

**HALTON FOOD BANK STUDY:
ALTERNATIVES TO
DEPENDENCY**

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DEDICATION

**This report is dedicated to
the citizens of the community who use and have used food banks
and the volunteers who have made food bank services possible.**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Glossary of Terms

1. INTRODUCTION	1
History of the Study	1
Food Banks in Canada	4
Poverty in Halton	4
Food Security	5
Food Security Alternatives	6
Purpose and Objectives of the Study	6
Study Outcomes	7
2. METHODOLOGY	9
Advisory Committee	9
Key Informant Interviews	10
Study Questionnaire	10
Focus Groups	12
3. ABOUT FOOD BANKS IN HALTON	14
History	15
Mandates	15
Organizational Structure	16
Volunteers	16
Funding	16
Eligibility Requirements	17
Frequency of Visits Permitted	18
Distribution of Food to Recipients	18
4. PROFILE OF FOOD BANK RECIPIENTS IN HALTON	20
Number of Food Bank Recipients	20
Changes in the Number of Food Bank Recipients	21
Present Profile of Food Bank Recipients	22
Demographic Information	22
Financial Information	28
Housing Information	34
Food Bank Use	39
Conclusion	42
Summary	43

5. FOOD BANK USE	46
General Service	46
Food Quality	48
Food Quantity	50
Range of Products	53
Suggestions for Improvements	57
Conclusion	66
Summary	67
Recommendations	68
6. ALTERNATIVE STRATEGIES	72
Current or Past Use of Alternatives	72
Other Complementary Activities or Alternatives	82
Conclusion	88
Summary	88
Recommendations	89
7. ROOT CAUSES OF FOOD INSECURITY	91
Unemployment	91
Minimum Wage Jobs	92
Inadequate Social Assistance	93
Housing Costs	96
Lack of Child Care	97
Inadequate Training and Education	98
Quality of Social and Community Services	99
Regressive Taxes	102
Conclusion	102
Summary	103
Recommendations	104
8. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS	106
Who Uses Food Banks?	106
Is Food Bank Use Increasing?	106
Do Food Banks Meet the Needs of Those Depending on Them?	107
Will Complementary or Alternative Programs Decrease Food Bank Dependency?	110
Will Food Banks Continue To Be Needed?	117
The Future of Food Banks	118

9. RECOMMENDATIONS	121
Food Bank Service: Changes for the Future	121
Alternatives to Food Banks: Enhancing Food Security	123
Other Actions to Reduce Food Bank Dependency	124
The Next Step	125

REFERENCES	127
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APPENDICES	129
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- 1 *The Price of Eating Well in Halton* brochure
- 2 Key Informant Interview questions
- 3 Food Bank Recipient Questionnaire
- 4 Focus group flyer
- 5 Focus group questions
- 6 Article: “Food Bank Shelves Empty”

Table of Figures

Figure 1 - Halton Food Bank Use	20
Figure 2 - Place of Residence	23
Figure 3 - Number of Children in Household	24
Figure 4 - Currently Employed	25
Figure 5 - Highest Level of Education	27
Figure 6 - Household Income	29
Figure 7 - Go Without Food Sometimes So Your Kids Have Food	29
Figure 8 - Do You Receive Social Assistance?	32
Figure 9 - How Long Have You Been Receiving Social Assistance	33
Figure 10 - How Long Have You Lived in Halton?	33
Figure 11 - Housing Situation	34
Figure 12 - Amount Spent on Housing Per Month	36
Figure 13 - How Much Did You Spend On Utilities?	37
Figure 14 - Length of Time On The Subsidized Housing Waiting List	38
Figure 15 - Number of Times Received Food In The Past 12 Months	39
Figure 16 - If You Have Been Using The Food Bank Longer Than One Year, How Long?	40
Figure 17 - How Long Were You Without Food Before Using The Food Bank Today?	41
Figure 18 - If Affordable Child Care Was Available Would You or Your Partner Be Able To Work?	96

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Alternatives	Alternatives, in this study, refers to food security activities in place of, or complementary to, food bank use.
Community Gardens	Land donated or rented at a low cost is used by participants to plant and harvest food.
Community Kitchens	A group of people from a neighbourhood or group who work together to plan and prepare nutritious meals.
Community Dinners	The community works together to organize and prepare a neighbourhood or community dinner.
Soup Kitchens	A community group operates a drop in kitchen where community members can have access to hot meals at no charge.
Fresh Food Basket	A basket of fresh produce is delivered to your neighbourhood from a central depot at a low cost once a month.
Food Co-op	Community owned and operated grocery stores which provide food to members at a low cost.
Grow-a-Row	Farmers and gardeners mark and plant a row from their field to be donated to or harvested by a group/organization.
Gleaning	The gathering of left-over food after the farmer has harvested e.g. potatoes, at little or no charge.
Food Buying Group	A group of people who pool together their resources to buy bulk food at wholesale prices.
Pick Your Own	A group of people arrange to go to a local farm or orchard where they pick produce for themselves. This can be donated or for a small cost.

Donor	An individual or organization that gives food or other products or otherwise makes a contribution to the food bank.
Food Security	Being 'food secure' means that people have access to sufficient, nutritious food that meets their needs.
Food Bank	An organization that provides food and other associated services to individuals and families.
Food Services	Includes all services designed to feed the hungry, including such services as food banks and school breakfast programs.
Household	A single person, two or more people, or a family living together in one residential unit.
Poverty Line	Refers to the Low-Income Cut-Off (LICO) established by Statistics Canada. In Halton, for example, the LICO for a family of four in 1997 is \$28,098. Any family of four with an income below these level is considered low-income or poor.
Pre-box	The total predetermined quantity and mix of food and/or non-food items allotted by the food bank to individual or family recipients per visit.
Recipient	A food bank recipient is a person who has received food from a food bank on one or more occasions.

1. INTRODUCTION

History of the Study

Three major initiatives have developed simultaneously in Halton to explore the food security issues of residents of this region. First, *The Halton Health Promotion Plan* (1997) identifies food security as a priority issue for the region. Improving nutrition for children and families is one of the Plan's objectives. The Plan advocates access to and promotion of affordable, nutritious, and personally acceptable food for all residents, including people with low incomes.

Second, the Halton Anti-Poverty Coalition, a volunteer organization of Halton residents, whose aim is to empower people living in poverty, works to improve conditions for Halton's poor. The Coalition identifies food security as its main priority.

Thirdly, the Halton Social Planning Council and Volunteer Centre also identifies food security as an urgent need in Halton. The Council produced a brochure: *The Price of Eating Well in Halton*, in partnership with the Public Health Department of the Regional Municipality of Halton. It documents the fact that many low-income Halton residents cannot afford to purchase the kind or quantities of food essential to a healthy diet. (See Appendix 1 for *The Price of Eating Well in Halton*).

The concerns of the partnership drafting the Halton Health Promotion Plan, the experience of those living in poverty and the research documenting the price of eating well in Halton complement other concerns and research found across Ontario and Canada. A number of studies have been conducted across Canada by food banks, Social Planning

Councils and other agencies to determine why food bank use has increased. The profile of food bank recipients documented by these studies is very similar across the country. The people who suffer the most food insecurity are:

- people for whom social assistance is their primary income, including families with children, single-parent families, and
- people who work at part-time or full-time jobs but whose income is still so low they cannot afford to provide for their food needs or those of their families.

For example, *A Report on Hunger in Peterborough* (1996) finds that the majority of households that are food insecure are living on low incomes. It also documents the high proportion of children among food bank recipients. A similar study conducted in Belleville identifies people who are food insecure as i) those living in rental accommodation, ii) those forming part of the working poor, and iii) those dependent on social assistance for their income.

Complementing this work in Ontario is a study of poverty in Edmonton, *Two Pay Cheques Away* (1996). It reports that those who are food insecure in that city are predominantly single mothers, single men, children, people receiving social assistance, and the working poor. In addition, they tend to be less educated and younger than the average person in Edmonton. Moving to our Pacific Coast, a study conducted by the Surrey, B.C. Food Bank, suggests food bank recipients are predominantly single adults, single-parent families with young children, those living on social assistance, and those with less education than most residents.

More recently, the report *A Glimpse of Child Hunger in Canada* (1998) also points to similar characteristics of those suffering from hunger. This National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth, which represents about 57,000 Canadian families with children, found that the poorest of the poor who report hunger are families with children headed by lone mothers who are on social assistance. About one third of hungry families are primarily wage earners, often dual parent families - the working poor.

In summary, food security studies report consistent findings. Most people who are recipients of food banks in Canada:

- are unemployed or work at very low paying jobs
- are dependent on social assistance for their income, in part or in whole
- rent their accommodation.

Many of these studies also find:

- high numbers of children in households using food banks
- high numbers of the disabled in households using food banks
- high numbers of single men in households using food banks
- high numbers of single-parent families headed by women using food banks

Research consistently finds lack of adequate income to be the principle reason that people use food banks.

Food Banks in Canada

Statistics Canada estimates that two million people, 7.5% of the Canadian population, received food assistance at least once in 1991. By 1994, that number had risen to two and a half million, 8.6% of the population (Riches,1997).

Although Canada produces plenty of food, sufficient nutritious food remains inaccessible to many residents. The first post World War II Canadian food bank opened in 1981 in Edmonton, responding to the food needs of people suffering through the recession and affected by cuts in government spending.

By 1992, food banks in Canada outnumbered McDonald's franchises three to one. By 1994, the number of food banks in Canada had risen dramatically to 457. Ontario has more food banks than any other province. On the other hand, Quebec has the fastest rate of increase in their establishment (Riches,1997).

A direct correspondence can be seen between the increased number of food banks in Canada and Statistics Canada's figures on the increased number of people living in poverty in the country. In 1996, Statistics Canada identified 1,267,205 families as having incomes below the Low-Income Cut-Off, as compared with 972,855 families in 1991, an increase of 30%.

Poverty in Halton

Although Halton is a more affluent region than others in Ontario, many people in Halton are poor and are not able to meet basic food needs. Using Statistics Canada's Low-

Income Cut-Off, poverty in Halton increased even more dramatically than it did nationally between 1991 and 1996. In 1991, 4,590 families in Halton were poor, compared to 7,140 in 1996, an increase of 52%.

This growing interest and concern about food security in our community evoked a series of questions about the role of food banks in resolving people's food needs. The Halton Social Planning Council believes this study provides important insights into food banks and their contribution to people's food security in our community. It describes the transformation of food banks from an emergency response to an organization providing food to those without over significant time periods. It also identifies, through the voices and written comments of study participants, the root causes of food insecurity. The Council trusts that this report will serve as a blueprint for action to build food security across Halton.

Food Security

Food security exists when "all people at all times have access to sufficient amounts of safe, nutritionally adequate, and personally acceptable foods in a manner that maintains human dignity" (Davis, 1991). When people's food needs are not met, there is food insecurity. This is the definition which underlies the study.

Food insecurity should not be confused with hunger, which is a shortage of food over a prolonged or intense period that can lead to severe malnutrition or starvation. We rarely see hunger, defined this way, in Canada.

Food banks have always been established as a stop-gap measure, intended to be a short-term response to food insecurity, not a permanent source of food. In reality, many

people depend on food banks on a long-term basis, and the need for the services of food banks has increased, not decreased, in recent years. Without them, men, women, and children would go hungry. Food banks do not intend to encourage long-term use and dependency; nevertheless, they remain one of the few stable sources of food for people with low incomes.

Food Security Alternatives

Food banks are responses to food insecurity; however, there are other activities or strategies that help people meet their food needs. These strategies, referred to as complementary activities or alternatives, are not necessarily new ideas, and many currently exist in Canada and elsewhere, for example, community gardens (or ‘allotments’) which have existed for centuries in Britain.

Many of the alternatives we explore in this study have been tried or currently exist in Halton. For example, community kitchens operate in a number of communities. One issue investigated is whether an increase and expansion of alternatives to food banks will reduce dependency on them and enhance food security for Halton residents.

Purpose and Objectives of the Study

Food banks resolve only the immediate need for food. They do not deal with the root causes of food insecurity in order to find long-term solutions. Important questions remain that need to be addressed. They are:

- C How do communities develop strategies to eliminate the root causes of food insecurity?
- C What alternatives are there to food banks? Are these alternatives complementary to the services of food banks?
- C How can communities learn about options, adapt them and implement them?
- C How can food banks better meet the needs of those they serve and do so humanely and in ways that maintain people's dignity?

Therefore, the purpose of the study is fourfold:

- (i) to build a profile of Halton food bank recipients, their characteristics and their needs;
- (ii) to identify ways that food bank services can be improved;
- (iii) to investigate alternative strategies to food bank dependency; and
- (iv) to examine the root causes of food insecurity.

Study Outcomes

This study will generate information for community reflection and action in four areas:

- a) Food Bank Recipient Profiles - information on food bank recipients including education levels, income, family status;

- b) Food Bank Service Delivery -information on the perceptions of food and services provided by food banks;

- c) Complementary and Alternative Services - ideas, concepts, programs, services other than food banks that will help meet food and nutrition needs

- d) Social and Economic Strategies - information, public awareness on the root causes of food insecurity leading to policy and program development to mitigate these factors.

Sections 4 through 7 of this report discuss these areas fully.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study involves three data collection mechanisms:

- 1) Key informant interviews with people who work for and with food banks or on food security issues, to explore different perspectives on food bank service and alternatives
- 2) A questionnaire to be completed by food bank recipients to develop a recipient profile
- 3) Focus groups comprised of food bank recipients to discuss food bank service and alternatives to food banks

Advisory Committee

A study Advisory Committee was formed. Its role was to guide and review the design and methodology of the study. Invited to serve on the Committee were representatives of the following Halton organizations: the Halton Anti-Poverty Coalition, the 11 Halton Food Banks, and the Halton Health Department. The Halton Anti-Poverty Coalition represented the point of view of people with low incomes, many of whom use food banks. The food bank representatives offered the views of the food banks' boards of directors, as well as their paid and unpaid staff members. The Halton Health Department shared its knowledge of nutrition and food security. The Committee met several times over the course of the study.

Travel time, workload, few staff resources, and other factors prevented some of the food banks from sending representatives to the Advisory Committee meetings. Meetings were held in the four municipalities to make participation easier. In addition, all food banks

not able to attend meetings received the materials discussed at the meetings in an effort to solicit their opinions.

Key Informant Interviews

Interviews were conducted in person or by telephone with staff or volunteers who operate Halton food banks, as well as with representatives of other organizations working on food security issues. The opinions expressed were those of the people interviewed and do not necessarily reflect the views of the organization itself.

Appendix 2 contains the interview questions asked of food bank representatives. Questions were asked about food bank services, policies and procedures; the future of food banks; and alternatives to them. In addition, interviews with organizations involved in food security, other than food banks, were conducted. Questions centred around the food security work of each respective organization.

Interviews were conducted with representatives from each of the ten food banks; six other key informant interviews were conducted with organizations, including the Halton Regional Health Department, the Halton Anti-Poverty Coalition, the Kerr Street Market, the Hamilton Social Planning and Research Council, the Metro Toronto Social Planning Council and the Toronto Daily Bread Food Bank.

Study Questionnaire

A questionnaire was designed to develop a profile of food bank recipients. Council researchers reviewed questionnaires used in other Canadian studies and where appropriate

adopted selected questions. Of particular assistance to us was the *Toronto Daily Bread Food Bank Survey* (February 1995).

Careful consideration was given to the appropriate length of the questionnaire, since the survey was to be self-administered. Great effort was made to keep the number of questions to a minimum without sacrificing the quality and quantity of information sought. The Advisory Committee reviewed and commented on the questionnaire. It was pre-tested in a Halton food bank. Changes were made in questions because of the pre-test and Advisory Committee's comments – the language was simplified and more space provided for comments. The phrase 'food security' was not used in the questionnaire as it is not widely known; 'food needs' was used instead. The final questionnaire included closed questions to elicit demographic information and open-ended questions to collect qualitative data. The food bank recipient questionnaire is found in Appendix 3.

The Advisory Committee believed that some recipients might feel concerned that critical comments about food bank service might affect their relationship with the food bank. Consequently, to encourage full and honest answers, respondents were asked not to identify themselves.

Four-hundred and fifty questionnaires were distributed during site visits to the food banks in Halton. Thirty questionnaires were given to each of the four food banks in North Halton (Milton and Halton Hills) and 50 questionnaires to six of the seven food banks in South Halton¹ (Oakville and Burlington). This reflects the larger recipient population located in the south. The questionnaires were available during the food banks hours of operation.

¹ The Burlington food bank, Partnership West, did not participate in this study.

Respondents had the choice of returning the questionnaire to the Council in the self-addressed, stamped envelope provided for that purpose or they could leave it in a closed drop box at the food bank. Questionnaires were available at the food banks over a two-month period.

In addition, to elicit responses from those individuals who only use a food bank periodically, 40 questionnaires were randomly distributed to subsidized housing developments in Burlington; 20 were distributed to the Kerr Street Market in Oakville; and 40 were mailed to Anti-Poverty Coalition members. In total, 550 questionnaires were distributed. One hundred and two were completed and returned, that is, a response rate of 19%. The information from the questionnaire was entered into the computer program SPSS (the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) for analysis of the quantitative data.

Focus Groups

Focus groups were convened to explore food bank service and alternatives to food banks. In order to encourage frank and open discussion, the focus groups were convened at locations other than the food banks and no food bank representatives were present. Flyers inviting participation (see Appendix 4) were posted at the food banks and sent to community services, such as libraries, to be posted in places of public access. The sessions were also advertised through press releases that appeared in local newspapers. Recipients interested in participating were asked to register in advance.

Seven focus groups were held, involving 40 participants. Two groups were held in Oakville (seven people total); two in Burlington (15 people total); one in Milton (seven people), one in Acton (five people), and one in Georgetown (six people). Two focus groups

were held in Oakville and Burlington because of the larger population and numbers of food bank recipients residing in south Halton. The groups were facilitated by Council staff. Each session was recorded and transcribed to capture all of the discussion; however, individuals were not identified by name in the transcripts. A subsidy of \$15 was given to each participant to cover expenses.

The focus group questions were developed to encourage a structured discussion among food bank recipients and included questions on food bank use, alternatives to food banks, and the future of food banks. The questions to guide focus groups are found in Appendix 5.

Questions explored what people liked and disliked about using food banks. They also asked for comments on food quality, food quantity and the range of products available. Inquiries were also made about how the food banks could be improved to better serve recipients. The questions also investigated other methods of meeting food needs such as community kitchens and community gardens. After being provided with information on alternatives to food banks, participants were asked if they had participated in any, why or why not, they would be interested, and if they had any other ideas for alternatives. Participants were then asked how they see their future and the future of the food banks; what would help them decrease their use of food banks; and for any other comments.

3. ABOUT FOOD BANKS IN HALTON

Table 1 lists the eleven food banks operating in Halton Region: four in Burlington, four in Halton Hills, one in Milton, and two in Oakville. This does not include a number of other food assistance programs, many run through churches, that offer emergency aid.

Table 1 - Halton food bank location and hours of operation

Name of Agency	Phone #	Hours	Address
Burlington			
B.E.E.F.	632-0465	Tues 10-2 Thur 2-6	Pinedale Plaza, 561 Wedgewood Dr, Unit 8, Burlington L7L 4J1
Partnership West Family Support Network	637-2273	Mon -Wed 10-1 Fri 10-1	1254 Plains Rd E, Burlington L7S 1W6
Salvation Army Burlington	637-3893	Mon-Fri 9-12	2090 Prospect St, Burlington L7R 1Y9
Community Unity	336-0652	No Schedule	3321 Palmer Dr, Burlington L7M 1Z7
Oakville			
Fareshare	847-3988	Mon 10-2, Thurs 3-7	1240 Speers Rd, Oakville L6L 2X4
Salvation Army Oakville	827-6523	Mon-Fri 9-12, 2-4	1225 Rebecca St, Oakville L6L 1Z1
Milton			
Salvation Army Milton	875-1022	Mon-Fri 9-4	100 Nipissing Rd, Unit 3, Milton L9T 1P7
Halton Hills			
Foodshare Acton	(519) 853-0457	Tues 9-2, Sat 10-12	153 Perth Rd, Acton L7J 1C9
Salvation Army Acton	(519) 853-5610	Tues/Thurs 9.30-12.30	114 Mill St E, Acton L7J 2M4
Salvation Army Georgetown	(905) 877-1374	Mon/Wed 9.30-12.30	318 Guelph St, Unit 13 Georgetown L7G 4B5
Georgetown Bread Basket	(905) 877-2893	Sat 10-12,	247 Armstrong Av, Unit 9 Georgetown L7G 4X6

History

The Salvation Army Family Services have been providing food for 30 years in Burlington and Oakville, for 15 years in Acton, for 10 years in Milton, and for four years in Georgetown. The Community Unity and BEEF food banks in Burlington have operated for 17 years and 10 years respectively. Oakville Fareshare has existed for nine years. Acton's Foodshare was founded eight years ago; while Georgetown has the shortest history of food banks of all the communities in Halton, with the Salvation Army operating for four years and the Georgetown Bread Basket since November 1996.

Mandates

The mandates of Halton food banks are different in phrasing but their essence is the same; that is to assist people living in poverty. Typical mission or mandate statements include the following:

"To preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, supply basic human needs, provide personal counselling, and undertake the spiritual and moral regeneration of all persons in need who come within our sphere influence." Burlington Salvation Army

"To provide family and social services, emergency assistance with food, clothing, accommodation, medication, provide emergency assistance for shelter and referrals to all Salvation Army institutions. Operate Christmas assistance programs for needy families. Family and spiritual counselling." Oakville Salvation Army

"... to contribute to the alleviation of hunger and the prevention of malnutrition for those individual or families who are temporarily in need of food and b) in a discrete and non threatening way to provide easy access to food for those individuals or families who are temporarily in need of assistance." Acton Foodshare

Organizational Structure

With the exception of the Acton and Georgetown Salvation Army food banks, food banks in Halton have Board of Directors comprised of community volunteers. The Boards set policy and procedures for the respective food bank. Six food banks operate through a combination of paid staff, usually a coordinator, and volunteers. Acton Foodshare, Burlington East Emergency Fund, Community Unity, and Georgetown Bread Basket are run entirely by volunteers.

Volunteers

All food bank representatives identify the important role volunteers play in their operations, fulfilling such tasks as fundraising, collecting food donations, interviewing recipients and serving as Board Members. Volunteers are identified as coming from a wide range of backgrounds including business. Many are retirees. It is important to note that food bank recipients frequently volunteer at the food banks, helping with duties such as shelf stocking and packaging. However, few are involved in food bank Board of Directors.

Funding

None of Halton's food banks receive funds from government. Support comes from local donations from individuals, businesses, or churches. The Salvation Armies also receive funding from the Red Shield Appeal, door-to-door fundraising and seasonal food drives at Easter, Thanksgiving, and Christmas.

Churches and local business make individual donations of food items or of money; in addition, some businesses have agreements with individual food banks. For example, Community Unity in Burlington receives a large monthly donation of milk from a local dairy farmer; the Georgetown Bread Basket food bank receives large corporate donations from a Christmas 'corporate challenge', spearheaded by the Mayor of Halton Hills. When food supplies deplete, the food banks rely on financial donations to purchase food to replenish their stock.

Eligibility Requirements

In order to use the services of most of the food banks in Halton, an individual has to present specific personal and financial information to 'verify' that he or she, or the family, is in need of food assistance. All of the food banks that participate in this study, except Community Unity, perform a means test.

Information required usually includes: family size, ages of members, household income, sources of income, and proof of expenses, such as rent, utilities and clothing. Food banks evaluate eligibility on an individual basis. Generally, they subtract an individual's or family's expenses from their income, and determine on a discretionary basis if they are eligible or ineligible to use the food bank.

Two food banks follow an income guide to determine eligibility. For example, at one food bank a family is eligible if they have \$25 or less per person per week left over from their income after expenses. These two food banks indicate their rules are flexible and that there are circumstances that occasionally mean the rules have to be adapted for a recipient.

For example, a person, whose grocery money has to be used to cover unplanned expenses such as housing, utility costs or medical emergencies, would be given consideration.

Frequency of Visits Permitted

All of the food banks in Halton permit recipients to pick up food once a month except for the Oakville Salvation Army, which encourages visits every two months, and Burlington Community Unity, which has no restrictions. Food banks indicate they are flexible on this issue; each case is evaluated individually and more frequent use is permitted in certain circumstances. Food banks state that in most cases, food bank use is relatively long-term, for example, for a one to two year period. However, some food banks offer only short-term assistance, such as one to three months, as in the case of the Georgetown and Acton Salvation Armies. Food banks recognize some recipients may visit them infrequently, sometimes just two or three times a year and that some recipients use the service only at Christmas.

Distribution of Food to Recipients

Food banks usually ask the public to donate non-perishable foods to distribute to food bank recipients, including canned, dried, and prepackaged items, for one obvious reason – safety. These products have a longer shelf life. Some food banks do receive perishable food items such as bread, fresh fruit, meat, and vegetables, as well, some food banks receive non-food items such as soap, toothpaste and laundry detergent to distribute. Since these items are not donated consistently they are distributed on an irregular basis. However, this does not meet the food needs of food banks' recipients as discussed in *Section 5, Food Bank Use, Range of Products*.

The manner of food distribution varies across Halton. Seven food banks pre-box the food (Burlington East Emergency Fund, Burlington Salvation Army, Burlington Community Unity, Oakville Fareshare, Oakville Salvation Army, Milton Salvation Army and Georgetown Salvation Army); in the other three, recipients pick predetermined amounts of food from open shelves with the assistance of food bank staff (Acton Salvation Army, Acton Foodshare, Georgetown Bread Basket). Although the reasons given by the food banks for the different food distribution approaches relate to storage space and the number of volunteers or staff available, *Section 5, Food Bank Use, Suggestions for Improvements* clearly shows food bank recipients prefer a system of more choice.

4. PROFILE OF FOOD BANK RECIPIENTS IN HALTON

Number of Food Bank Recipients

Food bank use across the Region reflects the distribution of the population. Burlington and Oakville serve the largest number of recipients, approximately 1,690 and 1,400 individuals respectively on average per month. Milton serves approximately 460 individuals a month and the Georgetown and Acton food banks serve on a monthly basis an average of 215 and 205 individuals respectively. The majority of recipients are families and children. Figure 1 illustrates the average number of families served in each municipality between 1994 and 1997.

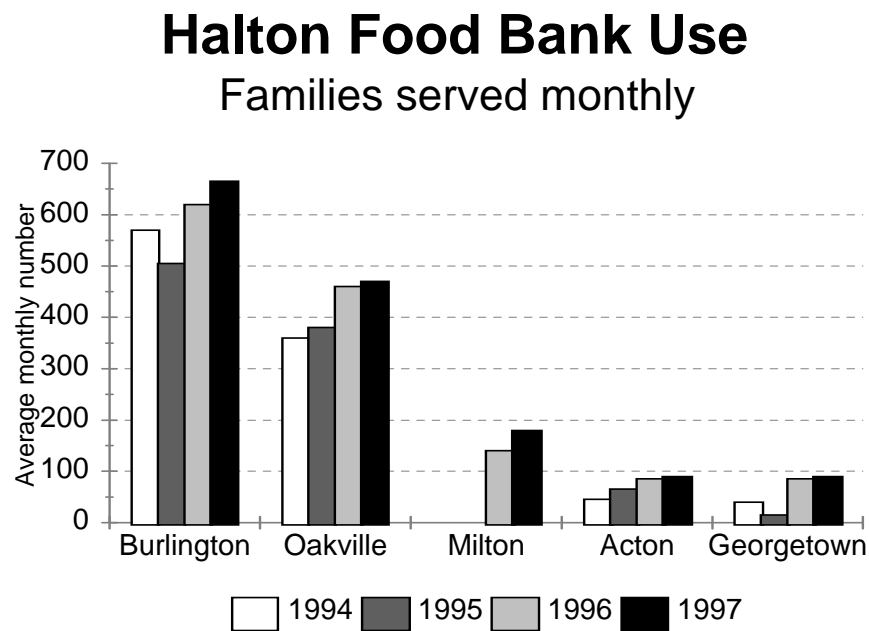


Figure 1

In Burlington, the number of families served decreased between 1994 and 1995 from 570 to 505, but has steadily increased from 505 in 1995 to 665 families in 1997, a 32% increase. In Oakville, the number of families served has increased steadily from 360 in 1994 to 470 in 1997, a 31% increase. In Acton, the number of families served increased, from 45 in 1994 to 90 in 1997, a 100% increase. In Georgetown, the number of families served has increased from 40 in 1994 to approximately 90, a 125% increase. In Milton, the number of families served has increased 29% from 140 in 1996 to 180 in 1997 (no information was available for 1995 and 1994).

Changes in the Number of Food Bank Recipients

In addition to the increase in the number of recipients using food banks from a monthly average of 1,015 families in 1994 to 1,495 in 1997, many food banks also report some noticeable changes in the profile of recipients. Common changes identified include the following:

- C a decrease in the proportion of single parent family recipients
- C an accompanying increase in the number of two-parent family recipients
- C an increase in the number of the working poor as recipients
- C an increase in the number of men in their fifties who have lost their jobs either through downsizing or forced early retirement as recipients
- C an increase in the number of unemployed people between the ages of 45 and 65 lacking current employment skills as recipients
- C an increase in the number of people with disabilities as recipients

The Georgetown Bread Basket, for example, reports that in 1997, 62% of their recipients can be defined as working poor – people who have permanent part-time or full-time jobs and who still cannot afford to feed their families properly.

Key informants suggest the following reasons have produced this change in the profile of recipients:

- C unemployment and underemployment
- C low-skilled jobs, temporary jobs, and part-time jobs (one food bank describes one recipient who is working at three low paying, part-time jobs)
- C the lack of affordable housing in the region
- C increases in the cost of rental accommodation
- C insufficient social assistance benefits
- C decreases in employment insurance benefits

Present Profile of Food Bank Recipients

This profile of food bank recipients is based on the 102 questionnaires completed and returned by Halton food bank recipients. The results, in the most part, are stated in percentages.

Demographic Information

Respondents provide background information on themselves and their household. Eighty-seven percent of those completing the questionnaire are women; 13% are men.

Place of Residence

As shown in Figure 2, the majority of respondents live in south Halton. Forty-six percent live in Burlington and 35% live in Oakville.

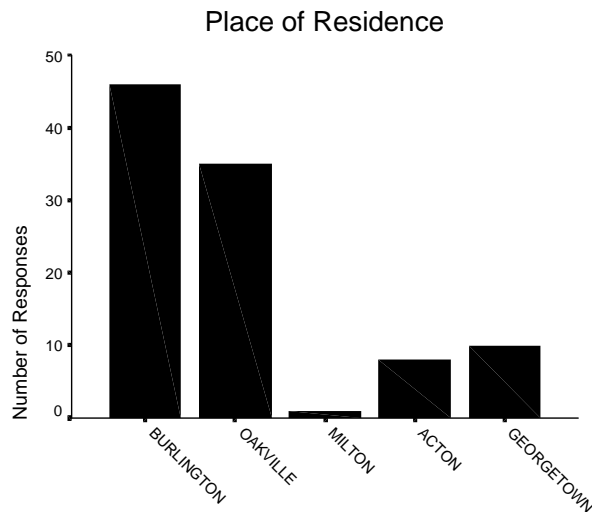


Figure 2
n=100

Household Size

Respondents' household size ranges from one person to six people including children. Fifty-five percent of households have one adult and 45% of households are comprised of two adults. Only two respondents indicate their households have three adults (n=101). Figure 3 illustrates that over 80% of households have children. The majority of households have one or two children, 28% and 31% respectively.

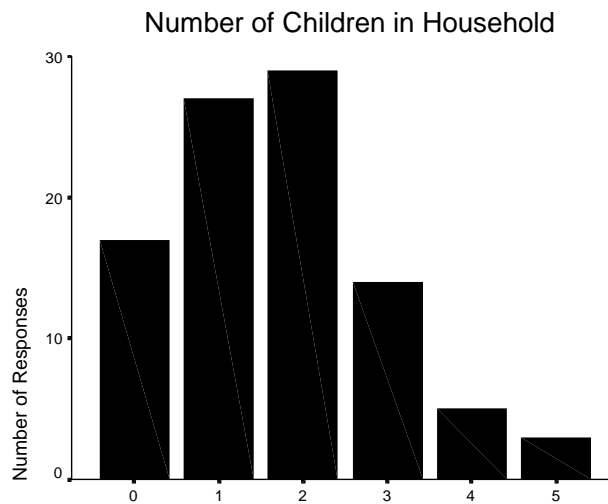


Figure 3
n=95

Health

The respondents' self assessment of their health indicates that 14% are in very good health, 65% are in good health and 19% are in poor health (n=100). However, 34% of respondents also indicate that an adult in their household has a disability (n=96).

Employment

Figure 4 illustrates the employment status of recipients. Seventy-seven percent of respondents are unemployed. Of the 23% who are employed, 20% of respondents are employed in full-time jobs, 72% work part-time, and 8% indicated other forms of employment.

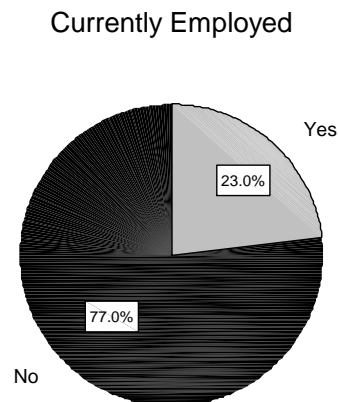


Figure 4
n=100

Training

Work skills, professions, and respondents' training vary widely. Respondents include very highly skilled/trained people as well as people with few skills. Many respondents have multiple skills. Respondents indicate their training, skills, trades, or professions include:

- *School bus driver*
- *long-distance operator*
- *homemaker, mother*
- *summer camp staff*
- *veterinary assistant*
- *assistant dietician*
- *sewing machine operator*
- *waitress*
- *cook*
- *warehouse (shipping and packing)*
- *Registered Nurses Aide*
- *Registered Nurse*
- *secretarial skills (from 20 years ago)*
- *sales (rep, retail clerk)*
- *chef*
- *business school*
- *nursing graduate*
- *cleaning*
- *factory work*
- *typing, filing*
- *computers*
- *environmental land surveys*
- *registered aesthetician (special effects make-up artist)*
- *cashier*
- *hairstylist*

- *journalism*
- *bookkeeping*
- *customer service rep*
- *bakery stores*
- *management in Tupperware*
- *restaurant management*
- *office management*
- *retail leasing*
- *marketing*
- *jack of all trades*
- *interior designer*
- *engineering*
- *plant management and operations*
- *state-of-the arts software*
- *instructor*
- *computer programmer*
- *liaison officer*
- *working with public*
- *teaching, training, research*
- *receptionist, basic computer, office*
- *general labour*
- *baking, cooking, secretarial*
- *Gerontology*
- *travel agent*
- *student in school - Academy of Learning*
- *guard*
- *working with children*
- *seamstress*
- *accounting*
- *Early Childhood Education Diploma*
- *medical office*
- *food service*
- *clerical work*
- *craftsperson*
- *hearing aid technician*
- *photography*
- *book sales*
- *B license*
- *production worker*
- *flooring sales and installation*
- *Red Cross Level II Certificate*
- *construction*
- *automotive*
- *administrative assistant*
- *painter*
- *tractor trailer operator*
- *carpentry*
- *tow motor operator*
- *dental assistant*
- *auto mechanics*

Education Levels

Figure 5 displays the respondents' highest level of education. The largest proportion of recipients (40%) indicated Grade 12 to be their highest level of education. Twenty-six percent have less than grade twelve and 35% had higher than grade twelve, of which 7% have university degrees.

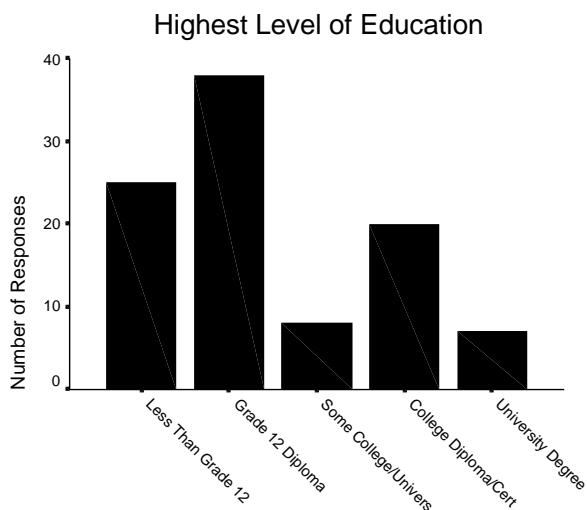


Figure 5
n=98

Fifteen percent of respondents indicate that they are currently attending school (n=100). Of those, 20% are attending school full-time and 80% are attending part-time.

Obstacles to Employment

In response to a question about obstacles to employment, over 50% of respondents identify some barrier that would prevent the employment of an adult in their household in the following year (n=96). Health problems, availability of child care, and adequate training are the most frequently cited obstacles. Obstacles they identify include:

- *mental illness*
- *cannot waitress or do any heavy lifting*
- *no affordable child care*
- *no skills, arthritis in hands and neck*
- *physical disabilities*
- *multiple sclerosis, use a power chair,*
- *and lost use of right hand*
- *poor health and lack of skills*
- *husband works, can't afford day care for four children, no subsidies*
- *lack of high school diploma*
- *back problems and arthritis*
- *fibromyalgia*

- *too old and sick*
- *disability pension*
- *race prejudice*
- *am disabled, husband left us*
- *pregnancy*
- *no child care*
- *need computer training*
- *back injury*
- *daughter was in a car accident*
- *affordable day care*
- *husband awaiting surgery, wife left job to care for ill daughter*
- *too old*
- *M.E., fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue syndrome*
- *field is extremely competitive, with few openings because of layoffs*
- *brain tumour*
- *emotional problems*
- *nervous breakdown*
- *disabled, son in school*
- *no work in trade trained for*
- *depression, marriage break-up, dealing with being battered*
- *can't afford the bus pass and can't walk very far without cane.*
- *unknown illness comes in flare-ups about every three months.*

Financial Information

Monthly Household Income

Figure 6 demonstrates that the majority of respondents have a monthly household income between \$500 and \$1,499. Forty-one percent have incomes between \$500 and \$999 and 37% have incomes between \$1,000 and \$1,499.

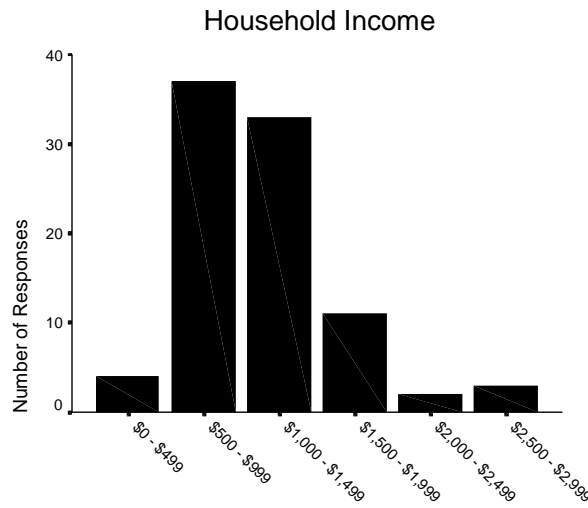


Figure 6
n=90

Budget Stretching

When asked what respondents regularly do to stretch their money or cut costs, Figure 7 shows that over 50% of respondents indicate that they sometimes go without food so that their children can eat.

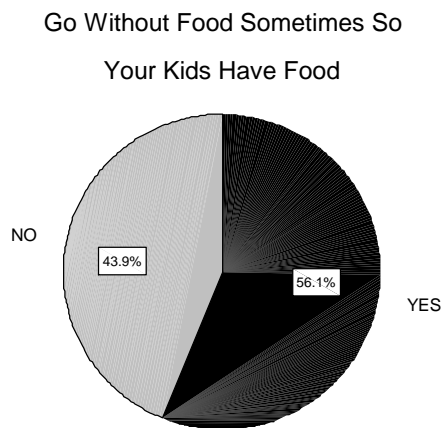


Figure 7
n=98

Exploring further budget stretching measures, respondents were asked to respond to a list of cost cutting measures that allow them to purchase food (n=98). They indicate that:

- 89% shop for specials
- 44% buy items in bulk
- 75% use coupons
- 82% buy food from clearance shelves
- 45% cook in bulk and froze/stored food
- 84% do not eat out
- 91% buy or use second hand clothes
- 14% go without telephone service
- 62% walk instead of using transit or a car

Other Expenses

Asked if they have given up things or reduced spending on certain things in the past three years due to lack of money, respondents indicate they have reduced use of or given up the following (n=91):

- car (40%)
- smoking (30%)
- house (25%)
- consuming alcohol (56%)
- recreation (81%)

Forty-four percent of respondents do not own a car (n=100) and 11% have no telephone service (n=98).

Respondents also indicate that they also forgo many of the “little things” that so many Halton residents take for granted. Their comments also suggest, they live on the “edge” by adopting survival practices. Examples of their experiences include:

- *we do without things and food which are not absolutely necessary*
- *no entertainment or new clothes-ever*
- *I go without so my husband has a good dinner*
- *skip meals or eat lunch again at supper time, eat pasta almost every day*
- *do not have a car*
- *no entertainment, social budget*
- *depend mainly on food bank*
- *get help from friend*
- *car pool, use food banks*
- *ride a bike*
- *borrow from neighbours*
- *exchange services with neighbour-bartering*
- *car is parked as I cannot afford it*
- *cannot go to theatres, etc. or have a holiday*
- *resorted to stealing at times i.e. Advil for menstrual cramps when the choice has been between buying medication or milk*
- *water down milk, liquid soaps; cut toilet paper in half; keep heat turned down; shower three times a week instead of seven*
- *pay only half of utility bills*
- *don't get my hair cut regularly, never spend money on recreation*
- *repair things instead of throwing out, look in second hand and reuse centres for everything, look at what people throw out on big pickup in spring, accept donations of clothing and things from friends*

Social Assistance Recipients

Figure 8 illustrates that 70% of respondents household income is from social assistance benefits (General Welfare Assistance or Family Benefits Allowance – now Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program).

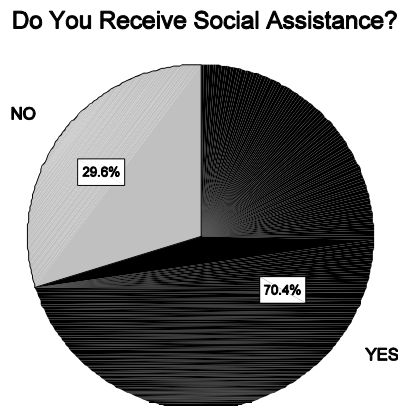


Figure 8
n=98

Figure 9 depicts that 66% of those receiving social assistance have been doing so for three years or longer. This denotes long-term dependency on social assistance. Thirty-eight percent of those receiving social assistance identify that they have received Unemployment Insurance, and when those benefits had ended, had become eligible for social assistance benefits (n=39).

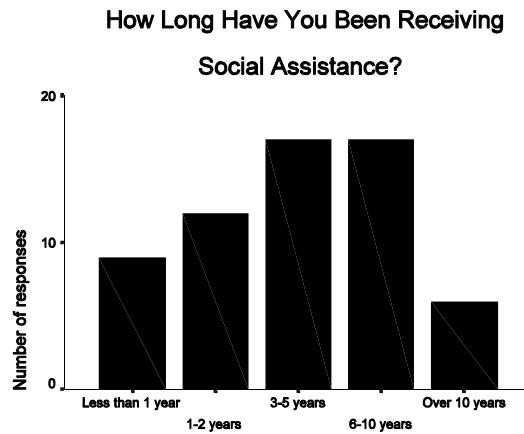


Figure 9
n=61

Housing Information

Length of Time Lived in Halton

Figure 10 illustrates that 55% of respondents have lived in Halton more than 10 years. Seventeen percent had lived in Halton for less than five years.

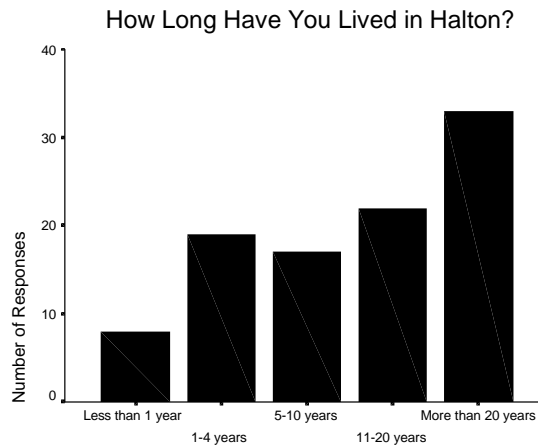


Figure 10
n=99

Home Ownership

Figure 11 illustrates home ownership or home rental. Ninety-one percent of respondents rent their accommodation and 7% of respondents own their own home.

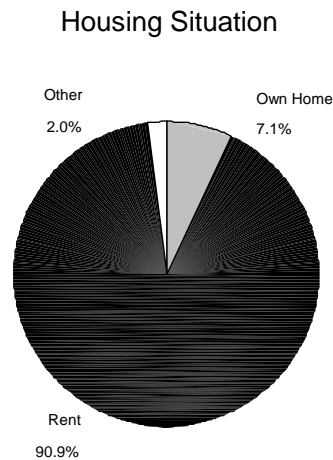


Figure 11
n=99

Frequency and Reasons for Moving

Seventy-five percent of respondents have not moved within the last 12 months; however, 25% have moved at least once (n=95). Many of the reasons for moving relate to rent levels and/or other housing costs. The following comments describe the reasons participants moved:

- *rent and utilities too expensive*
- *rats*
- *found a place in Halton Housing*
- *not enough room for the twins*
- *death threats, on myself & my daughter's life, from an ex-spouse*
- *moved to better living conditions*
- *over-housed*
- *money running out, had to look for cheaper place*
- *lost house to bank*
- *sharing with too many people, found more suitable housing*
- *to find a larger home*

- *spouse lost his job and we had to move*
- *separated from husband and factory closed at same time*
- *relocation due to abuse*
- *apartment was dangerous and had cockroaches*
- *my apartment was made into an office for business*
- *transfer from one province to another*
- *separated from spouse, couldn't afford residence*
- *children's health, my health, needed more room, apartment not up to standards*
- *health threatening humidity in the apartment*
- *due to health reasons I had to move close to family to get help*
- *apartment is not a good place to raise a child, but had to move back after 2 months. Could not afford townhouse*
- *divorce*
- *lost mother moved to be near good friends*
- *bugs*
- *we had to sell our house to survive*
- *the place we lived in for 6 months had no hot water, heat and the landlord wouldn't install them it was a dump and the city promised to condemn it but didn't*
- *could not afford rent and bills, very old townhouse, very high rent and very high hydro*
- *I left my abusive husband*
- *family breakdown, husband left us, forced to move*
- *to find work*

Housing Costs

Figure 12 illustrates that 53% of the respondents spend between \$500 and \$999 a month on housing each month, excluding utilities. Fourteen percent of respondents are paying over \$1,000 per month for housing (excluding utilities).

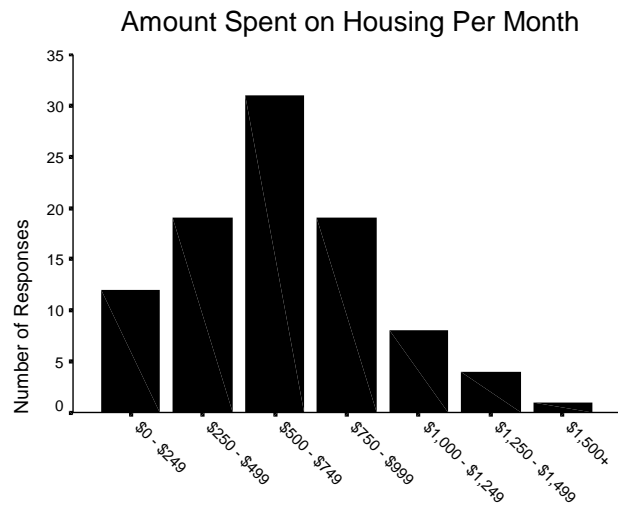


Figure 12
n=94

Utilities

Figure 13 illustrates the amount of money spent on utilities (heating, hydro etc.) each month. The majority of respondents paid between \$100 and \$299 a month on utilities; however, almost one-quarter (22%) of respondents paid over \$300 a month for them.

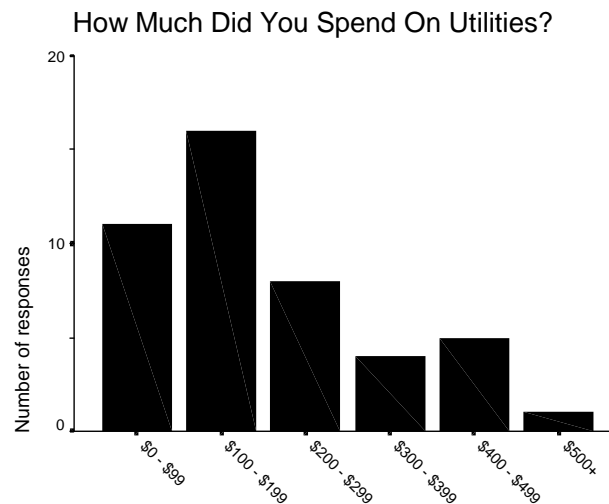


Figure 13
n=45

Subsidized Housing

Sixty-one percent of the respondents did not live in subsidized housing (n=98). Of those, 26% indicate they are on the subsidized housing waiting list. Figure 14 points out that of those on the subsidized housing waiting list, 67% have been waiting for two or more years. This clearly suggests that food bank recipients are experiencing an affordable housing crisis. A disproportionate amount of their income is going to housing and utility costs, leaving inadequate resources to purchase other basic necessities such as food.

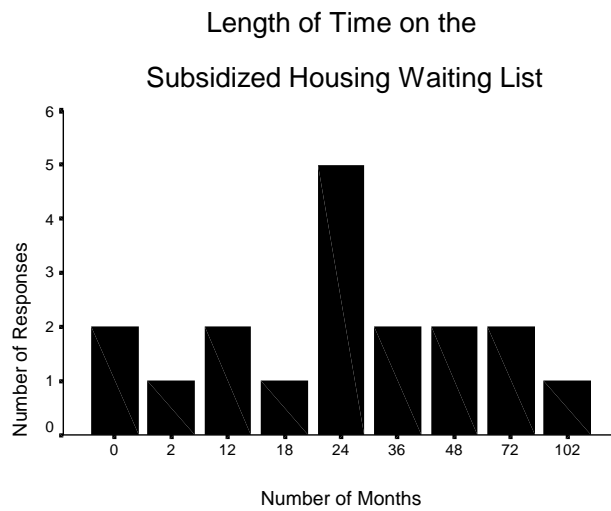


Figure 14
n=89

Food Bank Use

Number of Times Received Food

Figure 15 points out that of respondents using the food bank for more than one year, 33% had used it between 0 and 4 times, 27% had used it between 5 and 9 times, and 29% had used it between 10 and 14 times. Only 11% had used it more than 14 times in the last 12 months.

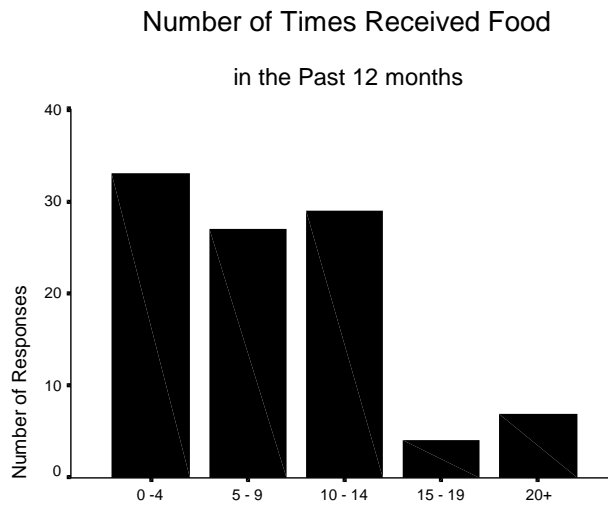


Figure 15
n=100

Length of Time Using Food Bank

Figure 16 indicates that use of the food bank has been long-term. Of the respondents using the food bank more than one year, 7% had used it one year, 25% had used it for two years, 33% had used it for three years, 18% had used it for four and 18% had used it five years or more. Indicating food bank use is a survival strategy.

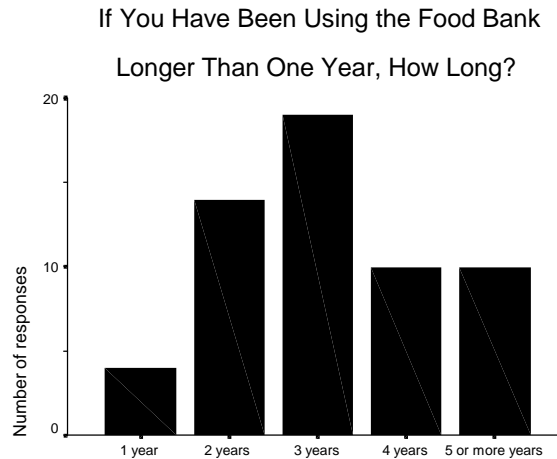


Figure 16
n=57

Length of Time Without Food

Figure 17 shows that 26% of respondents indicate that they have gone without food for one to three days before going to the food bank. Eight percent have been without food for four days or more. Twenty-nine percent of respondents state that they came to the food bank on the day they ran out of food; only 37% came to the food bank before they ran out of food (n=97).

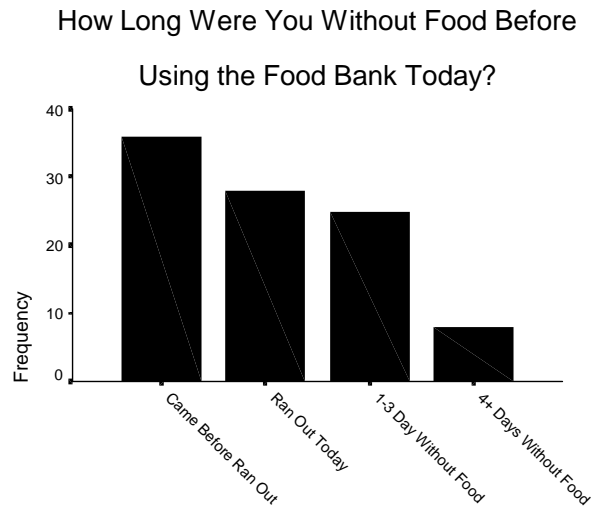


Figure 17
n=97

Conclusion

The profile data reveals that even though people using food banks possess a variety of skills, they are frequently prevented from working for health reasons or a disability and, therefore, must rely on social assistance for their income. Seventy percent of respondents receive their household income from social assistance benefits. When the average housing and utility costs of respondents are deducted from their average household incomes respondents are left with a limited amount to purchase basic necessities including food. Therefore, food bank dependency is long-term.

Summary

1. Food bank use has increased in Halton. The average number of families receiving food from Halton food banks each month has increased from 1,015 in 1994 to 1,495 in 1997, a 47% increase.
2. More than 80% of the questionnaires were completed by women, indicating that more women than men go to the food bank.
3. Many two-parent families are recipients of food bank services (approximately half of the respondents indicate that two adults live in their household).
4. The majority of respondents (80%) have children; 59% of these respondents have either one or two children.
5. The survey results indicate that 34% of respondents have an adult with a disability in their household.
6. Twenty-three percent of respondents are working, however, 72% of those jobs are part-time positions rather than full-time.
7. A significant number of people who use food banks appear to be highly skilled, trained and educated. Twenty-seven percent of respondents have a college or university certificate.

8. Health problems, including physical, emotional, and mental, prevent a large number of recipients from working.
9. Forty-five percent of respondents have monthly incomes below \$1,000.
10. The survey indicates that the overwhelming majority of people using food banks take cost cutting measures to save money (89% of respondents shop for specials, 91% use/buy second hand clothing and 82% buy food from clearance shelves).
11. Fifty-six percent of respondents receiving food from food banks state that they sometimes go without food in order to feed their children.
12. A large number of recipients do not own a car (45% of respondents indicate they do not have a car and 40% indicate that have reduced using or given up a car).
13. The majority of people using food banks are dependent on social assistance, that is, 70% of respondents receive their household income from social assistance benefits.
14. A large proportion of people using food banks are long-time Halton residents (55% of respondents have lived in Halton more than 10 years).
15. Ninety-one percent of respondents rent, rather than own, their accommodation, and many use most of their income to pay rent and utilities. Respondents pay a monthly average of \$648 for housing and an additional monthly average of \$193 in utilities.

16. Thirty-nine percent of respondents live in subsidized housing, although 26% are on the waiting list for it and, of those, 67% have been on the waiting list for 2 or more years.

17. One-third of the respondents obtained food from the food bank no more than four times in the preceding year. Twenty-nine percent have used the food bank between 10 and 15 times in the previous year.

18. A large proportion of people who obtain food from food banks go without food before going to a food bank. Thirty-four percent of respondents have gone without food for at least one day before going to the food bank.

5. FOOD BANK USE

General Service

Questionnaire respondents and focus group participants report that service at the food banks is good. Most feel the volunteers are very friendly as the following comments demonstrate:

“The attitude of the people is just great. I felt that immediately. It is very touching.”

“I think it’s great; the people here anyway have been really supportive. Well, all the people here have been understanding . . . They haven’t sort of made me feel like ‘God, you shouldn’t be here, you know, what are you doing here?’”

Social Contact

The importance of human relations and social contact at the food bank is important to recipients. Recipients believe that it is encouraging to be able to talk to the staff/volunteers and other recipients.

“They are very helpful. In fact when I went for the first time, they asked me how did I come to the food bank? I said I took the bus; a gentleman gave me a ride home.”

“You can sort of talk about it and meet people that are struggling and having the same kinds of problems that you are. It makes it a lot easier.”

However, there are sentiments expressed that reveal the other side of “relations” in the food banks. Some recipients feel that some of those who work or volunteer in food banks

are critical of people who use food banks. Their thoughts are captured by the following words:

“Sometimes I find they make you feel degraded when you go. Sometimes you get asked why are you here?... I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t have to be . . . I’m not a millionaire and I’m not taking this home in my Cadillac. It’s hurtful. It’s very hurtful.”

“When I was in Oakville . . . just before I moved here, they took me in a back room to get a financial statement off me. I was very embarrassed about that, to have to spill your guts to complete strangers that I know are just volunteers . . . I never went back.”

Negative Perceptions

Some focus group participants indicate that they feel a lack of empathy at times on the part of food bank staff. They feel that some food bank staff do not relate to the circumstances of food bank recipients’ nor do they understand why people depend on the food bank, especially, if the person is working. These sentiments are captured in the following commentaries:

“What I find bad about it is they treat everyone the same. They don’t take into consideration that you are an individual.”

“It’s embarrassing. I don’t think they take that into consideration. I think it’s just the job they have to do and they do it the best of their ability. I find no fault with them, I’m saying . . . to live off of somebody else, it’s embarrassing. It is very difficult for me to put my hand out to somebody.”

“If you happen to be working they kind of look at you and say. “Oh, like what are you doing here?”

“Because you’re using a food bank doesn’t mean you’re any worse than anybody else. We all have to use it because something has gone wrong.”

Food Quality

As discussed in *Section 3*, the food banks in Halton depend largely on food donations from the community, either through periodic drives or donation bins in supermarkets. Several food banks reported shortages. (See newspaper article in Appendix 6). Although Halton food banks collect food individually, in Burlington, three of the four food banks work cooperatively under the umbrella of the Burlington Foodshare Coalition to run seasonal joint food drives. The Salvation Army food banks in Halton conduct several major food drives during the year, particularly before Thanksgiving and Christmas. Donations from these major food drives usually sustain the Salvation Army food banks for the year.

Participants indicate that they are most appreciative of what they receive from the food banks, even though, all the items might not be of good quality.

“We are grateful for what we receive.”

“Most of the food is fine.”

“Everything I got was wonderful!”

Table 2 provides a breakdown of the kinds of food available from the food banks and the rating of their quality by food bank recipients completing the questionnaire. Apart from baby food, fresh vegetables, fruit, milk and dairy products are the items most respondents never receive from the food bank. They are also the items recipients frequently perceive as poor quality.

Table 2 - Perceived Quality of Food

Food items	Poor	Good	Very Good	Never Received	n
Canned fish, meat, beans	7%	57%	33%	3%	97
Canned vegetables, fruit, juice	7%	55%	37%	1%	92
Fresh vegetables, fruit	20%	21%	10%	50%	92
Milk and/or dairy products	20%	25%	22%	33%	91
Breads	18%	41%	26%	15%	93
Cereals, rice, pasta	10%	54%	36%	0	91
Baby food	5%	13%	13%	70%	86

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

At the same time, there is concern over receiving expired products. Many food bank recipients report receiving at least some products that are of poor quality or that are expired. Focus group and questionnaire respondents' comments include:

"When you are hungry quality doesn't really count that much. When you've got kids, you have to be concerned with keeping them on their feet."

"I've had rusted cans I just threw out because I didn't even want to chance it . . . I had one can that was even swollen and that would have been botulism right there. So what price do I pay?"

"Some cans and boxed items have dates as old as 1977!"

"Milk sour, bread stale, not enough lunch snacks."

"A lot of the baby food was a year or so past the due date. Sometimes the milk when opened was sour."

"Sometimes dates were over two years, sometimes no dates, got sick twice."

“Sometimes some of the stuff is really old . . . past its expiry date.”

“We’ve had the odd incident where something’s gone bad, the tins are bulging, where they cleaned out Grandma’s cupboards.”

“A lot of the food . . . sometimes the canned, boxes, like the kraft dinner, it’s expired. They’re giving out expired, outdated food.”

“It’s the same kind of thing with the milk too. They give you the frozen milk . . . you take the bag out to use it, or to let it thaw out, it’s already gone bad.”

“I got rancid peanut butter and I got cereal that was mouldy and then we looked on the box and it said 1983.”

“Some items, there isn’t any mention of production or expiry dates. There are no labels on some of the items . . . ”

Food Quantity

The quantity of food recipients receive varies among food banks. For example, the Burlington Salvation Army gives approximately \$50 worth of food. The Georgetown Salvation Army provides food on a meal plan basis. Oakville Fareshare provides enough food to last a family approximately four to five days. Some food banks also provide food vouchers (according to family size) to allow recipients to buy fresh food or dairy products from local supermarkets. The Milton Salvation Army has a ‘help yourself’ bin containing items which are returned and specialty products so that recipients who want them may take them in addition to their box. Most of the food banks that pre-box items permit recipients, if they ask, to exchange items if they are unsuitable. The different food banks’ practices and procedures in relation to food quantity raises the issue of equity.

Many focus group participants feel it would be useful if they have more choice in content of the quantity of the food they receive. However, participants' feelings differ on this issue depending on which food bank they use and the method of food distribution. Recipients prefer the systems of distribution that permit more choice rather than a pre-boxed amount of food which may or may not meet their needs. Their comments illustrate this:

"It's hard that way [the pre-box practise], when you get stuff you don't need, when you're needing something else so badly and it's not there."

"Having a pre-packaged box doesn't take into consideration if there are any food problems or whatever."

"You get a set box and you know I actually open the box there and remove almost half the box."

"I can't say I have that problem because at [name of food bank] they don't do that, that way. They have asked me, like you know, what do you eat and what don't you eat?"

Food Received Does Not Last a Month

Respondents and participants agree that the amount of food they receive does not last a month, the normal interval recipients must wait between visits. Sometimes this food is all that families have, consequently, some parents go without food in order to feed their children. They comment:

"It's supposed to give you a month. I could never get through a month."

"I find the food they give you I'm finished in a few weeks."

“I’ve gone three and four days on hot water and lemon just to make sure that [my daughter] eats. You know that’s all you can do sometimes. It doesn’t bother me too much, I get tired.”

At the same time, participants agree that the length of time the food lasts depends on the food items. Items such as rice, grains and oil can be stretched to last longer, however, canned and processed foods do not last long as the following comments demonstrate:

“If they give you ten pounds of potatoes, like a few packages of pasta... rice... you can really make that stretch... but a can is a can.”

“Canned stew and canned beans and canned pasta, in our house that’s like I have to open four cans of beef stew for one meal... you only get two in a box. I have to open two months worth of beef stew to make one meal.”

Amounts of Food for Children

Respondents and participants indicate that the amount of food from food banks for children is inadequate. Frequently participants comment that children sometimes eat the same amount or even more than adults, particularly teenagers.

“They also don’t realize how much children eat.”

“They’re not thinking of growing kids, they’re thinking little kids.”

Waste

Participants have mixed feelings about accepting products they will not or cannot use. Some feel they should accept all the pre-boxed food items they receive, whether or not they

can use them. They do not want to seem ungrateful. Others simply leave the items they cannot use. Their comments include the following:

“I get things that I cannot sometimes really make use of.”

“I take the ones I use and leave the rest for others. There is no point for me to take all the things home and then see if I need to take it back, especially if I have no transport or a car.”

Some individuals simply ask to exchange one product for another at the food bank - for example, asking for beans without pork. They suggest that perhaps recipients do not know that this can be done, or do not feel comfortable having to ask to exchange it. This raises the issue of clear exchange policies and procedures.

Range of Products

Most food banks try to carry food items that will provide recipients with adequate nutrition. Key informants report that most food banks try to solicit, organize, and provide food from the four major food groups: vegetables and fruit, meat, grains, and dairy. The range they can provide, however, is limited by the donations they receive. Most items distributed are food items. When they have them, many food banks also offer a limited range of non-food items, including household cleaning products, laundry detergent and some toiletries such as toilet paper and feminine hygiene products.

Dairy Products

The lack of dairy products is an issue among focus group participants. Some food banks do not provide any fresh dairy products; others provide vouchers to buy them or other fresh food. This, again, raises the issue of disparity between food bank practices.

“The only thing I have to complain about is that they don’t have dairy products.”

“I went to the Salvation Army. There was a table and they said, you know, you could take from there, and there was soya milk and that was wonderful because that’s expensive.”

“When I was living in Oakville, we used to go to the Oakville food bank there, they used to give you a cheque for a bag of milk.”

Basic Ingredients and Vegetarian Products

Most participants comment that they tire of receiving the same processed canned food items and that they would like more choice. They would also like to receive more basic ingredients as well as processed items.

“I always get canned pasta, brown stew, canned stew, pasta and brown beans and I would much rather have a healthier alternative.”

“I figure they should ask you what type of vegetables you like to eat more, whether you do like pork and beans or if you don’t.”

“I’ve never had grains from them at all, I’ve never had beans... I cook everything from scratch, I don’t want processed foods.”

“Don’t give me another can of brown beans, give me a package of barley that I can make beef barley soup. Brown beans and canned spaghetti, I’m sorry I’m getting so

sick of receiving it because I can only eat so much ... but if you gave me a bag of flour, a bag of sugar, a bag of powdered milk”

Participants suggest that it would be more useful to receive items such as lentils, flour, rice, oil, mayonnaise, and vinegar. For example, ingredients for making soup rather than a can of soup. Providing more rice and pasta and the ingredients to make meals, such as dried beans and lentils can help food last longer and can help recipients better meet their nutritional needs. In addition, these items are generally less expensive than canned or processed foods. They would also be more useful to people who are vegetarians.

“How can I cook? I need oil. Give me some tomato paste, give me some oil!”

“I mean, I’m a real basic cooker. I make basic stews and basic lasagna and basic foods.”

“The food banks don’t have the vegetarian stuff.”

“Well who thinks about those people. Now I just thought of it, who thinks about the people that don’t eat meat.”

“Sometimes the protein is hard to get, have more beans, grains.”

“There aren’t a lot of soya products and there are so many soya products on the market.”

On the other hand, recipients state that some people may not know how to cook with these basic ingredients and would prefer the pre-cooked or processed foods. The bottom line is a desire for greater choice about the food.

Personal Hygiene Products

Comments about personal hygiene products flow from different experiences with respective food banks. They are available at some food banks, but seldom anywhere consistently. Recipients find buying these products prohibiting, especially if it represents a choice between food and hygiene products. Many recipients are unable to purchase these products resulting in poor self-esteem as the following comments demonstrate:

“Well I think they should have women’s stuff. You know tampons and stuff like that. Every woman here needs them.”

“You never get pads, deodorant , anything like that. Pads are expensive.”

“Ya, shampoo.... in Mississauga they gave out shampoo and they gave out sanitary towels.”

“Self-esteem gets down low and if you had shampoo and cream rinse... stuff to make yourself look a little bit better, you wouldn’t feel so bad.”

Lack of Variety

Sixty-six percent of questionnaire respondents indicate that some basic foods familiar to them are usually not available at the food bank. These items include bread, meat, cheese, milk, butter, fruit and vegetables and women’s hygiene products. When asked to identify products they would like to see available, questionnaire respondents mention those listed above among others. In particular, they identify fresh fruits and vegetables, household products, and foods for children and babies.

Comments from focus group participants on variety and choice are similar. Participants voice some frustration over the lack of variety; some say they tire of receiving the same processed items such as peanut butter and macaroni and cheese. One comment captures this frustration:

“No more peanut butter!”

The consensus that participants came to is that receiving processed items is helpful but that they should not be the only items. Recipients would appreciate having some choice in the items they receive, and would appreciate the opportunity to request a greater variety of foods.

“If the food banks allowed you to go in there and pick what you used. You know what I mean, there’s not much sense in giving you a can of pork and beans... because I can’t eat it. I would be better off if they let me pick something that I can use myself.”

Suggestions for Improvements

In general, focus group participants and questionnaire respondents agree that food banks assist them, but feel several improvements can be made. The following comment reflects the view of participants:

“I think they are doing a good job and they are doing a tough job, so they might as well complete this and ask the people... find out the exact needs. Not the exact needs -the necessities.”

Suggestions for improvements include the following:

More Choice

Focus group participants agree that more choice in the type of food they receive from the food bank would better meet their needs. Participants prefer the systems where people can choose their own food items from open shelves at the food bank rather than the pre-boxed method. In respect to the pre-boxed approach of distributing food, two alternatives are suggested: picking items from a list or choosing items from open shelves with a buggy.

“I would like more choice. Perhaps a list of items that you could get or chose from, rather than being given things I don’t need.”

“[if we could] go in with the buggy and the lady and say okay, I don’t want to eat beans this time, can I have this instead. So you can get more rice or you can get whatever instead of the canned stuff.”

Participants recognize that a system with more choice would likely take more time and more staff or volunteers would be needed. One suggestion is an appointment system and the other is that food bank recipients increase their role as volunteers at the food bank:

“It might be hard when you administer this because there comes a lot of people. It is not easy to go with each one (recipient) separately.”

“For me, for example, since I benefit from the food bank I wouldn’t mind volunteering, you know, to walk with the recipient until she is finished, once a week or once a month or whatever.”

Food Vouchers

Focus group participants mention that food vouchers would be very useful, allowing them to buy some products not available at the food bank. It responds to recipients

comments about the lack of variety of food items particularly fresh foods. This suggestion is supported by the experience of food bank recipients who receive such vouchers from a food bank in Oakville. Voucher amounts depend on the size of the family and range from \$6 to \$30 per month. Recipients explain:

“A store food voucher allowing people to go and get basically the things that they need other than the stuff we are provided with.”

“They [the food bank] can’t keep cheese, they can’t keep milk, so that’s why you get the voucher.”

“I use it [the voucher] for buying orange juice, some meat, some chicken.”

However, participants concur that using vouchers can be embarrassing and that there is a need for sensitivity and an effort to protect privacy. Participants also suggest that the current voucher amounts need to increase or be revised more frequently.

“It [the voucher] still isn’t enough, especially when prices are going up on everything.”

Increasing the Youth or Teenage Allowance of Food

Participants discuss the need to increase the amount of food or the value of food vouchers for families with children, as many children, especially teens, eat as much if not more than adults. They feel that teens should receive more food than children, and that when they turn 16, teens should be classified as adults for the food banks’ allowance:

“Teenagers are not counted as adults and teenage kids eat as much as adults.”

“They need more than adults because they are growing.”

More Children’s Food

Respondents feel it would be useful to receive more food items that children would normally eat, such as cookies and crackers. At the same time, they recognize that these items are treats and not basic nutritious food items:

“Children’s lunch snacks... they don’t give you any snacks for them.”

“It’s something you wouldn’t buy... even like canned alphagetti and stuff like that.”

Clarify the Number of Visits Allowed

Confusion arose among respondents as to how often people can receive food from the food banks. Many focus group participants suggest that, to be equitable, the interval between visits should be consistent between the food banks across the region. Comments suggest confusion:

“The Salvation Army is every two months. You are allowed to go every two months, not every month.”

“I was told every thirty days!”

Increase Food Bank Hours

The question of equity comes up again in discussions about the differences in food banks’ hours of operation. Table 1 displays the varied hours that food banks are open. Many

participants, particularly those who work through the day, find it is difficult to go to the food bank because of their hours. At the same time, respondents recognize that food banks depend on volunteers and that it would be inappropriate to expect that they would be open all day, every day. Nevertheless, recipients feel that all food banks should be open a minimum number of evening hours to make the food banks more accessible. Their comments suggest the difficulties of those trying to access food bank services:

“The hours are bad.”

“The hours are a problem because when you are working, you can’t always get there, they’re closed.”

“Sally Ann’s pretty good. It’s open every morning from 9 to 11.30. But the other ones, the times are not always the greatest.”

“[the food bank] is only open Tuesdays and Thursdays. Tuesday morning 10 till 12 and Thursday afternoon 2 to 4.”

“You’ve got to give them credit, I mean they’re volunteers, they’re putting out their time and all that, but I’m one of those who happened to be working and I don’t get home till after five... it’s closed.”

“Even if like one or two days a week you know, if they could stay open later.”

Exchange Policies

Focus group participants suggest that a clear exchange system should be in operation at all the food banks. As mentioned in *Section 5, Food Quantity, Waste*, many recipients are having to do with less by receiving items they cannot use and they are unclear or feel uncomfortable about asking for exchanges. The following comment summarizes the dilemma:

“[If] I’ve got six cans I couldn’t use, what can I trade them for? or you have lost out on maybe two meals, three meals.”

More Basic and Healthier Foods

An interesting insight comes out of this discussion relating to respondents’ perceptions of the changing demands on food banks. Participants comment that food banks used to serve primarily emergency needs and families in temporarily difficult situations. Now, individuals and families need to use food banks on a longer-term basis, and consequently, the food they need is different. Recipients understand the origins of food banks as represented by their commentary:

“My understanding, the original reason for food banks is emergency service. In other words, if you were starving to death and you had no other choices and no options available. You’d go to the food bank and they’d give you these canned beans and canned pasta... they could keep it on hand for long periods of time.”

“He’s absolutely correct, this was not something that people had to use month after month, but an emergency thing.”

The shift to longer term use of food banks leads respondents to recommend that food banks try to obtain healthier basic food items instead of mainly processed or canned items. Basic food items include rice, pasta, flour, sugar, vegetables, dried beans and lentils.

“Give me all the stuff to cook and grains that are far more healthy because the canned stuff is so processed.”

“I’ve lowered my standards in many, many ways.”

Consistent Food Bank Policies and Procedures

Participants feel it is unclear as to which or how many food banks recipients can use. Most focus group participants feel that they can use only one food bank. Some recipients state they have been told that the food bank they must use is the one closest to them. Many feel it is unfair that they are unable to choose for themselves which food bank they can use since each food bank operates differently, for example, in the types and quantities of food they give out and in their hours of operation. There is some confusion as to why the food banks are different in terms of policies and procedures: pick your own vs pre-boxed, different hours of operation, use of vouchers or availability of items like bread. Recipients ponder:

“Why are there these discrepancies between each food bank?”

“When I phoned up in regards to having to first go to the food bank, they said the Salvation Army is your food bank.”

“We’re not allowed to go there because of the area that we’re in!”

Community Education of Food Items Needed

Focus group participants recognize that the food they receive depends on donations from the community. Participants suggest that food banks alter the message they send to potential donors, asking them to donate foods that recipients really need, or a better balance of food items and cooking items rather than the traditional canned foods such as canned beans and Kraft dinner. Recipients comment that:

“The service is limited by the type and amount of donations.”

“You see it’s not them [the food bank] buying it [the food], it’s the consumer buying it and giving it to the food bank.”

“What they (donors) should do is stop buying so many beans and pork. There are other vegetables besides beans and pork.”

“Whenever you see an ad for a drive for the food bank, you know on the bag or in the paper they always ask for the same things. They ask for canned fish and they ask for macaroni and cheese... people [food bank recipients] are getting the same things but is this what we are asking for? So what are we supposed to do?”

Food bank key informants echo some of these comments, saying that they would also like to see more donations of food such as canned fruits and vegetables, cereal, meal replacements, baby formula and less of others, such as canned beans, pasta and soup. A suggestion is that the public should try to think of their own eating habits when donating food rather than ‘emptying their cupboards’ or trying to judge the types of foods that food bank recipients might prefer or should expect to receive.

Participants also suggest that if public awareness about food bank use and poverty increases, they believe donations from all sources, including grocery stores and the public, would be easier to obtain. They share their views on the possible contribution of grocery stores:

“I think part of the problem is that we rely on donations so we won’t always get a balanced diet. If you need baby food and nobody donates baby food, what do you do?”

“I think another big thing is some of the stores throw away a lot of food that could be used... if you were to ask the stores... I think you could get a lot of food that way.”

“I don’t think these stores realize just how many people there are at these food banks.”

“I’m a great believer in that Canadians respond when they understand the situation, but often they don’t understand the situation and they don’t get a reasonably straight story on it.”

Participants also suggest that donors be asked to make financial donations so that food banks can purchase items that are frequently in short supply, such as powdered milk or infant formula.

Give Out Recipes

Focus group participants comment that it is sometimes difficult to know how to cook some of the food they receive, particularly when the food items are not chosen by the individual. They feel that it would be helpful to include recipes or cooking suggestions with the food.

“Maybe give out recipes, I mean, If they’re going to give you excess of other things, they could give out recipes on what to do with it or information on it.”

“You know you can end up with this box of food but how do you cook it. There are so many people that just don’t know.”

“...put in a recipe in with it and try and help people out that way.”

Collect Coupons

Several participants comment that having food coupons available at the food bank is a good idea. A participant discusses an experience:

“Out West they have at every food bank, a coupon thing... a coupon box... you just go through it and find the coupons that your family uses... its like an index card so while

you are waiting for your food you go through... you might turn in coupons that you found that you don't use."

Conclusion

Most key informants representing food banks believe that they are operating effectively, while accepting there is need for improvement. Some would like to have more space and volunteers; some would prefer a location that is more accessible to their recipients, such as along a bus route or in a central place. Food bank recipients feel food banks assist them but that there are a variety of ways they can be improved. Recipients consistently emphasized the desire for more choice in the items they receive. Suggestions of a pick your own method of choosing food rather than pre-boxed food and clear exchange policies were cited as important improvements.

Summary

1. Many food bank recipients feel a general sense of frustration and a feeling of powerlessness in having to use a food bank.
2. Recipients generally feel that food banks help them, that the food bank service is good, and the majority of food bank staff/volunteers are friendly and helpful.
3. There are many recipients who feel degraded by the service they receive. Participants feel embarrassment that they have to use food banks.

4. Participants dislike the lack of choice in the food items they receive, particularly in terms of whether food is distributed on a pick your own basis or by a pre-boxed method. Different procedures created by the different policies among the food banks.
5. Food quality is generally good, although most respondents indicate that they have at some time received products that have expired or have been damaged.
6. Most recipients feel the quantity of food they receive is inadequate to meet their needs, particularly the amounts for children.
7. Most food bank recipients indicate that they receive too many processed and tinned food items and not enough dairy products, fresh produce, meat, basic cooking items and cooking ingredients, as well as household products.
8. Recipients receiving food vouchers feel that they are very helpful, allowing them to buy fresh produce, meat, or milk. They suggest that the dollar amounts should be revised to keep in line with the cost of living.
9. Food bank recipients suggestions for improvements in the operation of food banks include:
 - Ⓒ a distribution system that provides more choice in food items,
 - Ⓒ grocery store vouchers to allow recipients to purchase food not carried by food banks,
 - Ⓒ children's snack foods,
 - Ⓒ extended hours,
 - Ⓒ clear exchange mechanisms for items not used or needed,

- Ⓒ fewer processed foods,
- Ⓒ more basic staple foods for cooking, and
- Ⓒ more consistency in procedures across the food banks.

10. Most food bank representatives feel their service is meeting the needs of their recipients and that little needs to be changed in the way the food banks operate. At the same time, many comment that more volunteers, more space and better location to facilitate access would be helpful.

Recommendations

Given that food banks are no longer an emergency service but, in fact, provide food over the long-term to meet basic needs and that food banks want to serve the community to the best of their ability, this research recommends that food banks, service providers, concerned citizens, the private sector and government collaborate to:

Policies

1. Develop clear and consistent policies and procedures to better serve food bank recipients around eligibility requirements, frequency of visits, food quality, availability of food vouchers, and provision of non-food items.
2. Ensure a similar and adequately consistent quantity of basic nutritious food, that meets Canada's Food Guide recommendations, is provided by all food banks to better meet the needs of the recipients.

3. Understand the importance of and increase the representation of recipients on food bank Boards of Directors, committees and in other decision-making roles.
4. Increase communication between food banks and other organizations associated with not only food security but also with the root causes of food bank dependency, income inadequacy and poverty.

Practices

5. Use the best practices of providing and distributing food, such as the pick your own or checklist approach, that can allow recipients to have more choice in the items they receive.
6. Improve the opportunity for recipients to exchange items that are unsuitable or personally unacceptable.
7. Develop and constantly assess food bank practices to guarantee accessibility including location, proximity to public transportation, operating hours and knowledge of client profile.
8. Improve facilities, such as freezers in all food banks.
9. Work to ensure that food bank environments are welcoming, particularly in reception/waiting areas.

Education and Awareness

10. Educate the public on the need for basic staple foods that recipients identify as essential as well as processed foods.

11. Educate the public regarding food bank use to raise awareness on food bank needs, distribution of food, eligibility requirements and food security issues.

12. Raise public awareness on the root causes of food bank dependency.

6. ALTERNATIVE STRATEGIES

Current or Past Use of Alternatives

Most of the food bank staff and volunteers agree that complementary activities or alternatives to food banks are a good idea; although they are not widely practised in Halton, most have tried to offer one or more at some time. Community kitchens and community gardens are the most familiar and the most often tried alternatives. All of the focus group participants have tried or are familiar with one or more alternatives. Focus group participants and food bank representatives feel school breakfast and lunch programs are important alternatives.

Food bank key informants believe that recipients would be interested in complementary activities or alternatives if they are offered. Many focus group participants feel there is a general lack of information on the availability of alternatives. Their interest is conveyed in these comments:

“Where do you find out about these things?”

“Where do you get this information?”

Focus group participants feel that food banks might be a good access point for promoting food alternatives or complementary activities or, at the very least, provide this information on a notice board.

“At the Salvation Army you pretty well have to ask.”

“I appreciate they have a bulletin board in BEEF because every time I go in I read the bulletin board to see what is going on. I’d almost wish that there would be a bigger bulletin board where other information could be shared. Like I know this community kitchen that I could go... put it up there.”

“[If] the food banks did lists maybe even within each food bank, of saying who would want to be involved in a food buying group or a food co-op or whatever, that you can put your name and phone number... we can have a meeting place and start organising... because we are all individuals -she lives over here and I live over there and we don’t even know each other to get in touch. So where do you make the connections?”

Several examples of alternatives are currently operating in Halton or have been tried by food bank recipients or food banks:

Community Kitchens

A community kitchen is a group of people who work together to plan and prepare nutritious meals for the ‘month end crunch’ at a low cost. Usually the food to make the meals is provided either by a sponsoring organization, such as a church, or by the individuals who participate. Several community kitchens run independently in Halton.

The Georgetown Salvation Army runs a community kitchen for food bank recipients that teaches people a variety of ways to prepare food, to budget, and to stretch their money. The Oakville Salvation Army operates a community kitchen which they feel has been very successful:

“The greatest benefit is not just the meals they take home but the support and learning from each of them.” Oakville Salvation Army

Many focus group participants are familiar with community kitchens. Two focus group participants have recently joined community kitchens, and several others express an interest in doing so. They share their experiences:

“Just joined one... the church is going to totally sponsor it for the first six months which means they provide child care and everything. So I’m trying that, this is my first experience. We had our planning meeting last week and we’re cooking Saturday...we decided on four recipes to satisfy everybody...[we cook] once a month at the crunch week before the welfare cheque comes out... it will be a quarter per person per meal, so like four meals [for four people] will cost you four dollars and that will be for four meals for the crunch.”

“I’ve done a community kitchen with the Salvation Army... we are just at the beginning of it to see how it turns out. Everybody brought in recipes and we all decided what we wanted. It was really neat.”

Participants discuss the difficulties in running community kitchens. Issues of transportation and commitment from people involved are identified as particular difficulties. Both the Burlington Salvation Army and BEEF have run community kitchens in the past, but lack of staff time, financing, and facilities are given as reasons why they are no longer operating.

“It’s quite a struggle to keep them going.” BEEF

Acton Foodshare has been involved in community kitchens and community gardens, but they feel that these alternatives are only helpful in the short-term and are not long-term solutions to food insecurity. They do not address the problem that food bank recipients face, that is insufficient income to purchase food.

Community Gardens

Community Gardens are pieces of land either donated or rented, on which individuals or groups can plant and harvest food. Several community gardens operate in Halton. For example, the Halton Anti-Poverty Coalition rents several community garden plots which it makes available to the community each year. Most focus group participants are not aware that any community gardens currently exist in Halton, although several have tried them in the past and liked it. They reminisce the value of past experiences:

“We used to rent a plot from Oakville... we got a lot of food. We got tomatoes coming out of our yin yang... it’s beautiful because it’s not only accomplishing, you know from the material and the food thing, the basic stuff, but it is just doing it, getting involved, getting your hands in the dirt.”

“I would love the community garden. I have tried these back home and I grew my own vegetables and everything. I think it would be great.”

Some participants feel community gardens would be a wonderful opportunity for them to use their gardening skills, while others believe they do not have the skills or the knowledge to participate. One participant states:

“A local church in Milton plants a vegetable garden and brings the food to the food bank but it would be nice to have a community plot for people to use and grow their own food.”

The Oakville Salvation Army comments that they had tried to develop a community garden in the past but limitations of transportation and time ended the activity. Participants also discuss the difficulties with community gardens, including transportation, stealing, and the commitment needed of participants. Several focus group participants have experimented

with community gardens and feel they are not very successful. They believe the concept needs more clarification and that the following problems need to be resolved:

“ It was out in the middle of nowhere... it was really hard for me to get there, a lot of gas money to get there.”

“Other people would steal it. Your stuff would be gone by the time you get up there.”

“Everybody stole everything out of my garden... I'd be going to get my tomatoes or something, somebody had already been there and helped themselves to my tomatoes.”
“It's hard... if you don't push yourself.”

“You really need to have to be into gardening to be honest with you.”

Food Co-ops

Food co-ops are not-for-profit operated grocery stores that buy food in bulk at wholesale prices. One of the aims of co-ops is to sell food to members at prices lower than those found in regular grocery stores.

Halton does have an experience with a food co-op, as a key informant from the Kerr Street Market explains. The Kerr Street Market started as a food co-op. People had to be members by law for it to be a true food co-op. In order not to discourage people from joining the co-op, the membership fee was \$1. The co-op found that in the true sense of a food co-op, it was not feasible since there was a mix of clientele: those that could afford to buy and those that could not. The Manger of the Kerr St. Market, Mr Ron Shantz, describes how as a co-op, the Kerr St. Market had to change to become a charitable organization to best suit the needs of the community:

“We have found [with the co-op] two distinct recipient groups that we can differentiate between: the ‘poor and the needy’ and the ‘broke’. The ‘broke’ are those that have had a short set back in life, are having a few bad months, laid-off etc, they have good skills and hope for the future. They need short-term help. The ‘poor and the needy’ are generally victims of generational poverty with different often longer term issues. We need to help both types of people with their different levels of need. We help the ‘broke’ by giving them food, this helps their family, it reduces stress and helps them focus on getting back on track. The ‘poor and the needy’ often have deeper needs than just food. They need to be fed and clothed first before they can resolve the other issues.”
Ron Shantz, Manager, Kerr St. Market

Neither focus group participants or food bank key informants have had experience with food co-ops. Most participants are unfamiliar with the concept of food co-ops but indicate they would not use them unless they were significantly cheaper than regular stores or supermarkets. Two focus group participants have been members of a food co-op but found that the products are not any cheaper than the supermarkets, particularly, the discount grocery stores such as No Frills or Food Basics. One participant explains:

“I tried one... gave it a three month try and never went back... I can buy food cheaper elsewhere. I found it more expensive so I stopped going.”

School Nutrition Programs

School nutrition programs are most often initiated by schools, parents, organizations, or others in the community, to provide nutritious breakfast, lunch or snack programs for students at little cost, if any. Programs are usually operated and supported by donors and volunteers from the community. In Halton the Food for Thought program works in partnership with community volunteers, parents/parent councils, schools, the private sector and the faith community *“to improve the learning capacity, health and well being of*

children in the Halton Region by ensuring access to healthy food before and/or during the school day.” There are 12 school nutrition programs in Halton serving approximately 1,780 students daily. Food for Thought is helping another 5 schools develop nutrition programs that will be launched during the Spring of 1999.

Food bank key informants feel school breakfast and lunch programs are important. Not only do they assist children but also they help parents both financially and in terms of saving time. Children are identified by both recipients and food bank key informants as particularly vulnerable in terms of their need for nutritious food. Many focus group participants find it very difficult to provide children with nutritious meals all the time, and clearly recognize that children learn better when they have had a nutritious breakfast. There is some concern about children being labelled or stereotyped as “poor”. Participants strongly suggest programs be universal in nature and that all children should be welcome to participate in school nutrition programs, as the following comments indicate:

“I really try with my kids to provide them with a good breakfast and I probably succeed about 80% of the time, but I know other children that don’t get any at all.”

“There’s medical proof and everything else that when children have a good hearty breakfast they learn better.”

“When I lived in Toronto, we had a school breakfast thing and at the time I was working but he still wanted to go because it was open to the whole school.”

“For whatever the reason: sometimes kids don’t like it or don’t eat when they get up, or parents don’t have the time, or for kids who’ve got no food in the house, kids should have a nutritious breakfast.”

“You can’t just select a few... you’ll ostracize that child and they’ll have that label.”

“There is enough pain involved in a child not having, my kids going through it right now with not having skater pants which is some big thing. For me to have to tell him that he has to go and eat breakfast and lunch because he’s poor with the rest of the poor kids, I just couldn’t do it to him.”

For some parents, the cost of food provided or ordered for special school fundraisers such as for pizza or hot dog days, is beyond their means. Their comments reveal their struggle:

“Why can’t they help my problem? It’s 60 cents for milk. Why can’t they just give each kid a glass of milk a day? Why does it have to be 60 cents [for milk] and three dollars for pizza and three dollars for hot dogs.”

“ We have this at our school and it’s just like every week he wants to buy this and he wants to buy that... he says well the other kids are all buying it.”

“Things like the pizza days, the little things, at school I cringe at, I just can’t do it, especially for three children, it all adds up.”

Community Dinners

Community dinners involve volunteers organizing and preparing a meal, usually made from donated food, and offering the meal to the community. It was discussed that several community dinners are organized in Halton. Key informants praise the idea of these dinners, stressing the importance of the social contact offered by such occasions. A key informant comments that a free community dinner program is operated regularly in Milton, sponsored by different churches:

“What we’ve done in our community is we had a hot food meal on Thursdays at St. Agatha’s Church... so by grouping together we could provide food... but you’re also providing the fellowship for people... the fellowship is as important as the food.”

Several of the focus group participants have been to community dinners. They agree that they are very successful and participants enjoy both the food and the social interaction. There comments illustrate this:

“They’re great ideas and usually very, very well prepared.”

“I took this eighteen year old and my nine year old and my friend took her four children. I tell you, you think you took them to Disneyland... they kept the roast beef as hot as can be and this kid just kept on eating and eating and they kept on bringing and bringing and he’s eating and eating cause we don’t have roast beef. It’s like it’s Christmas!”

“The community dinner is one thing we don’t organize enough.”

Although most focus group participants believe periodic community dinners are a good idea and help strengthen the community, they see the dinners as a social event rather than a long-term food security alternative. This is captured in their words:

“I’m not too proud to say that the best meal I’ve had, in I don’t know how long, was at the Polish hall in January when they do a dinner, and my god was it good and am I ever waiting for January to go again.”

“I went to one... it was marvellous. Marvellous evening!”

Soup Kitchens

Soup kitchens, operated by not-for-profit organizations or community groups, provide drop-in access to hot meals at no charge. Even though no soup kitchens operate in Halton, several focus group participants have had meals at soup kitchens elsewhere. However, as the following comments show, they feel negatively about them:

“I don’t like soup kitchens. I don’t see families going to soup kitchens as an alternative.”

“Soup kitchens have bad connotations that’s for sure.”

Other Services Offered by Food Banks

Several additional or complementary services are offered by Halton food banks. These include Christmas programs, work programs, drop-in centres, information boards, bulk food buying groups, child care, counselling, and worship.

Both Acton food banks are involved with Acton Children’s Corner, a drop-in centre for parents and children that teaches life and parenting skills. The Oakville Salvation Army discovered through a survey of its recipients, that isolation and lack of social interaction are important issues to recipients. Consequently, they created a women’s craft group that meets regularly. The Georgetown Salvation Army also runs a regular women’s craft group and a work program called ‘the Hope Program’, where recipients have the opportunity to earn money doing ‘piecework’ in cooperation with local businesses. Many food banks state that they would like to do more but they have limited resources to provide these types of programs.

Other Complementary Activities or Alternatives

Some key informants and focus group participants express an interest in other food security alternatives practised outside Halton, these include:

Gleaning

The term ‘gleaning’ refers to gathering, at no charge or little charge, food left over after a farmer has harvested crops. People can gather food for themselves and for their local food bank. Several participants feel gleaning is a good idea:

“I love the idea of that... I could feed my family... when they pick the carrots now they use automatic machines to pick the carrots, there’s carrots left behind.”

“An awful lot is left behind...they certainly could be used.”

“I would love that . . . I could not put a price tag on it... I could freeze that for a winter’s worth of food... potatoes or onions. It’s all done mechanically now and there’s so much left.”

“Please let me into your potato patch after you have cleaned it out because I’d pick up every bloody potato there was there! I’d be more than happy.”

Organization and coordination are identified as challenges for gleaning to work on any kind of scale. Participants feel that it would be useful if food banks could organize and advertise gleaning trips for recipients:

“Who’s going to contact the farmers... there’s got to be some sort of calling list to start... you need transportation... the initial contact... the food banks should be able to handle that.”

“Maybe somebody could rent a bus or the Salvation Army maybe has a bus - here’s your transportation.”

“If all the food banks, the same month, said okay and they had a poster up that said Joe Blow farmer is going to let us clean out his potato field on September 16th bring your plastic bags... or you know a phone list of people... I would love it!”

Pick Your Own and Grow-a-Row

Some participants express an interest in the ‘pick your own’ and ‘grow-a-row’ ideas. ‘Pick your own’ involves organizing a group of people and going to a local farm where they can pick produce themselves, for no charge or a minimal cost. In ‘grow-a-row’ projects, farmers or gardeners mark and plant a row from their fields with the yield going to a local food bank or group/organization. Participants thought these ideas can work, but again pointed out the need for coordination and organization as these comments illustrate:

“All I need to be told is when it’s going to be happening... If I read in the paper that they were picking apples, I would be there like a bat.”

“All you need is the organizer.”

Cooking Lessons

Some focus group participants suggest that free cooking lessons can be helpful, perhaps in conjunction with a school, such as E.C. Drury in Milton, that has kitchen facilities, equipment and trained instructors. Other participants feel that people know how to cook, and that this alternative would not be helpful.

“How to cook lessons! Cooking on a budget for example.”

“Well, I think we know how to cook. That’s not going to be the answer to the problem.”

Canning and Pickling

Participants express some interest in the ideas of canning or pickling. Several participants already canned their own vegetables and made jams. Participants suggest that knowledgeable food bank recipients could give lessons or workshops to their peers on recipes and techniques. Comments range from:

“Show us how to pickle!”

“You would have to have someone around of a lower income situation to organize it.”

“It’s very easy, you guys would be surprised how easy it is.”

Fresh Food Basket

A fresh food basket program is a non-profit fresh produce delivery system. Buyers purchase, at low cost, a pre-packaged box or a basket of fresh produce once a month. The organization purchases bulk fresh produce and packages it into individual boxes. Prices are lower than regular retail because of centralized purchasing and the direct connections between the organization setting up the program and suppliers or producers. Orders and payments are usually taken at the beginning of the month when people generally have money, and boxes are delivered toward the end of the month when the money has normally run out. No such programs exist in Halton, however, one focus group participant had been involved in a ‘harvest basket’ program elsewhere as they describe:

“They had what you call a ‘harvest basket’ that you pay ten dollars or whatever and you got so much of each of the things [fresh produce] that you ordered in your harvest basket.”

Participants feel that this program might work in Halton, but that the cost would have to be quite low in order to make it possible for many people to participate. Again, the dilemma is who or what organization can start and operate such a program?

Meal-in-a-Bag

A meal-in-a-bag is a package prepared by the food bank that includes a recipe for a meal along with the ingredients to make it. Many focus group participants like the idea of the meal-in-a-bag. One comment summarizes the experience of many:

“The meal-in-a-bag would be a good idea. What happens a lot of the time is that I get one or two of the ingredients to make something, for example I might get salad dressing and nothing to go with it, or chilli stuff and kidney beans but no ground beef, it makes no sense.”

Food Depots

Food depots are smaller branches of a main food bank, opened at different locations in a community in order to make the service more accessible. Many focus group participants and key informants from food banks like the idea of one large food bank with several smaller outlets or depots in neighbourhoods across the community. Participants feel that this approach might be better than the current configuration of services and that it would also help ensure easier access and promote consistent service and policies. One participant’s comment expresses this:

“It would probably work better because there would be uniformity.”

A Coordinated Approach to Providing Alternatives

The dilemma identified by the focus groups in the development of complementary activities or alternatives to food banks is determining whose role it is to organize and coordinate them. Focus group participants suggest food banks be more involved in alternatives, or that food security coordinators/organizers are needed. Some recipients feel that alternatives should be developed by community organizers who are peers - that is, people who truly understand the issue:

“Coordinators are what is needed for everything. That is your priority is coordinators.”

“Someone who’s been in the situation that understands it to organize it. I think someone that’s got a lot of money and stuff, they’re not going to understand.”

Hamilton provides an example of several local community-based food security alternatives or projects that are coordinated. This includes a *Community Kitchen Network*, which coordinates community kitchens and assists people in finding a community kitchen in the Hamilton area, and *Hamilton Organic Mentorship Experience*, which coordinates numerous community garden plots that are open to the public.

Food Security Advisory Committees

The Hamilton Social Planning and Research Council is involved in food security as a member of the Hamilton Regional Food and Shelter Assistance Advisory Committee

which reports to Regional government. The Committee not only addresses issues such as food bank use, food distribution and alternative food security programs but also issues of income security which cause poverty and food bank use.

“These ‘alternatives’ do not address the issue of poverty, they offer some support but what is really needed is policy change. These are not the solutions, the most important solution is an income security program for all Canadians.” Don Jaffrey, Executive Director, Hamilton Social Planning and Research Council

The Toronto Social Planning Council has also been active on a food security advisory committee. Representatives of the Toronto Council sit on the Research Advisory Committee of the Toronto Daily Bread Food Bank and assist in its direction-setting as an anti-hunger organization. The Council believes the root causes of food insecurity and poverty need to be addressed simultaneous to providing alternative food programs to reduce food bank dependency.

Advocacy

The Toronto Daily Bread Food Bank is an example of an organization that participates in advocacy to address food security rather than complementary activities or food bank alternatives. The Toronto Daily Bread Food Bank provides extensive food bank services, but is not involved in any alternative food security programs apart from supplying some food to school breakfast programs. The Food Bank as an organization puts its other resources into aggressive advocacy for income security policies as the best long-term solution to food insecurity.

“It [food security] is not a food problem; it is an income problem. Community gardens are the ‘neo food banks’ or the ‘new alternative’. Alternatives are nice community builders but they draw huge amounts of resources and do not end hunger; it’s just a different way to give food. It gives the illusion that food needs are being met when they are not. Jobs, income security programs, unemployment insurance issues are the solutions, not alternatives!”. Sue Cox, Executive Director, Toronto Daily Bread Food Bank

Conclusion

Complementary activities and alternatives to food banks, such as community gardens and community kitchens, do exist in Halton, although they operate on an infrequent and uncoordinated basis. Several food banks have been involved in developing them and many food bank recipients have participated in them. However these programs are short-term measures and they do not address the root causes of poverty and food bank dependency. In other communities outside Halton such as Hamilton and Toronto, food bank dependency is being addressed in a coordinated approach with community networks and committees, dealing not only with complementary activities and alternatives to food banks but also advocacy for income security.

Summary

1. Most participants have experience with one or more complementary activities or alternatives to food. Focus group participants and food bank staff have had the most experience with community kitchens and community gardens.
2. On the whole, there is support for the idea of alternatives, however, clear advantages and disadvantages are discussed by focus groups and key informants. Some of the

disadvantages or barriers to the success of alternatives identified include: organization, coordination, transportation, commitment, start-up costs, facilities and lack of information, and community awareness.

3. There is general consensus that alternatives are short-term aids to food security rather than long-term solutions.
4. Outside Halton, communities are dealing with food security by advocating for income security as well as providing alternative programs to reduce food insecurity.

Recommendations

Given that food banks are no longer an emergency service but, in fact, provide food over the long-term to meet basic needs and that food banks want to serve the community to the best of their ability, this research recommends that food banks, service providers, concerned citizens, the private sector and government collaborate to:

1. Create a food security action body to i) advocate for and with those who need food banks, ii) coordinate food bank services, and iii) develop additional complementary or alternative programs.
2. Work with food bank recipients to promote and develop alternative food security programs that best meet the needs of the community.
3. Develop and distribute an inventory of food security services including information pamphlets to improve access and increase public awareness.

4. Develop a food security phone number or 'Hot Line' in Halton to provide information and assistance to those in need of access to food security services.

5. Investigate the possibility of funding a food security coordinator to facilitate the development of food security alternatives.

7. ROOT CAUSES OF FOOD INSECURITY

The data gathered in this study, and for that matter, in other food bank studies, reveals that food bank use is directly related to income levels. The profile of food bank recipients reveals that questionnaire respondents have an average monthly household income of \$1,081. When the average monthly housing cost (usually rent and utilities) of the questionnaire respondents is subtracted from that total, it leaves approximately \$240 a month for other basic necessities such as transportation, clothing, school costs and, of course, food. Using Ontario's Nutritious Food Basket the approximate cost of feeding a family of four in Halton is \$467 a month. This leaves a serious shortfall between household income and the cost of feeding a family.

When people in Halton cannot afford to purchase the food they need, many rely on food banks. To reduce food bank dependency income must increase. Individual and family income insecurity is a result of unemployment, minimum wage jobs, inadequate social assistance, high housing costs, lack of child care, inadequate training and education, reduced funding of social and community services and regressive taxation such as the GST.

Unemployment

The most frequent cause of individual and family poverty identified in this study is unemployment. In January 1999 there were 5,979 employment insurance claims in Halton. Focus group participants voice frustration and a sense of powerlessness about work and finding work. One recipient said:

"I get angry when I think about it because I worked all my life... it's not my fault."

Many key informants suggest that the government should focus on employment strategies if it wishes to reduce poverty and food bank use. At the same time, some representatives of the food banks believe that there will always be a need for food banks even if more people found employment.

“Immediate attention must be paid to employment, particularly for the 45-65 age group, as many will not have sufficient pensions with which to retire, especially the stay-at-home mothers (common for this group) who stayed at home for the entire duration of their children’s lives until they left home and who now have no pension or medical/dental benefits.” Community Unity

“No matter how much employment is available there will still be the people who are always unemployed and need the food bank.” Burlington Salvation Army

Minimum Wage Jobs

The inadequacy of the minimum wage is also identified in the focus group discussions as attributing to food bank dependency. A single parent who works full-time (40 hours per week) for minimum wage (\$6.85/hour) earns a gross annual salary of \$13,700 (before tax). This family would be living \$4,391 per year below Statistics Canada’s 1997 Low-Income Cut-Off. The 1997 Low-Income Cut-Off (commonly referred to as the poverty line) for a single parent with one child in Halton is \$18,664.

Questionnaire respondents, focus group participants, and key informants agree there is little incentive for people to leave welfare for a minimum wage job, especially given the medical and dental benefits given to social assistance recipients. This is especially true of people with children. If these benefits can be maintained by someone working at a minimum wage job, there would be more incentive for people to take low wage jobs, if available.

“It’s something that’s more than just a job...people that are just getting jobs are not necessarily out of the food bank syndrome... their jobs aren’t affording them a life style that they can stop using the food bank... \$6.85 an hour minimum wage isn’t going to do it.”

“If you get one [job] earning six dollars an hour ...you know by the time you pay taxes and everything you’re worse off working minimum wage income.”

“A lot of times now they’re not hiring you full-time, they’re hiring you part-time... but you still don’t get the benefits.”

“To go back to work at \$6 or \$7 an hour... it’s not worth it. It would be worth it if they didn’t dock you as much and you got the benefits.”

“Why can’t the government have something... and get the glasses and the medical. I mean prescription for my child’s antibiotics are \$25, glasses are \$100 and dental, if your child needs braces, well hey, they go without!”

Insufficient wages and issues of wage equity are also discussed in the key informant interviews:

“The obvious answer is to provide employment with sufficient wages to support and feed a family, for all age groups, enabling them to purchase their own food.”
Community Unity

“Those working at minimum wage cannot afford a nutritious diet.” Oakville
Fareshare

“There is a definite difference between men and women’s pay that prevents women from re-entering the workforce after child raising... The only thing that can help people is a job with a decent wage and only the government can do this.” Community Unity

Inadequate Social Assistance

Inadequate income from social assistance benefits is a contributing factor to food bank dependency. Table 3 shows the current monthly maximum allowances for social assistance

recipients in Ontario. These rates reflect the 21.6% cut made by the provincial government in 1995.

Table 3 -Monthly Social Assistance Allowances

Family Type	Shelter Allowance	Basic Needs Allowance	Total Maximum Allowance
Single Unemployed Person	\$325	\$195	\$520
Single Disabled Person	\$414	\$516	\$930
Two People	\$511	\$390	\$901
Single Parent with one child under 12	\$511	\$446	\$957
Couple with two children under 12	\$602	\$576	\$1,178

Individuals and families receiving social assistance have incomes below the poverty line. Focus group participants, including a number who are disabled, clearly expect to have to continue using food banks unless social assistance allowances are increased.

“Unless the government is willing to ‘cut-back’ on the ‘cuts’, I’ll definitely use it because I only get \$520 a month.”

“I’m not considered employable... I’m going to be using the food bank because I’m only getting \$750 from welfare and it can’t go as far as it needs to.”

“You know it’s really ridiculous and when you talk to these people and say listen how the hell am I going to pay \$500 in rent and feed a growing boy, eighteen years old... he eats like a horse...and help with the clothing and stuff like this on \$600, can anybody tell me how to do that, I would greatly appreciate it.”

The October 1995 cuts to social assistance benefits have resulted in increased dependency on food banks, for the obvious reason that people’s basic costs did not decrease

when welfare allowances did. The comments of focus group participants and key informants comments illustrate the effects of this policy decision:

“When the 20% came off, boy oh boy. That turned a lot of people to food banks.”

“I was paying \$1,100 a month to rent a house and \$200 like that off your cheque... so I had no choice, I had to go to the food bank.”

“I lost \$300 off my cheque. I was getting \$1,000, I ended up getting \$688, like I mean that’s a lot of money off a cheque, bills were still the same.”

“[the government] really created dependency... the amounts that are offered now you just can’t live on... the government has created that situation.”

“The welfare cuts affected the number of people using the food bank and now more welfare recipients have become part of the permanent food bank clientele.” Oakville Fareshare

“This Provincial Government’s policy to reduce social assistance cheques by 22% is reprehensible... Pointing at those relying on social assistance to survive being made victims of downsizing, plant closures, spousal abandonment etc. would be laughable if not so tragic.” Community Unity

Focus group participants feel that the children’s allowance portion of the social assistance benefit does not adequately reflect the real costs of raising a child. Cutting off support for dependent children at the age of 18 is also an issue, since many children of this age still live at home and are dependent on their families, as the following comments show:

“I think a more realistic look by the government at what the cost of a child is... I think the amount on my welfare cheque that accounts for my child is \$127.”

“When my son turned 18... \$200 goes off your cheque... he goes to high school... and he doesn’t stop eating.”

“These children get penalized when they turn a certain age and that shouldn’t be.”

Housing Costs

One of the reasons that so little money is available in peoples’ budgets for food is accommodation costs - primarily rent and utilities represent such a large proportion of an individual’s income. The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation Rental Survey documents that the average rent in October 1998 for a private, three-bedroom apartment in Halton is \$981 a month, up from \$770 in October 1989. The questionnaire respondents pay a monthly average of \$648 in rent or mortgage payments and, in addition, pay a monthly average of \$193 on utilities, for an average total of \$841 on housing costs. When the average housing costs of questionnaire respondents are subtracted from the average household income of questionnaire respondents only \$240 is left each month for all other expenses. Respondents do not have enough income to purchase the basic necessities of life in Halton.

Furthermore, many focus group participants identify the shortage of and long waiting lists for subsidized housing as an issue affecting their well-being. The questionnaire reveals that of the 26% of respondents who have been on the subsidized housing waiting list, the majority have been waiting two or more years. The availability of more affordable housing is, therefore, a priority if the goal of decreasing dependence on food banks and increasing food security is to be reached. Participants also comment that subsidized housing should be built in mixed dwelling areas, to avoid the creation of isolated social housing projects. Participants’ comments include:

“We were compelled to rent a very high apartment. It’s \$1,000 per month for rent, which is very high, but we couldn’t find an alternative. We applied to subsidized

housing but subsidized housing says they have a long waiting list and that is the reason why we depend completely now on the food bank.”

“We are just waiting... waiting for a long, long time...3 to 5 years.”

“We live in cooperative housing so we are ok, but there is a real need for low cost housing. I would like to see the government back more social housing, not everybody is making \$50,000 or \$60,000 a year.”

“Ontario housing isn’t the solution, it is seen as stigmatized. We need better housing, mixed in with the rest of society rather than cliques of social housing.”

Lack of Child Care

Child care is identified as an important issue by questionnaire respondents. Fifteen percent of respondents indicate that they use child care services. Of these, 26% depend on private day care services and 68% on subsidized child care. Eleven percent of these respondents using private day care state that they are on the waiting list for subsidized child care. Figure 18 illustrates that 86% of questionnaire respondents believe that they or their partner would be able to work if affordable quality child care was available.

If Affordable Child Care Was Available
Would You or Your Partner Be Able To Work?

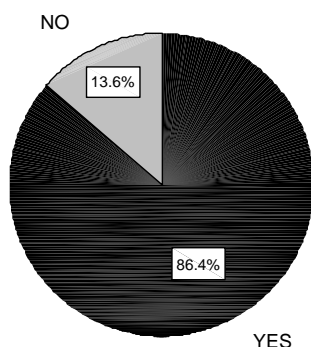


Figure 18

Focus group participants agree with questionnaire respondents that affordable child care is crucial to parents' ability to work and possibly earn an income that would permit them to buy their own food.

"It all goes back to children and child care."

"There has to be the supports for them [parents], like day care."

Inadequate Training and Education

Focus group participants acknowledge that employment skills, training and education affects one's ability to find work with an adequate wage. Many questionnaire respondents are trained for low-skilled jobs, not for the labour market today. Many participants stress the need for retraining and skill development, particularly computer training. Both skills training and 'on-the-job' training is stressed as important to get work experience. As discussed in *Section 4, Profile of Food Bank Recipients, Education Level*, 15% of

questionnaire respondents indicated they are currently attending school. Several participants in the focus groups mention that they would like to go back to school to up-date their skills or be retrained. The following comments illustrate this:

“To me training would be number one.”

“They have so many people that they can choose from today... they want you to have experience and you went to school to learn how to do these certain jobs and yet they still won’t give you the job because you haven’t worked yet at a company that gives you the experience.”

“Upgrade and get a better quality job... go back to school and upgrade myself.”

Quality of Social and Community Services

The quality of community and social services at the municipal government level is a concern to focus group participants and food bank staff. The food bank representatives comment on this:

“There is an overloading of the whole system... particularly the caseload of social workers.” Community Unity

“Instead of downloading... they [the provincial government] need to restructure social services... so that there are no weeks of waiting for recipients to get help. The government is putting the onus on the community where there aren’t the resources.” Georgetown Salvation Army

Participants acknowledge the work loads of their case workers but several participants remain frustrated with the slow response from their case workers to their phone calls. The following comments summarize the feelings of respondents:

“I’ve spent five or six times in the last week on the phone trying to get hold of this same worker... they never return any calls.”

“That’s happened to me. I’ve called sometimes four days in a row.”

”You can’t blame the workers because they’re so damn busy down there that they don’t have time.”

“... she said she’s got almost double her work load than she had before.”

“I guess I’m lucky because I’ve never had a problem with my worker. She calls me back; she’s been more than helpful.”

Twenty-five percent of questionnaire respondents indicate they have had a problem finding or using community services. Their comments include the following:

- | | |
|---|---|
| <i>C Sometimes have been treated with disrespect and ‘talked down’ to</i> | <i>available for individuals experiencing difficulty</i> |
| <i>C Needed therapy, but can’t afford \$10/week and HandiVan fare \$4/week</i> | <i>C Finding elderly friendship-groups</i> |
| <i>C Finding someone to watch my kids when I was sick</i> | <i>C very frustrating trying to access my social worker when I was collecting family benefits</i> |
| <i>C Difficulty getting in touch with the right agency geared to income</i> | <i>C Agency that would help with the monetary problems of trying to find employment.</i> |
| <i>C UI won’t help family benefits recipients with resume, job search</i> | <i>C Can’t get access to a computer course</i> |
| <i>C Needed occupational therapist for child</i> | <i>C My ex-husband keeps calling welfare on us to keep stopping our cheques</i> |
| <i>C Needed dental care for my children.</i> | <i>C People won’t tell me what services there are, having trouble finding rides anywhere</i> |
| <i>C Son has Tourettes Syndrome, needs treatment and meds - treatment not covered by OHIP, no drug plan</i> | |
| <i>C Not aware of all the services</i> | |

Respondents were asked to identify needed services that don't exist, or services which need to be expanded. Responses include:

- *More crisis intervention places to call, perhaps a community garden or someone to teach how to grow a food garden*
- *HandiVan free for those who can't pay.*
- *A service that would help, especially with kids, when in need or emergency situation*
- *Friendship clubs or things to play cards together*
- *More subsidized daycare*
- *Family counselling covered by OHIP*
- *Recipient awareness service, periodic, not just one time*
- *Business start-up help services*
- *Breakfast program*
- *Extended dental care and eye care for people*
- *More youth centres (14 to 18 years)*
- *Women's support shelters*
- *Elderly friendship groups*
- *Places to go and learn how to cook nutritiously and very inexpensively*
- *More support for low income, single women who want to be in business for themselves*
- *Places for kids for free*
- *A place to trade given can goods or groceries that I receive from food bank*
- *More assistance available to children for camps and sports*
- *More food banks*
- *Not aware of a lot of services*
- *Better upgrading educational programs to meet today's market needs. More options for adult students*
- *Schooling during hours that kids are already in school - can't afford babysitters for 3 kids before and after school!*
- *I'm finding a lot of disabled people are poor too. You can't work so your money from disability pension is about 80% less than your salary was. You still have to live and the equipment needed is expensive*
- *Find more caring social workers that believe in people--instead of ones that believe everyone is lying*
- *Social services could help more in finding jobs*
- *Instead of only support for families with preschool or young children, try finding something or a place where 50+ to meet and chat when you have no extras it's hard to be on top of the world*
- *Government make more jobs available*
- *Funding to legal aid should be increased*
- *Subsidies for children's recreation*
- *Easy access to the welfare workers. Sometimes we wait for several days before we can get hold of them*
- *Consolidate agencies to streamline services - food, clothing, shelter*
- *Free child care and dental*

- *Children's Aid--more spontaneity when calls come in to report problems*
- *Make them more friendly and helpful; have a one stop place to get a number of services*
- *Lower transportation fees (bus) for low income people, better affordable housing, recreational programs more affordable*
- *Get after the Deadbeat dads that don't give support*
- *Resource Centre-we visit it every day-still have no job-it needs updating more often-also get very frustrated each day when no one even returns your calls*
- *It would be nice if you could get a bus pass for \$20 a month*
- *Getting churches more involved*
- *Legal aid-opens up more so that the poor can have proper representation!*

Regressive Taxes

Several participants in the focus groups feel that the tax system, particularly the GST, puts low-income people and families at a greater disadvantage because they are the ones that can least afford to pay them. One study participant summarizes the thoughts of many in the comment:

"I would very much like to see how they [the government] say to the person on a fixed income...well you can get by on it and then they decide to take the GST... like even buying groceries, things are taxable."

Conclusion

The reason that poverty and food bank use exists is income insecurity. Alternatives do not address the underlying problem of food insecurity; they only serve to help temporarily. Study participants point out that food bank use and food insecurity is an income problem created by unemployment, inadequate minimum wage, reductions in social assistance benefits and high living costs.

Summary

1. Dependency on food banks is directly related to lack of adequate income.
2. People who work full-time, but at minimum wage, do not make enough income to feed themselves or their families.
3. Individuals and families who receive social assistance have even less disposable income after accommodation costs are paid.
4. The lack of affordable housing compounds the problem of low incomes. Private sector housing is very expensive; there is no new subsidized housing being built, and there are long waiting lists for those that exist.
5. There is a need for more education and training that will increase and expand the skill levels of individuals so that they can apply for higher skilled and higher paying jobs.
6. A large proportion of families with children who use food banks do not have child care. If affordable quality child care were available, many indicate they would be able to work.
7. A large proportion of people using food bank services have problems using or finding other community services.

Recommendations

Given that food banks are no longer an emergency service but, in fact, provide food over the long-term to meet basic needs and that food banks want to serve the community to the best of their ability, this research recommends that food banks, service providers, concerned citizens, the private sector and government collaborate to:

1. Increase employment opportunities and develop strategies to provide more jobs that pay adequate wages.
2. Increase the minimum wage to reflect a basic cost of living.
3. Study the current labour market trends and evaluate the effectiveness of current skills training and education provisions.
4. Ensure that relevant skills training programs and education programs are available to those that need them.
5. Make available at the secondary school level, life skills courses, including household budgeting, financial management, nutrition, basic food safety and food preparation. This should be part of the requirement for a high school diploma.
6. Increase the Maximum Basic Needs Allowance of social assistance so that it is adequate to cover monthly expenses.

7. Set the Maximum Shelter Allowance of social assistance at the average regional market rental values. Shelter costs and the cost of utilities should be completely covered by the Maximum Shelter Allowance so that families and individuals do not have to use money allocated for food and other costs to pay for housing.

8. Increase funding for new social housing programs.

8. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Who Uses Food Banks?

The questionnaire data reveals the following profile of food bank recipients:

- 80% of those completing questionnaires are women,
- 80% have children,
- 34% live in a household with an adult who has a disability,
- 27% have a college diploma or certificate or a university degree,
- over 40% have monthly household incomes between \$500 and \$999,
- 56% have gone without food sometimes so their children can have food,
- 45% do not own a car,
- 70% receive social assistance,
- 91% live in rented accommodation,
- 26% are on the subsidized housing waiting list,
- 34% went without food for one day or more before going to the food bank, and
- 85% indicated that they or their partner would be able to work if affordable quality child care was available.

Is Food Bank Use Increasing?

Food bank use has increased in Halton, and there is no indication that this trend will change. In the past, food banks usually assisted people on a short-term or emergency basis. Now, people rely on food banks to meet their monthly food needs over extended periods of time. For many recipients, the food bank is their primary or only source of food and often the food they receive is not enough to meet their own or their family's needs.

Do Food Banks Meet the Needs of Those Depending on Them?

In general, food bank recipients think food banks are very helpful and are very grateful they exist, asserting that they and others would be in a worse situation without them. Their feelings can be summed up by the following comments:

“We’re very grateful, extremely grateful, we wouldn’t be this far... they really helped us.”

“It feeds the kids. It makes the difference between my kid going to school hungry and going to school full.”

“No matter whether we like things or not, the quality of food or the quantity or whatever, it still helps a lot.”

“The way I look at it, be thankful for what you’ve got and try to live with whatever is available because it would be an awful poor town if we didn’t have the food banks.”

No Other Choice

Focus group participants dislike having to use or depend on a food bank, but feel they have no other option. Their comments include the following:

“I tend to be a proud person; it hurts me that I am not able to do it for myself. I’d rather be giving than taking.”

“I don’t think it is disliking the food bank itself... just having, you know, to face the reality that here we are using a food bank.”

“I believe that people on low incomes... just don’t have any choice. People are trying to make ends meet... but food banks are a necessity in this day and age. I mean there are no two ways about it.”

“It’s a matter of pride, you wish you didn’t have to go, you feel a sense of humility. I worked for 18 years in upper management and the next day you find out your job is not there and you are having to use the food bank. You have to go in order to get groceries on the table for the kids. Sometimes I’ve had to roll up the children’s pennies to buy milk.”

Negative Perceptions of Food Banks

Many food bank recipients and key informants comment on the false public perceptions about ‘abuse’ of food banks, decrying the often negative perception of the poor, particularly, of people who depend on social assistance for their income. They state:

“We find this very disturbing... and have seen hardly any abuse.” Oakville Fareshare

“I have met few persons who did not desperately wish to be working instead.” Community Unity.

“They (the government) should not paint everyone with the same brush. It makes it harder for those that are in need to ask for help when the government promotes a negative public perception of welfare recipients. A lot of recipients would not come to the food bank, as it affects their self-esteem, if it wasn’t for their children.” Milton Salvation Army

“ People are not aware of food bank use and poverty in Halton. They [the community] read in the papers that things are getting better but poverty still exists. We need to raise awareness.” Acton Foodshare

“Food banks have such a negative stigma that some people would rather go hungry than have the feeling of ‘begging’ for food. It means also that children go hungry longer.” Don Jaffrey, Executive Director, Hamilton Social Planning and Research Council

“Food banks meet the needs in the short-term but they are not long-term solutions. There is a sense of denial in Oakville, that there is no poverty because there are no homeless shelters or street people. Food banks are one vehicle for increasing the

awareness in the community and they should be part of a solution, but the reaction is often adverse or denial.” Ron Shantz, Manager, Kerr St. Market

Food Quantity and Quality

Food banks are often the only source of food recipients have each month and it is not enough food to sustain them for a month. Issues of food quality exist. For example, food donated to food banks is sometimes expired. Recipients suggest that it would be helpful to ask the public to donate more staple foods, such as rice and grains, rather than just processed or canned items. Bulk staples and basic cooking ingredients can provide for more meals, for example, the ingredients to make soup are more useful than cans of prepared soup, as the homemade soup will stretch further. One view of the quality and quantity of food from food banks follows:

“Food quantity and food quality are insufficient. Food amounts only last a few days and there is an issue with items being out of date.” Don Jaffrey, Executive Director, Hamilton Social Planning and Research Council

Focus group participants would like to have more choice in the items they receive from the food bank. This would help address cultural or other preferences and respond to individual needs. Participants also point out the importance of receiving household products and personal care items since they are also necessary, but often beyond food bank recipients budgets.

Will Complementary or Alternative Programs Decrease Food Bank Dependency?

Focus group participants, food bank representatives and other key informants are familiar and have experience with one or more of the complementary activities or alternatives to food banks. However, they agree that these alternatives only provide short-term aid and do not address the root causes of food bank dependency. The list below outlines some of the advantages and disadvantages found in implementing such programs:

Community Kitchens

Advantages

- < Provides participants with inexpensive nutritious food
- < Provides food at the end of the month when it is often difficult to meet food needs
- < Provides an opportunity for participants to learn new recipes and foods (e.g. from different cultures)
- < Improves cooking skills and nutrition knowledge
- < Develops commitment and improves self-esteem
- < Enables participants to be more self-sufficient
- < Provides opportunity for social contact and networking

Disadvantages

- < Attendance is irregular
- < Available facilities or safety restrictions limit ability to run kitchens
- < Start-up costs and the cost of supplies are often a deterrent
- < Each kitchen serves only a small number of people, usually between 5-8

- < Participants need access to a freezer for storage of the food
- < Public does not understand the goal or meaning of community kitchens, reducing participation
- < Need for organizational support, usually a coordinator

Community Gardens

Advantages

- < Provides participants with fresh low-cost produce
- < Can serve a varied number of people (usually between 10-40)
- < Builds community spirit
- < Physical benefits of good nutrition, fresh air, and exercise
- < Social benefits of sharing skills, ideas and pride in accomplishment
- < Environmental benefits of learning about nature, gardening and being self-sufficient

Disadvantages

- < May only appeal to people who like to garden; disabled people may be excluded by the nature of the program
- < Transportation can be an issue
- < Requires supervision to prevent stealing and vandalism
- < Requires time commitment - several months of maintenance
- < Often the public does not understand the goal or meaning of community gardens reducing participation
- < Need for organizational support, usually a coordinator

Food Co-ops

Advantages

- < Can offer lower food prices
- < Employment opportunities can be created
- < Source and quality of food can be controlled
- < Can be tailored to fit specific group needs

Disadvantages

- < Considerable amount of capital needed for start-up costs
- < Needs considerable commitment of time, planning and organization
- < Group needs to be committed and cohesive
- < Transportation can be an issue
- < Often the public does not understand the goal or meaning of food co-ops
- < Competition from discount grocery stores such as No Frills and Food Basics

School Nutrition Programs

Advantages

- < Provides participants with nutritious food
- < Improves learning and concentration capacities of children
- < Can serve a large number of children
- < Builds team work and community spirit

Disadvantages

- < Can have negative stigma if focussed rather than universal

- < Dependent on cooperation of school/principal
- < Need for volunteers and coordinator
- < Need for funding or community/business donations

Community Dinners

Advantages

- < Provides participants with nutritious food
- < Provides opportunity for social contact and networking

Disadvantages

- < Not regular and serve limited number of people
- < Need for donation of food
- < Need for organization and volunteers

Soup Kitchens

Advantages

- < Provides participants with nutritious food
- < Provides opportunity for social contact

Disadvantages

- < Negative stigma attached
- < Need for organization and volunteers

Gleaning

Advantages

- < Makes use of food that would otherwise be wasted
- < Provides participants with fresh nutritious produce
- < Can serve a large number of people
- < Builds teamwork and community spirit
- < Physical benefits of good nutrition, fresh air and exercise
- < Does not require a long-term commitment

Disadvantages

- < May appeal to a select group of people, disabled people may be excluded by the nature of the program
- < Only possible during harvest time
- < Dependent on cooperation of farmers to determine when and what is gleaned
- < The group must be ready to go at short notice
- < Often the public does not understand the goal or meaning of gleaning
- < Need for organization and a coordinator

Pick Your Own Farm Trip/Grow-a-Row

Advantages

- < Provides participants with fresh nutritious produce
- < Enables participants to be more self sufficient
- < Builds teamwork and community spirit
- < Physical benefits of good nutrition, fresh air and exercise

Disadvantages

- < Appeals to select group of people, disabled people may be excluded by the nature of the program
- < Only possible for a short period of time in the year
- < Dependent on cooperation of farmers
- < The group must be ready to go at short notice
- < Need for organization and a coordinator

Cooking Lessons/Canning and Pickling

Advantages

- < Provides opportunity for participants to learn new recipes and foods (for example, from different cultures)
- < Provides food at the end of the month when it is often difficult to meet food needs
- < Improves cooking skills and nutrition knowledge
- < Enables participants to be more self-sufficient
- < Provides opportunity for social contact and networking

Disadvantages

- < Available facilities or safety restrictions limit ability to run courses
- < Costs, such as the cost for supplies are often a deterrent
- < Participants need access to freezer or other storage means
- < Need for organization or coordinator

Fresh Food Baskets

Advantages

- < Lower food prices are offered
- < Employment opportunities can be created
- < Source and quality of food can be controlled
- < Can be tailored to fit specific group needs

Disadvantages

- < Considerable amount of capital needed for start up costs or food buying
- < Needs considerable commitment of time, planning and organization
- < Group needs to be committed and get along
- < Transportation can be an issue
- < Often the public does not understand the concept

Meal-in-a-Bag

Advantages

- < The food from the food bank is being used effectively
- < The participants are receiving nutritional cooking ideas for feeding their families
- < No extra actual purchases may be needed

Disadvantages

- < Would not appeal to all groups/individuals tastes
- < Takes more time and organization

Food Bank Depots

Advantages

- < Provides more accessible food bank services/distribution points to more/new areas
- < One central depot can control and ensure consistent policies and procedures for all small/local depots
- < Local depots can be organized to fit specific group needs
- < Creates uniform/consistent policies
- < Helps improve community spirit as more locations and more volunteers involved

Disadvantages

- < Considerable amount of capital needed for start up and relocation costs
- < Needs considerable commitment of time, planning and organization
- < Increases administration of records. A computer system would be needed
- < More volunteers are needed for the increased number of distribution points

Will Food Banks Continue To Be Needed?

All food bank key informants feel that food banks will continue to be necessary and may, in fact, be permanent institutions due to growing income disparities and increased poverty. At the same time, they affirm that food banks are not the answer to food insecurity. Food banks are band-aid solutions. They conclude:

“Coming to a food bank once a month does not help solve the problem.” Burlington Salvation Army

“The rich will stay rich and the poor will stay poor, but the large middle class is suffering more.” Georgetown Bread Basket

“Even if employment does increase there will still be people on disability whose incomes are not enough [to live on].” Georgetown Salvation Army

In addition, most key informants believe that the number of people who need food bank services will grow. While some feel able to handle increasing numbers, others suggest the demand for services will expand beyond current capacity.

“The government keeps cutting because they know others will pick up the slack.” Georgetown Salvation Army

“We will need more food drives in the future, every year they cover a larger and larger area.” Georgetown Bread Basket

“They [food banks] have also seen the overall growth of food bank recipients, more families needing the services of food banks which means more children.” Don Jaffrey, Executive Director, Hamilton Social Planning and Research Council

The Future of Food Banks

Key informants comment that the media and the community promote supporting food banks, but don't look closely at, or talk about, why people need food banks - they don't deal with the root causes of food insecurity. Many people give food and money but they do not stop to ask why these things are needed in the first place. One common concern about focussing on improving food bank services and on complementary or alternative programs is that they take energy and resources away from looking at and doing something about the root causes of food insecurity.

Why do people need food bank services? Why are incomes not sufficient to allow them to buy food for themselves and their families? What about job creation strategies? Why is the minimum wage so low that basic necessities cannot be covered? Why is affordable housing inaccessible? Key informants are clear that providing food for today does not solve the problems of the working poor or those who are dependent on social assistance.

“Food banks are not meeting the needs of the poor. They are sporadic at best as a delivery mechanism. There is a concern of the continued decreasing donor response while there continues to be a continued growth in demand. This makes the food banks an inadequate source for meeting their food security needs, it is an unreliable source. They provide a basic short-term service, they do nothing to solve the problem in the long-term, food banks are a band-aid approach to a much bigger issue.” Don Jaffrey, Executive Director, Hamilton Social Planning and Research Council

The Toronto Daily Bread Food Bank’s research, along with other studies identify clearly that food banks do not meet the needs of the hungry, not even the poor. They know that the majority of households needing food bank services still go without food. They, therefore, believe it necessary to focus attention and energy on resolving food insecurity issues, including advocating for changes in government policy, in order to reduce poverty and food bank dependency. Issues that they feel need to be addressed include: increasing social assistance benefits, expanding social housing programs, increasing minimum wage, and providing skills training and education based on an analysis of labour market trends. Three comments from key informants capture the need for food banks to emerge as advocates:

“Without food banks being involved in advocacy and coalitions it gives the impression that food banks are providing a satisfactory service and are meeting the needs of the poor. Food banks have to balance their work against the broader issues, not just using a bandaid approach to hunger.” Andy Mitchell, Community Social Planning Council of Toronto

“Food banks should be involved in advocacy and coalitions for better solutions to the crisis of poverty. The Food and Shelter Assistance Advisory Committee provides a voice in Hamilton to Regional Government and as a way of responding collectively or on an individual basis to public policy. This has proved effective for example, with the recent Social Assistance legislation (Bill 142), the Committee organized a community forum to raise questions and concerns. So to some extent local organizations are involved in advocacy, but more could be done.” Don Jaffrey, Executive Director, Hamilton Social Planning and Research Council

“I see food banks heading in various directions. The best case scenario is that food banks continue to do a lot for the environment. They are very good at using waste food and redirecting surplus food from the food industry. The worst case is that funding is directed into food banks and they may become part of the welfare system. Food banks are not the proper organization to provide the social safety net across the country. Food banks are inappropriate and an inefficient way of meeting basic needs. It goes beyond subsistence levels of food amounts; the issues are dignity and proper jobs.” Sue Cox, Executive Director, Toronto Daily Bread Food Bank

Our research corroborates the concerns of other studies and confirms the need to focus our attention on combatting the root causes of food bank dependency.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

Food Bank Service: Changes for the Future

Given that food banks are no longer an emergency service but, in fact, provide food over the long-term to meet basic needs and that food banks want to serve the community to the best of their ability, this research recommends that food banks, service providers, concerned citizens, the private sector and government collaborate to:

Policies

1. Develop consistent policies and procedures to better serve food bank recipients such as eligibility requirements, frequency of visits, food quality, including expiry dates, availability of food vouchers, and provision of non-food items.
2. Ensure a similar basic nutritious amount of food is provided by all food banks, including skim milk powder, infant formula, dried or canned beans, peas, rice, pasta, lentils, grains, tinned meats, canned or frozen fruit and vegetables.
3. Increase the basic quantity of food allowed to recipients to better meet their needs and collaborate in order to give consistent quantities of food that better meet the needs of the recipients.
4. Understand the importance of and increase the representation of recipients on food bank Boards of Directors, committees and in other decision-making roles.

5. Increase communication between food banks and other organizations associated with not only food security but also with the root causes of food bank dependency.

Practices

6. Find the best practices of providing and distributing food that can allow recipients to have more choice in the items they receive.
7. Improve the opportunity for recipients to exchange items that are unsuitable or personally unacceptable.
8. Develop and constantly assess food bank practices to guarantee accessibility including location, proximity to public transportation, operating hours and knowledge of client profile.
9. Improve facilities, such as freezers in all food banks.
10. Work to ensure that food bank environments are welcoming, particularly in reception/waiting areas.

Education and Awareness

11. Educate the public on the need for basic staple foods that recipients identify as essential as well as processed foods.
12. Educate the public regarding food bank use to raise awareness on food bank needs, distribution of food, eligibility requirements and food security issues.

13. Raise public awareness on the root causes of food bank dependency.

Alternatives to Food Banks: Enhancing Food Security

Given that food banks are no longer an emergency service but, in fact, provide food over the long-term to meet basic needs and that food banks want to serve the community to the best of their ability, this research recommends that food banks, service providers, concerned citizens, the private sector and government collaborate to:

1. Create a food security action body to i) advocate for those who need food banks, ii) coordinate food bank services, and iii) to develop additional complementary or alternative programs.
2. Promote and develop alternative food security programs that best meet the needs of the community.
3. Develop and distribute an inventory of food security services including information pamphlets to improve access and increase public awareness.
4. Develop a food security phone number or 'Hot Line' in Halton to provide information and assistance to those in need of access to food security services.
5. Investigate the possibility of funding a food security coordinator to facilitate the development of food security alternatives.

Other Actions to Reduce Food Bank Dependency

Given that food banks are no longer an emergency service but, in fact, provide food over the long-term to meet basic needs and that food banks want to serve the community to the best of their ability, this research recommends that food banks, service providers, concerned citizens, the private sector and government collaborate to:

1. Increase employment opportunities and develop strategies to provide more jobs that pay adequate wages.
2. Increase the minimum wage to reflect a basic cost of living.
3. Study the current labour market trends and evaluate the effectiveness of current skills training and education provisions.
4. Ensure that relevant skills training programs and education programs are available to those that need them.
5. Make available, at the secondary school level, life skills courses, including household budgeting, financial management, nutrition, basic food safety and food preparation. This should be part of the requirement for a high school diploma.
6. Increase the Maximum Basic Needs Allowance of social assistance so that it is adequate to cover monthly expenses.

7. Set the Maximum Shelter Allowance of social assistance at the average regional market rental values. Shelter costs and the cost of utilities should be completely covered by the Maximum Shelter Allowance so that families and individuals do not have to use money allocated for food and other costs to pay for housing.
8. Increase funding for new social housing programs.

The Next Step

It is our common goal to improve food security for all, therefore, food bank service providers, food bank recipients, government, and the community-at-large need to collaborate on strategies to increase food security.

Some focus group participants express hope that this study would increase public awareness about the need for food bank services in Halton and address some of the reasons for food bank dependency. Participants believe that the community has little understanding of poverty and how it drives one to seek help from food banks. People donate food but do not question why they need to give food or why there is a need for food banks. Study participants expressed surprise, yet, relief that this study was being conducted. The following express some of their feelings:

“I think it’s great that someone is doing this study.”

“It is a good idea to get people who do use the food bank, you know, what kind of people they are, why do they use the food bank and why they could not find some more independent way.”

“The food banks are not well enough known. I was once told there wasn’t any poor people in Milton.”

“I think what you’ve got to do is you’ve got to introduce the community to [the fact] that there are such things as food banks, that there are people that use food banks and it’s not just lazy people or people that don’t want to work.”

The Halton Social Planning Council believes this study provides important insights into food banks and their contribution in our community. It describes the transformation of food banks from an emergency response to an organization providing food to those without. It also identifies through the voices and written comments of study participants the root causes of food security. The Council trusts that this report will serve as a blueprint for action to increase food security across Halton.

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APPENDICES

- 1 *The Price of Eating Well in Halton* brochure
- 2 Key Informant Interview questions
- 3 Food Bank Recipient Questionnaire
- 4 Focus group flyer
- 5 Focus group questions
- 6 Article: "Food Bank Shelves Empty"