can take to integrate many of the initiatives that emerged from the feedback and recommendations made in this report.

As we continue to push for long-term, systemic policy solutions to reduce poverty and food insecurity, we will keep working in partnership with people who have lived experience of food insecurity to help us achieve our vision of a Canada where no one goes hungry.

WHAT IS PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH?

Participatory action research (PAR) is a form of community-based research in which community members who are most affected by the topic of the research participate.

PAR:

- involves the ongoing engagement and involvement of people with lived experience throughout the research process,
- is grounded in collaboration, and
- aims to create change that is developed, and led, by the people most impacted by the issue being researched.⁴

WHY CHOOSE PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH?

PAR offers people with lived experience the chance to conduct research on their own behalf. In the context of food insecurity, PAR can elicit rich insights from people who have a close connection to and understanding of the issue. Working closely with individuals and communities who are experiencing food insecurity in this way ensures that their voices and experiences are heard and that they are meaningfully engaged throughout the research process.

Essentially, PAR is a collaborative approach to research that engages community members with lived experience in all aspects of the research process, including research design and data collection.

In our particular context, using a PAR approach generated rich insights into and a deeper understanding of:

- why people decide to access—or not access—food banks,
- the key barriers to access, and
- how to better support people who are experiencing hunger.

⁴Chevalier, J. M., & Buckles, D. J. (2013). *Participatory Action Research: Theory and Methods for Engaged Inquiry*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

BENEFITS OF PAR

Through our work, we have observed that PAR has benefits for team members, participants, and organizations.

The benefits for team members and participants include:

- People with lived experience explore and have a say about an issue that directly impacts them.
- People with lived experience are treated as equals and are respected. They are valued and appreciated.
- People with lived experience can contribute meaningfully and are compensated fairly for their work and expertise.
- People with lived experience gain research knowledge and skills.
- People experience power and healing when they tell their story.

The benefits for organizations include:

- Organizations gain information that can help them better understand and support their communities.
- Organizations see an increase in positive visits and outcomes for people accessing food.
- Organizations have the opportunity to collaborate and build relationships with the people they work with.

“EVERYONE NEEDS TO HEAR THE STORIES OF HOW MANY PEOPLE HAVE ENDED UP IN DIFFICULT TIMES THROUGHOUT THEIR LIVES. THERE NEEDS TO BE A MUCH BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THIS DIRE SITUATION.”

Reflection from a Peer Researcher

OUR TEAM

The peer research team comprised 12 people with a diverse range of perspectives and characteristics in terms of geographical location, age, gender, and connection to food insecurity. Some peer researchers had direct lived experience with food insecurity, past or present, and others worked or volunteered at food banks. Some people on the team had experience of working or volunteering at food banks and were also experiencing food insecurity. The peer researchers lived in Ontario, Alberta, and British Columbia. We attempted to recruit from Northern areas and Eastern provinces, but we did not receive any applications from those areas.

The peer researchers lived in rural and urban areas, were active in food banking — as clients, past clients, or current/past workers/volunteers — and brought personal and professional expertise to this study.

The peer researchers explored both research assumptions and their connection to the research. It was assumed that participants experienced stigma at some point when accessing food and that they would have issues with the quality and selection of food offered. They were passionate about improving outcomes for people experiencing food insecurity and wanted to give a voice to others. Given their close connection to the issue, they made excellent researchers and were skilled interviewers when it came to discussing sensitive issues.

WHY PEER RESEARCHERS BECAME INVOLVED WITH THE PROJECT

Peer researchers were passionate about creating change in their communities. They shared their motivations for getting involved with the project:

“I HAVE EXPERIENCED FOOD INSECURITY PERSONALLY AND FEEL VERY MOTIVATED TO BE PART OF **REMOVING THESE BARRIERS** FOR OTHER PEOPLE.”

Reflection from a Peer Researcher

“I HAVE BEEN ON BOTH THE RECIPIENT SIDE AND THE VOLUNTEER SIDE OF THE SYSTEM AND FEEL THAT MORE COULD BE ACCOMPLISHED WITH FEWER RESOURCES IF **A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE/APPROACH COULD BE TAKEN.** THAT APPROACH NEEDS TO BE ROOTED IN THE COMMUNITY REQUIRING THE SUPPORT AND THE MEMBERS OF THAT COMMUNITY NEED TO BE EMPOWERED TO CREATE AND IMPLEMENT THAT CHANGE.”

Reflection from a Peer Researcher

“AS A PEER RESEARCHER,
I HOPE TO BRING A DIFFERENT
PERSPECTIVE AND **GIVE A
VOICE TO THIS COMMUNITY.**”

Reflection from a Peer Researcher

THE RESEARCH PROCESS

The peer researchers were involved in designing and developing the project and worked collaboratively from start to finish. They provided valuable feedback and contributions, including information and stories based on their own experiences during regular meetings.



RESEARCH PLAN

The peer researchers (PRs) worked together to:

1. determine the research plan and design the research project,
2. develop not only the vision and goals for the project but also the data collection materials, and
3. develop research questions, sampling strategies, and eligibility criteria.

Food Banks Canada developed an implementation toolkit that contained all the relevant materials for the study as well as directions for data collection and submission and distributed it to the PRs to guide them. The PRs engaged in data analysis and were involved in the presentation of results at the 2023 Food Banks Canada conference, *Momentum for Good: People, Purpose, Passion*.

The following list outlines the research plan and processes the PR team engaged in:

1. Develop the vision and goals for the project.
2. Consider key processes and training (including the development and distribution of an implementation toolkit that contained project information and directions for key processes).
3. Develop, revise, and refine materials (including the interview guide and community survey).
4. Determine sampling and recruitment processes and develop recruitment materials.
5. Engage in recruitment of participants.
6. Collect and submit the data.
7. Analyze the data.
8. Present the findings.

ONGOING COLLABORATIVE DEVELOPMENT

Regular meetings were key to maintaining collaboration and connection throughout the project. The meetings were held online and involved designing the project and developing a vision and goals for the work. Participants engaged in the planning process and collaborated to revise and refine the project's vision and its short-term, medium-term, and long-term goals.

Collaborative development took the following forms in this project:

- Giving everyone a voice.
- Synthesizing ideas.
- Considering viability within the scope of the project.
- Participating in ongoing consensus-based decision-making.
- Working together to refine and revise the project vision, goals, processes, and materials.
- Recording aspirations beyond the project scope.

PROJECT VISION

The peer researchers collaborated on developing the project's vision and goals. They worked both independently and collaboratively in meetings to revise and refine the concepts and ultimately agreed on the final vision statement for the project:

“OUR VISION IS TO BETTER UNDERSTAND BARRIERS TO FOOD ACCESS ACROSS CANADA THROUGH THE PERSPECTIVES OF PEOPLE WITH LIVED EXPERIENCES **USING AN ACCESSIBLE, DIGNIFIED, AND INCLUSIVE RESEARCH APPROACH.** THIS KNOWLEDGE GAINED FROM THIS STUDY WILL INFORM PRACTICAL AND SUSTAINABLE CHANGE AT A COMMUNITY LEVEL TO INCREASE FOOD SECURITY.”

PROJECT GOALS

Working together, the team developed the short-term, medium-term, and long-term goals of the project.

SHORT-TERM GOALS

- Build a focused project design.
- Gather high-quality data.
- Create a safe and equitable research process.
- Empower individuals through participation.

MEDIUM-TERM GOALS

- Analyze data for emergent themes.
- Set aside and archive long-term ideas.
- Prepare research dissemination strategies.

LONG-TERM GOALS

- Disseminate research and present findings.
- Determine future directions and actions.

RECRUITING PARTICIPANTS

The peer researchers recruited participants using snowball sampling and word of mouth. FBC also created flyers, which the PRs distributed throughout their communities. Each peer researcher was responsible for recruiting up to 10 participants. Some only recruited a few participants, while others recruited more than 10 participants each.

TRAINING

Participants learned how to understand and use research. They learned:

- the principles of PAR,
- how to design research instruments, including interviews and surveys,
- the importance of focus groups,
- how to write memos and field notes, and
- how to analyze data.

They also learned about research assumptions, reflexivity, and positionality.

Peer research assistants offered one-on-one training for anyone who required additional guidance and support throughout the project.

DATA COLLECTION

The peer researchers worked together to determine what questions they needed to ask to help them better understand the issue. Through ongoing planning and meetings, the PR team developed a community survey consisting of short-answer and multiple-choice questions, and an interview guide to gather rich qualitative data. Participants could participate remotely or in person.

After the findings from the PAR study were analyzed, a large-scale quantitative survey was distributed to the general population across Canada to gather deeper insight into the experiences and feedback the participants mentioned.

FIELD NOTES AND MEMOS

In addition to conducting the surveys and interviews, PRs wrote detailed field notes and memos throughout the research process. Memos are brief notes that researchers use to document their thoughts and ideas. Some reflections from peer researchers are found throughout this report.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data was analyzed using approaches from Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis.⁵ A data analysis team comprising some of the PRs was assembled, a data analysis process was developed, and the team members were trained in data collection processes and randomly assigned interviews to review and analyze. The team members familiarized themselves with the data, engaged in initial coding, and generated key themes.

The data analysis team and peer research assistants met regularly, and their ongoing communication led to the development of key themes. Peer researchers engaged in reflection and thoughtful discussions about reliability and validity as well as their own connection to the research. They were also involved in interpreting and reporting the results of the study.

WHAT DID WE LEARN?

This study involved a total of 108 participants. **Table 1**, which is based on the results of the community survey given to project participants, shows an overview of their demographics.

TABLE 1. PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

PROVINCE/TERRITORY	FREQUENCY (n)	PERCENTAGE (%)
AB	12	11.1
BC	48	44.4
NB	1	0.9
ON	43	39.8
Yukon	3	2.8
Did not respond	1	0.9

GENDER	FREQUENCY (n)	PERCENTAGE (%)
Male	33	30.6
Female	73	67.6
Did not respond	2	1.9

⁵Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>

TABLE 1. PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

CULTURAL BACKGROUND	FREQUENCY (n)	PERCENTAGE (%)
Indigenous	19	17.6
Prefer not to answer	5	4.6
Visible minority	32	29.6
White	52	48.1

NEWCOMER TO CANADA	FREQUENCY (n)	PERCENTAGE (%)
	14	13

INCOME SOURCE*	FREQUENCY (n)	PERCENTAGE (%)
Self-employment	24	22.4
Employment	23	21.5
Credit or loan	9	8.4
Social assistance	52	48.6
Other	4	3.7
None	12	11.2
Prefer not to answer	3	2.8

*Respondents could select more than one income source, percentages will not add to 100.

HOUSING TYPE	FREQUENCY (n)	PERCENTAGE (%)
Rent	71	65.7
Own	23	21.3
Living with family	4	3.7
Rooming house	5	4.6
Shelter	1	0.9
Unhoused	1	0.9
Did not respond	2	1.9

FACTORS LEADING TO FOOD INSECURITY AND/OR ACCESSING A FOOD BANK

The interviews generated rich stories and key themes that described the experience of food insecurity and barriers to accessing food banks. In the interviews, participants were asked about the first time they realized they were experiencing food insecurity, the circumstances that they felt contributed to their situation, and their decision to access — or not access — help. The themes that emerged from the interviews could be categorized as a personal or household crisis, health issues, situational factors, and challenges with receiving support. These areas were not mutually exclusive and often intersected.

“BECOMING A SINGLE MOM WITH NO INCOME WAS SCARY AND I DIDN’T KNOW WHERE TO TURN.”

Participant Quote

REFLECTIONS ON THE EXPERIENCE OF FOOD INSECURITY

When asked about when they first realized they were food-insecure, the respondents generally discussed the circumstances that contributed to their experience of food insecurity, but only a few were able to pinpoint specific moments and how they felt at the time. For some, the realization came when they noticed their fridge was empty; others remembering facing difficult choices. In at least one case, the observation was accompanied by a feeling of fear.

Overall, their answers suggest that they did not always recognize the situation they were in and that it often took time to sink in.

“[THE RESPONDENT] REMEMBERED ONE DAY HE ONLY HAD HAMBURGER BUNS AND JAM LEFT IN THE HOUSE; WAS ON HIS OWN FOR THE FIRST TIME. **HE REACHED OUT TO FAMILY FOR SUPPORT AND WAS GIVEN A HOT LUNCH THAT DAY.**”

Reflection from a Peer Researcher

“WORK WAS SLOWING DOWN, AND THE BILLS KEPT COMING. **FOOD WASN'T THE FIRST PRIORITY.**”

Participant Quote

“[THE PARTICIPANT] WAS WORKING A JOB THAT WASN'T PAYING THEM WHEN [IT] SHOULD HAVE AND THEY RAN OUT OF FOOD FOR THE FAMILY. **IT'S HARD AND SCARY NOT BEING ABLE TO LOOK AFTER 4 KIDS AND A WIFE.**”

Participant Quote

“SHE REMEMBERS HOW THEY NOTICED FOOD INSECURITY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC. **IT WAS HARD FOR THEM TO BUY SOME FRESH FOOD AND VEGETABLES AT A HIGHER PRICE,** ALTHOUGH HER HUSBAND HAD A GOOD JOB.”

Reflection from a Peer Researcher

“SHE REMEMBERS THE DAYS [ALMOST A WEEK] THAT SHE **DID NOT HAVE ANYTHING TO EAT** [EXCEPT FOR A POTATO].”

Reflection from a Peer Researcher

CIRCUMSTANCES CONTRIBUTING TO FOOD INSECURITY

Facing a crisis

When reflecting on their initial experience of food insecurity, participants often said that a crisis was the main contributing factor. Themes relating to the experience of a crisis included the death of a primary income provider, the loss of a job, being significantly impacted by a natural disaster or pandemic, going through a family breakup or divorce, or being the victim of a crime. In most cases, a significant drop in income accompanied these crises.

“THE FIRST TIME [THE RESPONDENT REALIZED SHE WAS FOOD-INSECURE] WAS AFTER HER HUSBAND PASSED AWAY [IN 2022] AS HE WAS THE MAIN SOURCE OF INCOME; **OVERNIGHT, THE FAMILY LIFE CHANGED** [FINANCIAL CONCERNS SURFACED AND NO MONEY WAS LEFT BEHIND]. WHAT LITTLE MONEY IS AVAILABLE GOES TO THE LAWYERS AS NO WILL WAS LEFT BEHIND.”

Reflection from a Peer Researcher

These difficult circumstances left participants facing difficult decisions.

“I HAD TO DECIDE WHETHER TO **FEED EVERYBODY OR HAVE SOMEWHERE TO LIVE.**”

Participant Quote

“PEOPLE THAT ARE GOING TO THE FOOD BANK ARE AT A TIME OF CRISIS, **THEY NEED ESSENTIALS.**”

Participant Quote

Others experienced crises within their families such as the loss of a loved one or a divorce.

“THEIR DAUGHTER’S DAD PASSED AWAY ABOUT A YEAR AGO. THEY MOVED TO START OVER AND REALIZED THEY NEEDED HELP WITH FOOD. THEY HAD DONATED BUT HAD NEVER BEEN ON THE OTHER SIDE. THEY WERE SCARED AND WORRIED. IT WAS VERY EMOTIONAL.”

Reflection from a Peer Researcher

“I WAS HOMELESS. I NEEDED SHELTER. I LOST MY SAVINGS.”

Participant Quote

As one of the peer researchers with lived experience of food insecurity noted, “everyone is one crisis away from needing a food bank.”

Participants in this study felt that given the difficult situations people are generally facing when they access food banks and the fact that many are actually in a crisis situation, volunteers and food bank staff should have more training, including trauma-informed care and sensitivity training.

“VOLUNTEERS NEED MORE TRAINING. TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE.”

Participant Quote

Challenges related to health status

Some participants experienced challenges related to their health—for example, an injury or sudden illness, mental or physical disability, substance use disorder, or the cumulative effects of stress, anxiety, or depression. Depression and anxiety were recurring themes in interviews with participants.

“[THE PARTICIPANT] WAS IN A CAR ACCIDENT AND HAD A HEAD INJURY ALONG WITH OTHER INJURIES. THIS CHANGED THEIR LIFE BECAUSE THEY WERE UNABLE TO WORK. THEY STARTED GOING TO A FOOD BANK SHORTLY AFTER.”

Reflection from a Peer Researcher

**“IT’S NOT ALWAYS
EASY GETTING OUT OF
THE HOUSE WHEN YOU
HAVE DEPRESSION.”**

Participant Quote

“I FEEL AWKWARD AROUND OTHER PEOPLE.
**MY PERSONAL MENTAL HEALTH IS THE
BIGGEST BARRIER.** DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY
MAKE IT REALLY DIFFICULT.”

Participant Quote

“I EXPERIENCE DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY
AND PTSD. IT CAN BE REALLY HARD TO
MOTIVATE MYSELF TO GET TO THE FOOD
BANK. **I DON’T LIKE GOING ALONE.**”

Participant Quote

Thirty-five per cent of the participants in our study noted that they had a disability or debilitating illness. Insufficient income and not being able to work as a result of illness or disability impacted their ability to access food.

“HE WAS WORKING BUT ALL THE MONEY WENT TOWARD ADDICTION, AND AFTER SOME SERIOUS HEALTH PROBLEMS, HE WAS OUT OF WORK AND REALLY NEEDED FOOD BANK SUPPORT AS DISABILITY PAY DIDN’T COVER ALL BILLS/NEEDS.”

Reflection from a Peer Researcher

“I AM ON DISABILITY. I HAVE TO GET **A PAYDAY LOAN FOR GROCERIES**. I FEEL LIKE I’M SCRAMBLING FOR STUFF.”

Participant Quote

“SHORTLY AFTER RETIRING, I USED TO RUN MY OWN BUSINESS. **AFTER SEVERAL MEDICAL INCIDENTS**, I SPENT TIME IN THE HOSPITAL. [I WAS] UNABLE TO WORK. [I HAD] A FEW ABDOMINAL SURGERIES [AND] FOOT SURGERY, [ALSO HAD MY] LEFT SHOULDER REPLACED.”

Participant Quote

Situational factors

“Situational factors” in the context of this study are circumstances or factors contributing to or exacerbating lack of income. These factors are mostly the result of gaps in our social safety net, many of which have been getting significantly larger due to a lack of government income support for working-age adults other than provincial social assistance. Fifty-one per cent of respondents had household incomes below \$25,000 a year, and 41 per cent received provincial social assistance as their main source of income. Provincial social assistance income levels fall below the official poverty line nationwide, and people who receive social assistance as their main source of income are at nearly four times greater risk of being food-insecure than those who earn their main source of income from wages, salaries, and self-employment.⁶

Other sources of income for respondents included pensions, Employment Insurance (EI), and employment. When income levels from these sources are low and rent is non-negotiable, food becomes a “luxury” that households are more likely to go without.

“IT’S HARDER TO BUY FOOD BECAUSE OF THE PRICE OF THE FOOD NOW, AND THEY CANNOT AFFORD FRUIT. HAVE HAD TO CUT BACK ON FRESH FOOD AND BUY CHEAPER FOOD BUT FINDING CHEAPER FOOD ISN’T HEALTHY.”

Participant Quote

⁶Tarasuk, V., Li, T., & Fafard St-Germain, A. A. (2022) *Household food insecurity in Canada, 2021. Research to identify policy options to reduce food insecurity* (PROOF).

“NOT HAVING ENOUGH MONEY TO BUY FOOD, BEING PREGNANT AND NOT BEING ABLE TO WORK, THEIR PARTNER WAS LAID OFF FROM WORK. **HAVING TO DEPEND ON EI WASN'T ENOUGH TO PAY ALL THE BILLS.**”

Reflection from a Peer Researcher

“LIVING ON A PENSION AND **NOT GETTING ENOUGH MONEY EACH MONTH FOR FOOD.**”

Participant Quote

“THEY WERE UNABLE TO WORK AND WERE **ON SOCIAL ASSISTANCE TO SURVIVE.** A PENSION IS NOT THE SAME AS WHEN YOU'RE WORKING FULL-TIME. THEY HAD TWO KIDS AT HOME. THEY NEEDED TO BE CREATIVE WITH MEAL PLANNING AND THEY GREW VEGETABLES. THEY STARTED MAKING HOMEMADE FOODS, AND CANNING.”

Reflection from a Peer Researcher

“I WAS NEWLY OUT OF RECOVERY. I HAD HIGH RENT AND JUST SUPPLEMENTED WITH FOOD BANK. **MY INCOME IS MOSTLY DISABILITY.**”

Participant Quote

“A REFUGEE TO CANADA, MY FIRST PLACE IN CANADA, I DIDN'T HAVE AN INCOME, RECEIVED SOCIAL ASSISTANCE. THE AMOUNT RECEIVED COULD ONLY PAY FOR RENT. APARTMENT RENT WAS HIGH. DIDN'T HAVE A PERMIT TO GET ANOTHER JOB TO PAY FOR THE FOOD. GOT WORK PERMIT, APPLIED FOR SOME JOBS. GOT A JOB TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM. **MY INCOME IS THE REASON I NEEDED ACCESS.**”

Participant Quote

“THE PARTICIPANT REMEMBERS HER EXPERIENCE WITH FOOD INSECURITY BEGAN IN 2018 WHEN HER EMPLOYMENT STATUS CHANGED, AND SHE HAD TO BECOME SELF-EMPLOYED. SHE WAS CURRENTLY **FEELING MORE INSECURE SINCE THE RISE IN COST OF FOOD.**”

Reflection from a Peer Researcher

“I DIDN’T HAVE ANY MONEY.
**I EXPERIENCED DISCRIMINATION
AT MY JOB.** MY BOSS TOLD ME
THAT THEY HAVE A RULE AGAINST
PEOPLE OF MY CULTURE.”

Participant Quote

“SHE WAS A SINGLE PARENT
WHO WAS ON WELFARE
STRUGGLING TO PUT FOOD
ON THE TABLE. THOUGH SHE
HAS NOW STARTED WORKING,
**WITH FOOD PRICES RISING
SHE IS STILL STRUGGLING.**
SHE ALSO NOW HAS 3 KIDS
AND SO THE WELFARE
CHEQUES ARE NOT ENOUGH.”

Reflection from a Peer Researcher

Challenges Receiving Support (Social or Financial)

According to a study from Statistics Canada, people living in Canada with the lowest incomes are more likely to turn to family and friends than to charity when they are experiencing financial difficulty.⁷ For some participants in our study, turning to family and friends was not an option—for example, people who were newcomers to Canada, had not yet established a support network, and whose employment income was not enough to support them.

“IN 2021 SHE BECAME A SINGLE MOM STRUGGLING TO MAKE ENDS MEET WITH NO CHILD SUPPORT. THE GOVERNMENT FUNDING SHE RELIED ON WASN’T EVEN ENOUGH TO COVER HER RENT, **SO THE FOOD BANK BECAME AN ESSENTIAL PART OF HER LIFE.**”

Reflection from a Peer Researcher

“[THEY WERE] LIMITED ON FAMILY AND FRIENDS. **FAMILY IS NOWHERE IN THE AREA NOR FINANCIALLY ABLE TO HELP.**”

Reflection from a Peer Researcher

⁷Uppal, S. (2023, February 8). Rising prices and the impact on the most financially vulnerable: A profile of those in the bottom family income quintile. *Insights on Canadian Society. Statistics Canada.*

“THIS PARTICIPANT WAS A NEWCOMER TO CANADA ARRIVING IN 2018 WITH HIS WIFE AND TWO DAUGHTERS. **THEY WERE OUT OF PERSONAL FUNDS WITHIN A FEW MONTHS**, TRYING TO SETTLE IN. HE WAS STILL IN SCHOOL, DOING HIS ENGLISH ASSESSMENTS AND COULD NOT FIND A JOB. THEY STAYED IN A WOMEN AND FAMILIES SHELTER.”

Reflection from a Peer Researcher

“I HAD RECENTLY MOVED. I DIDN'T KNOW ANYONE. **I HAD NO FAMILY SUPPORTS.**”

Participant Quote

“WHEN HER AND HER HUSBAND MOVED TO CANADA, THEY HAD TO PAY A HIGH RENT. SHE HAD A JOB WHERE SHE DIDN'T MAKE ENOUGH MONEY. NOW SHE IS IN SCHOOL, AND THEY HAVE A BABY. WITHOUT SUPPORT FROM THE FAMILY, HER HUSBAND HAD TO STAY HOME WITH THE BABY SO SHE COULD FINISH SCHOOL. **SHE HAS NOT BEEN ABLE TO GET A GOOD JOB. FOOD IS EXPENSIVE.**”

Reflection from a Peer Researcher

DECISION TO ACCESS (OR NOT ACCESS) HELP FROM A FOOD BANK

Participants described factors that impacted their decision to access, or not to access, a food bank. Some stated they felt embarrassed and uncomfortable. Others noted they felt guilty because they thought others needed help more than they did, despite knowing they required food.

Participants provided valuable insights into the decision to access (or not access) help from a food bank, despite experiencing some level of food insecurity.

Those who did not ask for help mentioned feeling embarrassed, being concerned about the location of the food bank, or feeling that other people needed help more than they did as reasons for their decision.

“DURING THIS PERIOD, SHE DID NOT REACH OUT TO ANYONE, **SHE FELT IT EMBARRASSING TO LET ANYONE KNOW SHE WAS OUT OF FOOD.** SHE WAS ALSO EMBARRASSED AT THE POSSIBILITY OF ENCOUNTERING SOMEONE THEY WOULD KNOW WHILE STANDING IN LINE (THE FOOD BANK WAS LOCATED ON A PUBLIC STREET).”

Reflection from a Peer Researcher

“[THE PARTICIPANT] **WAS EMBARRASSED TO ASK FOR HELP.** [THEY ARE] NOT CLOSE TO FAMILY. NEIGHBOURS SHARED THEIR FOOD FROM THE GARDEN WITH EACH OTHER.”

Reflection from a Peer Researcher

“THEY DON’T ACCESS THE FOOD BANK. IF THEY WERE TO ACCESS THE FOOD PROGRAM IN THE TOWN... [THEY FEEL THAT] **IT IS NOT A GOOD PART OF TOWN.**”

Reflection from a Peer Researcher

“[THE PARTICIPANT] DOESN'T ACCESS THE FOOD BANK AS A RECIPIENT. THEY THINK IT TAKES AWAY FROM THE PEOPLE THAT NEED IT MORE.”

Reflection from a Peer Researcher

Those who did decide to access a food bank did not make the decision lightly. Participants suggested that they had to overcome a significant psychological hurdle due to the stigma attached to accessing help.

“[THEY] HAD SOME FAMILY SUPPORT BUT WORKED UP THE COURAGE TO GO TO THE FOOD BANK. STILL A LITTLE ASHAMED ABOUT ACCESSING THE SERVICES TO THIS DAY.”

Reflection from a Peer Researcher

“PUT PRIDE BEHIND YOU.”

Participant Quote

“FRIENDS AND FAMILY HELPED HER REACH OUT TO SUPPORT SYSTEMS **WHILE SHE OVERCAME HER PRIDE.**”

Reflection from a Peer Researcher

“BRIEFLY SPEAKS TO THE FACT THAT THERE WAS ANOTHER TIME IN HER LIFE WHEN SHE ALSO ACCESSED THE FOOD BANK. **SHE THOUGHT SHE WAS DONE WITH RELYING ON THIS SERVICE** AND SO IT WAS DIFFICULT FOR HER TO COME BACK.”

Reflection from a Peer Researcher

“**THE MENTAL BARRIERS TO GOING THE FIRST TIME.** GETTING PAST THE MENTAL OBSTACLE WAS THE BIGGEST.”

Participant Quote

THE KEY BARRIERS TO TRYING TO ACCESS HELP

One of the project's main objectives was to better understand what barriers to food access — in particular, accessing help from a food program such as a food bank — are encountered by people who are experiencing food insecurity. After reviewing the responses from the research participants, the peer researchers categorized the barriers to access into four main areas: emotional barriers, social barriers, physical barriers, and organizational barriers.

Physical Barriers

Physical barriers — for example, distance from the food bank and lack of transportation — were mentioned as a barrier to food access. Participants in rural communities noted that it took a lot of time and gas to get to food banks and many of them simply could not make the required trip.

“IT’S A 30–40-MINUTE WALK TO THE FOOD BANK. I DON’T DRIVE SO IT IS HARD TO GET THERE.”

Participant Quote

“I’D LEAVE AT 12 O’CLOCK AT NIGHT, I’D WALK ALL NIGHT AND GET THERE BY 10 IN THE MORNING AND I’D GET HOME JUST AS IT WAS GETTING DARK OUT.”

Participant Quote

Some participants had to take the bus for hours to get to their nearest food bank. Others mentioned that they had to walk when buses were not available. They also shared stories about times when they had to carry heavy boxes and cans home.

“I HAD TO COMMUTE THREE BUSES, 1.5 TO 2 HOURS TO THE CLOSEST FOOD BANK.”

Participant Quote

**“MY MEDICAL ISSUES
LIMIT MOVEMENT AND
STRENGTH TO CARRY
[FOOD ITEMS] HOME.”**

Participant Quote

Travel conditions and scheduling also posed barriers for participants. Some participants spoke about being unable to make it to the food bank because it did not offer flexible hours that worked with their schedule.

**“TRAVEL CONDITIONS AND ABILITY TO
MAKE THE SCHEDULE WORK WITH OTHER
RESPONSIBILITIES ARE CHALLENGING.”**

Participant Quote

Accessibility challenges related to physical disability and illness were also described.

Thirty-five per cent of the participants in this study self-identified as having a disability, and 39 per cent indicated that someone in their household has special dietary needs. The latter group talked about the challenges of trying to access food for people who have specific dietary needs and the importance of offering accommodations and selections.

“I HAVE A CHILD WITH A VERY SPECIFIC DIET WITH A LOT OF ALLERGIES. IN THE BEGINNING, THEY WERE ACCOMMODATING, BUT AFTER [A] TIME, THEY STOPPED PROVIDING THE SPECIFIC DIET. **WE FELT UNCOMFORTABLE ASKING THEM TO ACCOMMODATE US AGAIN.**”

Participant Quote

“HE CAN’T EAT MANY FOODS THAT ARE AT THE FOOD BANK, BECAUSE OF HIS DISABILITY. **IT WOULD BE GOOD IF THEY COULD CUSTOMIZE THE FOOD FOR SOME OF THE PEOPLE.**”

Reflection from a Peer Researcher

Emotional Barriers

Participants described many emotional challenges that arose when they were looking to access food. Some spoke about experiences of anxiety and depression that made it difficult for them to access food banks.

“I EXPERIENCE DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY AND PTSD. IT CAN BE REALLY HARD TO MOTIVATE MYSELF TO GET TO THE FOOD BANK.”

Participant Quote

“IT CAN BE HARD TO GET OUT OF BED WHEN YOU’RE DEPRESSED.”

Participant Quote

Participants described feeling embarrassed and ashamed to visit food banks. They did not want people to know they could not afford food and they felt ashamed about their circumstances.

“I AM ASHAMED TO BE IN THIS SITUATION.”

Participant Quote

“IT IS REALLY WORRISOME TO ADMIT THAT YOU CAN’T PROVIDE FOR YOURSELF.”

Participant Quote

Guilt was also noted as a barrier to reaching out and accessing help. Feeling like others needed food more than they did discouraged some participants from seeking support from a food bank.

**“I FELT LIKE PEOPLE WOULD THINK,
'DO YOU REALLY NEED IT?'"**

Participant Quote

**“IF YOU THINK SOMEONE ELSE
NEEDS IT MORE, CHANCES ARE
YOU'RE THE ONE THAT NEEDS IT.”**

Participant Quote

Some participants felt defeated and exhausted because of their circumstances. They found their situation extremely challenging and often difficult to accept.

**“IT IS HARD TO ACCEPT THAT YOU'VE
REACHED THE POINT THAT YOU ARE
THE ONE THAT NEEDS HELP.”**

Participant Quote

Social Barriers

Social barriers emerged as a key theme throughout the interviews. Participants talked about experiencing stigma and discrimination, lack of knowledge and information about how and where to access food, and cultural differences, including language barriers and a lack of culturally appropriate food.

Some participants mentioned they experienced stigma at food banks and were sometimes discriminated against and treated poorly, which led to their avoiding food banks in the future. Some participants delayed accessing food due to the embarrassment of asking for help and the stigma associated with accessing food banks. Peer researchers noted this theme in their memos throughout the project.

“WE HAVE NOT UTILIZED THE FOOD BANK OR ANY FOOD SERVICES PERSONALLY, **ESPECIALLY I WOULD SAY BECAUSE OF THE SOCIAL STIGMA.**”

Participant Quote

“STIGMA, ALTHOUGH HE HAS A GOOD GRASP ON THE IMPORTANCE OF SUPPORT AND HIS QUALIFICATION FOR IT, **BUT IT ALWAYS COMES BACK TO STIGMA.**”

Reflection from a Peer Researcher

The stigma associated with accessing food was especially prominent in rural locations and smaller communities where there is less anonymity and a greater likelihood of the participants running into someone they know. Some feared that they would be seen by others in their community. This lack of privacy posed a significant barrier to accessing food.

“IT’S HARD BECAUSE I SEE THE SAME PEOPLE I SEE AT THE POST OFFICE OR THE BANK THERE – IT’S A SMALL TOWN.”

Participant Quote

Some participants stated that they did not know where or how to access food in their communities. Others were unaware of processes and eligibility criteria. Some participants also explained that cultural differences and language barriers impeded access to food. This latter point was mentioned by many newcomers to Canada who were not always able to connect with someone who spoke their language. People who had recently moved to new areas and did not have social networks struggled to navigate unfamiliar territory.

“IN MY CULTURE, MY BACKGROUND, I WASN’T READY TO, LET’S SAY, ALMOST BEG FOR SOMETHING LIKE THIS.”

Participant Quote

Participants shared that volunteers and staff can help mitigate some of the shame people feel when accessing food by being welcoming and non-judgmental.

“TO BEGIN YOU HAVE THE STIGMA AND THE EMBARRASSMENT. THE VOLUNTEERS DO A GREAT JOB OF MAKING YOU FEEL GOOD ABOUT ACCESSING.”

Participant Quote

Organizational Barriers

“Organizational barriers” were categorized as circumstances at a food bank itself that participants considered barriers to access — including the availability of food. Some participants stated that not enough food was provided, and others were unhappy with the quality and selection of food they received.

“THERE’S NOT ENOUGH FOOD THERE FOR ME.”

Participant Quote

“MULTIPLE PARTICIPANTS TOUCHED ON IT — THE VARIETY AND AVAILABILITY OF FRESH FOOD IS REALLY LACKING... **JUST BECAUSE THEY ARE DESPERATE DOESN'T MEAN THEY'RE GOING TO ACCEPT BAD FOOD.** IT WASN'T ABOUT BEING CHOOSY, BUT FEELING LIKE THEY WERE OF VALUE AND STILL REGARDED AS HUMAN BEINGS.”

Reflection from a Peer Researcher

Some stated that they faced long lineups and spent a significant portion of their day trying to get food. Hours of operation and lack of privacy were also noted as barriers that prevented people from accessing the food they needed — for example, some participants were not able to attend a food bank during its opening hours because of other responsibilities.

“THE LINEUP IS LONG. **I HAVE TO GET THERE EARLY OR I MISS OUT.** IT CAN BE A LONG DAY.”

Participant Quote

“IT WAS A BUSY DISTRIBUTION. THEY WERE IN LINE FOR ALMOST AN HOUR.”

Reflection from a Peer Researcher

“[IT’S] INCONVENIENT. THE PICK-UP TIME FOR FOOD IS THE SAME TIME AS HE STARTS WORK SO IT IS CHALLENGING TO MAKE THAT WORK. THEN FOOD HAS TO SIT IN THE CAR DURING WORK WHICH FREEZES OVER WINTER AND CAN SPOIL DURING SUMMER.”

Reflection from a Peer Researcher

Participants spoke about the ways they were treated by people when they reached out to access food. Fortunately, most participants reported that they felt welcomed by volunteers and staff at food banks. However, others stated that they felt unwelcome and were presented with eligibility criteria, like means testing, which made them ineligible for food.

“ACCESS WAS NOT VERY IDEAL. THEY HAD TO GO TO ANOTHER LOCATION TO REGISTER AND NOT AT THE LOCAL FOOD BANK; THEY HAD TO GET THEIR PHOTO TAKEN [TO PUT ON THE ACCESS CARD] AND ANSWER SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT THEIR SITUATION TO GET A CARD FOR ACCESS. IT IS OFF-PUTTING. ALTHOUGH THE SYSTEM WASN'T IDEAL, THE STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS WERE VERY KIND THERE AND AT THE LOCAL FOOD BANK.”

Reflection from a Peer Researcher

“I STARTED GOING THROUGH TREATMENT AND GOT MY OWN JOB AND SO BY THAT TIME I WAS A SINGLE MOM, WORKING AGAIN FOR NEAR MINIMUM WAGE AND THAT'S WHEN I ACTUALLY TRIED TO REGISTER WITH THE FOOD BANK, AND I GOT DENIED... MY INCOME WAS TOO HIGH.”

Participant Quote

“IT MADE ME REALIZE THAT LOTS OF CLIENTS ARE TURNED AWAY BECAUSE OF MEANS TESTING. **IT MADE ME REALIZE MORE PEOPLE DO SUFFER FOOD INSECURITY THAN WHO MAKES IT TO THE FOOD BANK, ESPECIALLY IF WE ARE ALREADY TURNING PEOPLE AWAY.**”

Reflection from a Peer Researcher

Some participants were unable to access food because of strict organizational rules like means testing and identification requirements.

“**GATHERING DOCUMENTS** [FOR EXAMPLE, PROOF OF ID], INCOME, AND UPDATING EVERY COUPLE OF MONTHS, IS STRESSFUL.”

Participant Quote

WHAT IS WORKING WELL?

Participants shared their thoughts about what is working at food banks and what they have found helpful.

An Easy Intake Process

Participants appreciated an easy sign-up (intake) process that did not require them to provide too much information in order to access food. They also appreciated not having to go through means testing.

“IT IS LESS STIGMATIZED NOW. I FEEL GOOD ABOUT GETTING GOOD QUALITY FOOD. THERE IS A POINT SYSTEM. IF YOU RUN OUT OF POINTS, THEN YOU CAN STILL GET ESSENTIAL ITEMS.”

Participant Quote

“THE SETUP PROCESS WAS REALLY EASY. THE HARDEST PART IS GETTING HERE EARLY ENOUGH. [WHERE I USED TO GO] I HAD TO WAIT FOR AN ID CARD, AND THEY WERE VERY STRICT. THERE WERE LOCATIONS AND DATES THAT IT WAS VALID FOR. IT CAME IN THE MAIL, AND YOU HAD TO WAIT FOR IT.”

Participant Quote

Friendly and Welcoming Staff

Staff and volunteers who were kind, welcoming, non-judgmental, helpful, and encouraging made the process easier for participants. Many participants mentioned that friendly staff made a huge difference during these difficult times.

“FOOD BANKS ARE TRYING. THEY ARE FLEXIBLE WITH DELIVERIES. THEY ARE TRYING TO BE HELPFUL AND NURTURING. THEY ARE TRYING TO MAKE PATRONS COMFORTABLE AND WELCOMING SO PEOPLE WHO NEED TO RETURN WILL FEEL WELCOME. I HAVE FAITH THAT THEY ARE DOING A GOOD JOB. THEY ARE ACCOMMODATING NEW CLIENTS SUCH AS SENIORS.”

Reflection from a Peer Researcher

“I ALWAYS FEEL WELCOMED AND SAFE.”

Participant Quote

Quality of Food and Other Items

Participants appreciated having quality food and healthy selections at food banks — including fresh and nutritious food — as well as culturally appropriate food. They also mentioned that they appreciated having access to hygiene products, baby items, and other household goods to help reduce the strain on their budgets. They wanted to make it clear that while the food support helps them in terms of their monthly budget, the quality of the food provided made a huge difference to their health because they receive nutritious foods that are outside the limits of their budget.

Choice

Participants reported that they prefer shopping models over premade bags and want the ability to choose or exchange items that they cannot use. This observation is consistent with the findings of an academic study that showed that the shopping model can enable greater levels of food security and well-being.⁸ Approximately one third of the food bank network offers a shopping model of food selection when there is adequate space and other infrastructure support to allow it.⁹

Connections to Further Support and Education

Participants in this study supported the decision to offer additional support on-site and some mentioned that they benefited from this resource. They suggested that it would be helpful to have access to mental health support, including counsellors, on-site as well as employment support and training and cooking classes. Many food banks across the network already provide this type of support — for example, one in five food banks provide education and training.¹⁰

Allowing Volunteer Opportunities

Some participants mentioned they appreciated having the opportunity to exchange volunteer hours for more food. They suggested that volunteering at a food bank reduced some of the stigma of accessing help, but it also gave them the satisfaction of being part of the food bank community.

⁸Rizvi, A., Wasfi, R., Enns, A., & Kristjansson, E. (2021). The impact of novel and traditional food bank approaches on food insecurity: A longitudinal study in Ottawa, Canada. *BMC Public Health*, 21, Article number 771.

⁹Food Banks Canada. (2021). *HungerCount 2021*.

¹⁰Food Banks Canada. (2022). *HungerCount 2022*.

OTHER SUGGESTIONS FROM PARTICIPANTS TO IMPROVE ACCESS

- Reducing lineups or holding lineups indoors in order to offer privacy for people who feel embarrassed about accessing help.
- Offering mobile hubs and delivery services.
- Offering gift cards for groceries, including for people who cannot access food banks.
- Increasing the hours of operation.
 - Some participants noted their food went bad in their car while they were at work because they only had the option of picking it up before or during their work hours. They suggested introducing flexible scheduling and increased hours of operation to address this challenge.
- Allowing more frequent visits.
- Better advertising.
 - Some participants noted that they did not know about food banks, especially when they were new to a community. Some suggested better advertising and sending children home from school with flyers to share information about access.
- Changing the name of the food bank to something that reduces the stigma associated with accessing help.

“I WOULD LIKE TO HAVE THE FREEDOM TO CHOOSE AND CUSTOMIZE AVAILABLE FOOD... I WOULD LIKE THE OPTION OF GIFT CARDS AND GOING THROUGH THE HAMPERS.”

Participant Quote

FROM PEER INSIGHTS TO A POPULATION-BASED SURVEY: RESULTS FROM A NATIONAL POLL ON FOOD ACCESS BASED ON THEMES ARISING FROM RESPONDENT INTERVIEWS

After the qualitative analysis of the interviews was completed, key themes, insights, and feedback from the interviews were incorporated into a survey instrument to survey the general population. The research firm Earncliffe Strategies was contracted to conduct an online national survey about key barriers to food access experienced by participants whom the survey instrument identified as food-insecure. More than 2,800 people responded to the survey. Participants who responded affirmatively to two or more questions on a six-item scale developed by the Economic Research Service of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to measure various levels of food insecurity, an abbreviated version of the 18-item scale used by Statistics Canada, were identified as food-insecure.¹¹ As rates of food insecurity are disproportionately high among Indigenous, Black, and People of Colour (BIPOC) communities,¹² an oversample of food-insecure BIPOC respondents was used in order to reach a sufficient sample size with which to conduct a robust analysis.¹³

Among the overall sample of participants who were identified as food-insecure, the most commonly cited barriers could be categorized as emotional or social: 54 per cent cited feeling ashamed as a major barrier, and 46 per cent said feeling that “others need it more” was a major barrier. The potential for feeling unwelcome or judged when accessing services was selected by 41 per cent of respondents. The respondents who had accessed a food bank or similar service in the past 12 months (N = 222) and selected this option may have selected it based on their actual experience.

Forty-one per cent of respondents also selected means testing as a barrier. Means testing could be considered an organizational-type barrier. This finding coincides with the findings in a recent study released by Statistics Canada which shows that, according to data from the 2021 Canadian Income Survey, nearly 80 per cent of families experiencing food insecurity

¹¹Economic Research Service. (2012). *U.S. household food security survey module: Six-item short form*. United States Department of Agriculture.

¹²Tarasuk et al., *Household food insecurity in Canada*, 2021.

¹³The online survey was conducted from August 10 to August 20, 2023, by Earncliffe Strategies on behalf of Food Banks Canada.

The total survey sample was 2,838. Sample sizes for BIPOC respondents experiencing food insecurity were n = 559 Indigenous / n = 564 Black / n = 737 POC. Weighting was done in two stages to control for the oversample of specific communities assessed as food-insecure:

1. Assess incident rates of food insecurity.
2. Combine the assessed rates of food insecurity with weights by age, gender, location, ethnicity, and education.

had incomes above the official poverty line (the Market Basket Measure or MBM).¹⁴ The MBM is often used by policymakers to assess eligibility for various income and social supports.

The other most commonly cited barriers could be seen as physical barriers related to lack of accessibility. They included the food bank being far from participants' homes (39%), not accessible by public transit (36%), and not accessible to people with wheelchairs or other accessibility needs (32%).

Concerns related to food — for example, food being of lower quality (35%), or not meeting dietary restrictions (28%) or preferences (28%) — are important organizational barriers to consider, but they were not as frequently seen as major barriers among the general survey sample who were assessed as food-insecure.

TABLE 2. MAJOR BARRIERS TO ACCESS AMONG PEOPLE WHO IDENTIFY AS FOOD-INSECURE (N = 1,222)

“For each of the following, please state whether you think it is a major barrier, a minor barrier, or not a barrier at all to using food supports such as food banks.”

MAJOR BARRIER	PERCENTAGE (%)
Feeling ashamed	54
Others need it more	46
Feeling unwelcomed/judged	41
Means testing	41
Far from home	39
Not accessible by public transit	36
Low-quality food	35
Limited hours	33
Not accessible to wheelchairs or people with mobility needs	32
Location not discreet	30
Lack of food to meet dietary restrictions	29
Lack of food to meet dietary preferences	28
Preference to ask friend (for help)	24
Language barriers	17
Not having parking available	15

¹⁴Uppal, S. (2023, November 14). Food insecurity among Canadian families. *Insights on Canadian Society*. Statistics Canada.

When major barriers to access were disaggregated by racial identity, emotional/social barriers remained the highest-ranked barriers, with “feeling ashamed” being cited most often among all groups. However, food-insecure respondents who identified as Black were significantly more likely to cite “feeling unwelcome or judged” than all other respondents.

Black respondents were also significantly more likely than respondents with other racial identities to select physical accessibility-related barriers such as food bank locations being too far from home, not accessible by public transit, or not accessible to people who use wheelchairs or have other mobility-related needs. It is important to note that about half of Indigenous respondents selected “far from home” as a major barrier to food bank access, even though this result was not statistically significant compared to the total.

There were also significant differences among different racial identities in terms of those who selected “lack of food to meet dietary restrictions” as a major barrier. Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour were more likely than white respondents to see this as a major barrier. Black respondents were also more likely to select other operational-type issues — for example, discreetness of location, lack of food to meet dietary preferences, and language barriers — as major barriers to access.

TABLE 3. MAJOR BARRIERS TO ACCESS, BY RACIAL IDENTITY

MAJOR BARRIER	TOTAL (A)	WHITE (B)	BLACK (C)	INDIGENOUS (D)	POC (E)
Feeling ashamed	54%	54%	56%	61%	52%
Others need it more	46%	47%	44%	48%	44%
Feeling unwelcomed judged	41%	38%	55% ^{ABDE}	40%	44%
Means testing	41%	40%	48%	42%	41%
Far from home	39%	36%	48% ^{AB}	49%	40%
Not accessible by public transit	36%	34%	46% ^{ABE}	39%	37%
Low-quality food	35%	33%	47% ^{ABE}	41%	38%
Limited hours	33%	32%	39%	40%	32%
Not accessible to wheelchairs or people with mobility needs	32%	30%	45% ^{ABDE}	30%	32%
Location not discreet	30%	27%	40% ^{ABD}	29%	33%
Lack food to meet dietary restrictions	29%	25%	40% ^{AB}	35%	34%
Lack food to meet dietary preferences	28%	26%	39% ^{ABE}	33%	30%
Preference to ask friend (for help)	24%	22%	26%	27%	28%
Language barriers	17%	13%	30% ^{ABDE}	20%	22%
Not having parking available	15%	14%	19%	17%	18%

Unweighted N = 2238; minimal sample size for testing: 30; column comparison symbols: A, B, C... (p ≤ 0.05)

When asked about what would improve food bank access (based on recommendations from the peer research study), nearly 60 per cent of respondents identified “having friendly staff or volunteers” as having a very positive impact. This response is consistent with findings about ways to address the emotional or social barriers that are the most prevalent in preventing food bank access. Home delivery was the second-highest-rated option to improve access. It could potentially help to address both the physical barrier of not being able to access a food bank due to distance and the social barrier of the stigma associated with accessing a food bank. Having a shopping-based model that allows clients to choose their preferred items was the third-most selected option to improve access.

TABLE 4. CHARACTERISTICS THAT WOULD HAVE A POSITIVE IMPACT ON THE EXPERIENCE OF FOOD BANK ACCESS

“For each of the following, please state whether you think it would have a positive or negative impact on the experience of using a food support service such as a food bank.” (N = 1,222)

VERY POSITIVE IMPACT	PERCENTAGE (%)
Having friendly staff/volunteers	59%
Home delivery	45%
Get to choose preferred items (a shopping-based model)	40%
Check availability online	39%
Exchange volunteer hours for more food	38%
Having a range of food catering to distinct dietary needs (e.g., Halal, Kosher)	34%
No means testing	31%
Having a drive-through option	28%
Having less conspicuous/visible locations	26%

When the responses are separated out by racial identity, having friendly staff and volunteers remained the option with the most positive impact, with Black and Indigenous respondents significantly more likely to select it. Black and Indigenous respondents were also significantly more likely to see programmatic initiatives such as home delivery, having a shopping model for food item selection, and being able to check the online availability of food items as having a very positive impact on food program access. Respondents who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour were also significantly more likely to view the availability of food that accommodated distinct dietary needs as having a very positive impact.

Another significant finding was that Black and Indigenous respondents were more likely to view the elimination of means testing as having a very positive impact on food bank access. This finding is consistent with the aforementioned Statistics Canada study that shows that rates of food insecurity for people living above the official poverty line are higher for Indigenous families living off reserve (31%) than for non-Indigenous (15%) families, and for racialized communities (21%) — including Black communities (33%) — than for non-racialized and non-Indigenous communities (14%).¹⁵ Contributing factors to this disparity include lower net worth, including assets, for Indigenous and Black households in particular.¹⁶ Having more assets to draw on during challenging financial periods (such as the current inflationary crisis) can help protect households from experiencing food insecurity.

This last point can be particularly true for people whose employment income might technically place them over the official poverty line but cannot keep pace with the rates of inflation and high housing costs we have been seeing. According to our latest *HungerCount* (2023) report, racialized groups accessing food banks are more likely to have employment as their main source of income compared to non-racialized groups, which is consistent with findings showing that racialized groups are more likely to be working in part-time work with lower wages.¹⁷

TABLE 5. CHARACTERISTICS THAT WOULD HAVE A POSITIVE IMPACT ON THE EXPERIENCE OF FOOD BANK ACCESS, BY RACIAL IDENTITY

VERY POSITIVE IMPACT	TOTAL (A)	WHITE (B)	BLACK (C)	INDIGENOUS (D)	POC (E)
Having friendly staff/volunteers	59% ^E	60% ^E	70% ^{ABE}	77% ^{ABCE}	51%
Home delivery	45%	46% ^E	54% ^{AE}	57% ^{AE}	37%
Get to choose preferred items (a shopping-based model)	40%	38%	53% ^{ABE}	58% ^{ABE}	38%
Check availability online	39%	37%	56% ^{ABE}	52% ^{ABE}	37%
Exchange volunteer hours for more food	38%	36%	47% ^{ABE}	50% ^{AB}	39%
Having a range of food catering to distinct dietary needs (e.g., Halal, Kosher)	34%	30%	55% ^{ABD}	44% ^{AB}	37% ^B
No means testing	31%	30%	40% ^{ABE}	40% ^{ABE}	29%
Having a drive-through option	28%	26%	43% ^{ABE}	36% ^B	28%
Having less conspicuous/visible locations	26%	22%	36% ^{AB}	34% ^{AB}	31% ^B

Unweighted N = 2238; minimal sample size for testing: 30; column comparison symbols: A, B, C... (p ≤ 0.05)

¹⁵Uppal, Food insecurity.

¹⁶Uppal, Food insecurity. And Li, T. (2021, October 26). *To eliminate food insecurity, we must dismantle anti-Black racism*. *Healthy Debate*.

¹⁷Food Banks Canada. (2023). *HungerCount 2023*, p. 52.

Overall, the results of this national survey provide crucial quantitative insights from the general population that expand on the qualitative findings of the peer study. These insights not only are useful in highlighting both the key barriers to access and initiatives that could have a very positive impact in addressing these barriers, but also enable us to disaggregate the findings by racial identity and discover significant differences among various groups.

FINDING STRENGTH AND COMMUNITY

Despite the numerous challenges the participants were facing, they demonstrated strength, resilience, and dedication to help others in their community. They were hard-working and showed great adaptability. Participants described coping skills and strengths. They helped others by picking up food for them and sharing food when possible. They learned skills like gardening and canning food. The stories they shared and the positive attitudes they maintained in the face of adversity illustrate their resilience. Their strength was noted through positive attitudes, community and connection, and adaptability.

Positive Attitude

Participants maintained positive attitudes despite navigating difficult situations.

Key themes that emerged included:

- Gratitude
- Hopefulness
- Kindness
- Giving back

Community and Connection

Key themes about community and connection emerged from interviews with the participants during the qualitative study. Community and connection were demonstrated by:

- Having support from family and friends
- Collaboration
- Asking for help/reaching out to others
- Seeking knowledge
- Volunteering
- Helping others (educating/informing others; picking up food for others; sharing food)

Adaptability

Participants demonstrated adaptability throughout the interviews. Several themes emerged that suggested participants were:

- Quick learners
- Hard-working
- Learning new skills to support themselves and their families, like gardening and canning

PERSONAL MESSAGES FROM PARTICIPANTS TO PEOPLE IN A SIMILAR SITUATION

At the end of the interviews, the peer researchers asked participants what they wanted others to know about food access in Canada. **Specifically, participants were asked what message they would send to others who may be experiencing food insecurity:**

“WE MAY ALL NEED THE FOOD BANK AT SOME POINT IN OUR LIVES!”

“IT CAN HAPPEN TO ANYONE. **DON'T BE ASHAMED.**”

“YOU SHOULDN'T FEEL BAD. EVERYONE NEEDS TO EAT. IF YOU ARE IN A HOLE NOW **YOU WILL GET OUT.** THANKS TO ALL THE PEOPLE THAT ARE PART OF THE FOOD ACCESS PROCESS.”

“YOU’RE NOT AN OUTCAST OR A FAILURE FOR NEEDING TO ACCESS THESE SERVICES. THAT’S WHY THESE SERVICES ARE HERE.”

“NOBODY SHOULD GO WITH AN EMPTY STOMACH. IF YOU HAVE THESE KINDS OF SERVICES, YOU SHOULD USE THEM.”

REFLECTIONS FROM PEER RESEARCHERS

The peer researchers involved in this study shared what they learned from being involved in the project, including their understanding of the issue of food access after hearing participants’ stories. **For example, they felt they learned about the research process and learned from the participants how they could improve access at their own food banks.**

“BEING A PART OF A PROJECT THAT IN THE END MAY HELP TO BETTER UNDERSTAND WHAT IS KEEPING INDIVIDUALS FROM ACCESSING FOOD. TAKING WHAT I HAVE LEARNED AND APPLYING IT TO OUR OWN FOOD BANK.”

They gained increased empathy and shared that food insecurity is something that affects many Canadians and could happen to anyone.

“INCREASED AWARENESS AND EMPATHY. THIS A REMINDER THAT THIS CAN HAPPEN ANYTIME TO ANYONE.”

“I UNDERSTAND NOW THAT EVERYONE IN CANADA IS ONE CRISIS AWAY FROM EXPERIENCING FOOD INSECURITY.”

“THIS PROJECT BROUGHT ME A BROADER VIEW OF THE CHALLENGES FACING THOSE SUFFERING FOOD INSECURITY. WHILE I HAD MANY NOTIONS OF THE MAJOR BARRIERS/ CHALLENGES, THESE INTERVIEWS, AND ESPECIALLY REVIEWING THE INTERVIEWS FROM OTHER RESEARCHERS ACROSS THE COUNTRY, REVEALED MANY ADDITIONAL VIEWS AND SITUATIONS PEOPLE HAVE THAT ARE OUTSIDE THOSE FROM MY AREA. IT SHOWED ME HOW DIVERSE THE PROBLEM OF FOOD INSECURITY AND PROVIDING SUPPORT CAN BE FROM A COUNTRY-WIDE PERSPECTIVE.”

WHAT STOOD OUT MOST TO PEER RESEARCHERS

The peer researchers reflected on the project and noted what stood out most to them throughout the research process.

“IN JUST ABOUT EVERY INTERVIEW THE PARTICIPANT MENTIONED HOW ASHAMED AND EMBARRASSED THEY WERE TO NEED ASSISTANCE DUE TO THE CIRCUMSTANCES IN THEIR LIVES. YET **NEARLY EVERY PARTICIPANT’S MESSAGE TO THEIR FELLOW CANADIANS WAS THAT NOBODY ELSE SHOULD FEEL EMBARRASSED OR ASHAMED.**”

“**THE PAIN OF POVERTY, [THE IMPACT OF] HOW THEY ARE TREATED WHEN THEY GO TO ACCESS FOOD AT FOOD BANKS BY THE SERVICE PROVIDER.**”

“THEIR WILLINGNESS TO **SHARE THE MORE VULNERABLE PARTS OF THEIR STORIES** AND THINGS THEY HADN’T SHARED WITH ANYONE ELSE.”

“I FOUND MOST OF THE PEOPLE HAD MENTAL, PHYSICAL, OR TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES IN THEIR LIVES AND FOOD INSECURITY WASN’T THE ONLY THING THEY NEEDED HELP WITH. THERE WERE A FEW PEOPLE THAT JUST NEEDED A LITTLE HELP TO GET THROUGH A HARD SPOT IN THEIR LIFE AND **HAVING FOOD WAS ONE OF THE MOST BASIC NECESSITIES.**”

“EMBARRASSMENT AND SHAME. **IT CAME UP A LOT.** TRANSPORTATION. EVERYONE THAT I HAVE TALKED TO MENTIONED SOMETHING ABOUT TRANSPORTATION. MOST ARE VERY GRATEFUL AND APPRECIATIVE.”

“APPRECIATION OF HAVING THEIR VOICES HEARD AND **A DEEP HOPE THAT THEY COULD OFFER HELP IN SOME WAY IN RETURN.**”

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Our findings have implications for actionable change, and our path forward includes incorporating the suggestions of those with lived experience into changes at organizational levels. Some peer researchers noted that they have already started to implement changes at their organizations based on the stories they heard from participants during this project.

In addition to developing its access and equity guide, Food Banks Canada will be launching an accessibility grant that will support programmatic changes and initiatives mentioned in both the guide and the research findings. These initiatives include creating welcoming and dignified spaces that promote inclusion — for example, upgrades to waiting areas, comprehensive training and orientation for volunteers and staff — staffing to support expanded/flexible hours or collection of food hampers — for example, gas chits or bus fares — and the development of working groups/advisory groups/roundtables that include people with lived experience to determine community needs.

Accommodating dietary preferences or restrictions was identified as a crucial way to reduce barriers to access, especially among people who are Indigenous, Black, and People of Colour. Therefore, a portion of the grant will be designated for the purchase of culturally specific foods.

We will also introduce initiatives that allow us to continue to obtain insights from people with lived experience and to engage in knowledge exchange with them. These initiatives will include more research studies that explore issues pertaining to barriers to food access and provide substantive input for the next iteration of our organization's strategic plan.

Engaging people with lived experience is an important part of facilitating change. People who have direct, lived experience with food insecurity can provide unique and meaningful insights that can lead to reducing barriers to accessing food.

“IT’S IMPORTANT TO SHARE OUR STORIES TO HELP COMMUNITIES COME TOGETHER AND MAKE IT BETTER UNDERSTOOD.”

Reflection from a Peer Researcher



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank all the people with experience and expertise who participated. Their work and dedication were crucial to the success of this project. We also thank the peer researchers for all their work. They played a crucial role in the development and implementation of this project. Thank you as well to the **Walmart Foundation** for funding this work.



foodbankscanada.ca



[@foodbankscanada](https://www.instagram.com/foodbankscanada)

1 (877) 535-0958 • info@foodbankscanada.ca