



*Canadians*



*In Crisis*



*From Coast-to-Coast*

# KEY FINDINGS

**There was a surge in need in the early weeks of the pandemic, when there was a gap between when lockdowns began to occur, and emergency income benefits arrived.**

The majority (52 percent) of food banks saw an increase in the month of March compared to the previous year, with one-quarter seeing increases of greater than 25 percent. If it were not for the initial lockdowns and restrictions in movement that affected food bank access, it is likely that the surge would have been much higher. This early spike paints a concerning picture of what we could see in the months to come if unemployment rates remain high, the temporary supports put in place end or are reduced, and more folks turn to food banks for help.

**Food banks nationwide faced unprecedented challenges during this period.**

Food banks faced unprecedented operational challenges that arose specifically because of the pandemic. They ranged from huge reductions in volunteers, significant shortages in food supply due to large disruptions in the supply chain and a decline in public donations, large reductions in previous funding streams, and challenges to rapidly implement new public health protocols.

**By far, the biggest challenge faced by food banks throughout this period was lack of volunteers.**

42 percent of food banks reported a reduction in volunteers to be a challenge of critical importance since March. Volunteers have always been the backbone of the food bank network, with a significant portion of the food bank network being run entirely by volunteers. Because of restrictions in movement brought about by the lockdown, along with health considerations due to the pandemic, many food banks were desperately short on the workforce needed to perform key tasks such as sorting donations, transferring food in and out of vehicles, and distributing food to those in need.

**Federal funding initiatives, along with tremendous support from businesses, individuals, and local communities, is what enabled local food banks to survive throughout this period.**

If it were not for the support that was present at the local, provincial and national levels, many food banks would not have been able to keep their doors open throughout this period. New funding streams enabled food banks to better manage the challenges that arose due to the pandemic and continue to serve their local communities.





**Throughout the pandemic, food banks were able to innovate and quickly adapt to the rapidly changing needs of their communities and engage their local connections.**

Nearly 50 percent of food banks provided food support to an emergency program during the pandemic outside of agencies they usually support or share food with (such as school programs, social housing units, social services agencies, or neighbouring food banks). The most significant adjustment made to food bank services was nearly 70 percent of those surveyed initiated a home delivery service in order to better serve those affected by lockdown restrictions. Other adaptations included expanding hours and days of service, pivoting their program to target groups such as homeless populations, students and seniors, and offering gift cards when low on food or when unable to accommodate people in their food bank. These changes were often done in conjunction with other community partners such as local governments, community organizations and local businesses.

**While the food bank network stepped in to meet the immediate need, social policy temporarily helped to mitigate a much higher rate of demand that might have otherwise occurred.**

53 percent of food banks reported a decrease in overall usage from March 2020 to June 2020. 90 percent of food banks attributed the decrease in usage to increased financial support for clients from the government. When highlighting specific benefits, 64 percent felt the CERB had the most significant impact, with the increases to the Canada Child Benefit ranked second (58 percent).

**Other factors reduced demand for food banks during this period that did not necessarily indicate a reduced need.**

One third of food banks attributed the decrease in numbers to restrictions in movement, and other public health directives implemented due to COVID-19. One in six attributed the decrease in usage to increased community support through temporary "pop-up" type initiatives or through other services in the community that provided food supports, as clients who would have normally accessed their local food bank may not have needed to due to the support of these other individuals or organizations. In some cases, food banks were sharing more food, but often through these new initiatives where client numbers weren't tracked. As lockdown orders lift, and schools reopen, many of these pop-up initiatives have closed and clients are expected to return to their regular food bank.

**Despite new social policy initiatives, one third of food banks reported an overall increase throughout this period, and one-sixth reported no change.**

Many food banks were struggling with increased client need while also handling the stresses of operating during a pandemic. This includes urban centres with populations of 100,000 or more, and other areas whose economies were more heavily impacted by the pandemic and associated shutdowns. Of those who saw an increase, 87 percent attributed this increased need to COVID-19-related job losses. In addition, those who lost their jobs in these areas also had to contend with high housing costs, and benefits such as the CERB were not enough to fully cover those costs in addition to food.



**Looking ahead, food banks are wary and anxious about the possibility of more and more people needing their supports as temporary government supports wind down.**

There is a worrisome combination of factors that may lead to a steep rise in food bank use over the months and year ahead. The end of the CERB combined with the lifting of eviction moratoriums, people's savings dwindling months into the pandemic, limited job opportunities and provincial governments clawing back social assistance for those who received the CERB will all likely contribute to difficult months ahead for many Canadians left with no other choice but to turn to their local food bank to feed themselves and their families.

**Now is the time to transform our social safety net to permanently flatten the curve of food bank use through the duration of the pandemic and the recovery beyond.**

Now that the CERB has ended, it is critical that new permanent income support-models and other social policies be put into place so that Canadians can make ends meet. Food banks across Canada cannot accommodate a tidal wave of new clients while maintaining its level of support for long-term need created by decades of social policy neglect.







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