

Hunger a fear for 3 million Canadians: Food Bank chief thinks actual total may be higher [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

About 3 million Canadians - one in every 10 - live in a household where getting enough food is a constant worry.

Almost 2.5 million of them had to compromise what or how much they ate in 1998-99 because of a lack of money, Statistics Canada said in its first report on the problem yesterday. Another 500,000 worried they would not have enough to eat because they were short of cash.

Together, these families have "limited or uncertain access to enough food for a healthy active life," the National Population Health Survey of almost 50,000 Canadians found.

About a fifth of them resorted to food banks, soup kitchens or other charitable agencies for emergency supplies.

But the survey could be significantly underestimating the number going hungry in Canada because so many poor people don't have phones and would not have been included in the survey, said Sue Cox, executive director of the Daily Bread Food Bank in Toronto.

About 14 per cent of food bank users in Toronto don't have a phone, but that jumps to 50 per cent in Edmonton, she said.

Cox has always "guesstimated" that about 3 million people a year use a food bank at least once and "I almost feel vindicated by this report," she said in an interview. "People have found that number a little unbelievable - they wonder how can that be."

Close to 1 million Canadians use a food bank at least once a month, according to the food bank, and in some areas they aren't allowed to use it that often. There are many others in need who just won't go to a food bank, Cox said.

"For a lot of people, the point when they would go to a food bank would be after going days without food. It's an act of desperation." - Sue Cox, executive director of Daily Bread Food Bank.

"For a lot of people, the point when they would go to a food bank would be after going days without food," she said. "It's an act of desperation."

Laura - who is diabetic and depressed - was evicted from her \$900 a month apartment after 21 years in December. She found a sympathetic landlord and a townhouse on a nearby street for nearly \$1,200 plus hydro.

She can pay the rent through her \$700 social assistance cheque and \$500 in child support. But she's been neglecting her hydro, and that may be turned off today.

A \$300 child tax benefit goes to pay for everything else, while Lisa, who had kidney cancer as a toddler and currently suffers from kidney infections, has moved back home.

The foursome is somehow getting by, procuring food from Laura's mother and the food bank.

This week it's pasta - no meat - for Laura and her daughter. The boys will get, as usual, the 12 burgers for \$3.40 Laura bought at Food Basics, and, too often, junk food.

A total of 420,000 children lived in so-called "food insecure" households, making up the largest proportion of any age group. But they didn't necessarily go hungry - their parents went without food so they could eat - although more than a quarter of them had to compromise their diet, the survey found.

The fact that 40 per cent of food bank users are kids can lead to "significant health problems," Cox said.

A total of 17 per cent of people in food-insecure households described their health as only "fair" or "poor," more than twice the proportion of other households, the report said. Almost a third experienced emotional distress, three times the rate of other households.

Hunger in North America rarely reaches the level of deprivation that exists in other parts of the world, the report says, but food insecurity covers a range from anxiety about the household's food supplies to ``ultimately, when food supplies and resources are exhausted, hunger

among children."

Hunger should not be a problem in Canada, it says, but the number of food banks continues to grow "and their substantial presence suggests that food insecurity not only exists, but persists."

More than a third of people living in households earning less than \$20,000 a year reported some sort of food insecurity in 1998-99 and 30 per cent said they had to compromise their diet. But getting enough food was a problem even for middle-income households, where 14 per cent of residents had problems getting a decent diet, the report said.

That could be because a layoff or job loss at some point in the year left the family vulnerable even though their income for the whole year was higher, it said.

That shows "how vulnerable Canadians are in a crisis," said Alan Mirabelli, executive director of the Vanier Institute of the Family.

"If you look at how much debt has gone up and savings have gone down, there's probably no margin to draw on in a crisis."

More than half of welfare families didn't have enough food to eat, as did many families relying on other government programs, the report says.

A third of all families headed by single mothers were food insecure and 28 per cent had to compromise their diet.

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