



Manitoulin Hunger Report 2022-2023

A Look Behind the Numbers of Food
Bank Use on Manitoulin Island

Acknowledgments

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Executive Summary

Food bank use is on the rise in communities all across Ontario and Manitoulin Island is no exception. From March 31st, 2022 to April 1st, 2023, the Manitoulin Family Resources Food Bank served a total of 4289 individuals. This is a 37% increase from 2018-2019.

Among the 1569 households who visited during this period, 28% were visiting for the first time. Included in this number are those who recently moved to Manitoulin Island and were faced with some of the ongoing challenges of rural living along with those who have lived on the Island for many years and simply could no longer keep up with the cost of living.

Households residing on one of the six First Nation reserves on Manitoulin made up 68% of all visitors from March 2022 to April 2023. This vast overrepresentation can be linked back to Canada's history of colonization and the ongoing impacts of separation from Indigenous culture.

The communities least represented among Food Bank visitors were those located furthest away from the Food Bank, likely a result of the inability to afford travel costs and the limited public transportation options.

The age group most prevalent among food bank visitors was age 25-35 while those age 14-17 were least prevalent. A startling 40% of individuals served at the food bank were children and youth between the ages of 0 and 17, more than one third of all food bank visitors.

Lastly, of the data gathered for visits between March 2022 and April 2023, 64% of households claimed social assistance as their primary source of income, a relatively unchanging statistic from years prior. Though only 6% reported their primary source of income as part-time or full-time employment, provincial studies show that precarious employment is on the rise which continues to drive food bank use (King & Quan, 2022).

Land Acknowledgement

With gratitude and respect we acknowledge that Manitoulin Family Resources is located on the Robinson-Huron and Manitoulin Island Treaty Territory, and that the land on which we operate is in the traditional territory of the Anishnabek Nation, specifically the Odawa, Ojibway, and Pottawatomi, known as the Three Fires Confederacy.

Overview

About Manitoulin Family Resources Food Bank and Thrift Store

Manitoulin Family Resources (MFR) is a non-profit agency that supports individuals and families by providing resources, advocacy, support, and education for those in need through the agency's three program areas of Children's Services, Violence Against Women Prevention, and Emergency Food Assistance.

The Food Bank found its origins through the work of the Violence Against Women Prevention program. Opening in 1984,, Haven House Shelter provided a safe space for women and their children who were experiencing or were at risk of experiencing violence. In many cases, women came to the shelter with very few belongings after having to quickly flee their homes. In response, staff began collecting donations of clothing and other basic necessities to give to shelter residents who were in need.

With no real designated space for storing items and little time for staff to manage incoming donations, it quickly became apparent that more resources were needed. Starting as a small room added on during an expansion to a portable building, the "Help Centre" took its roots. Donations were sorted and sold at affordable prices to those within and outside the shelter by a group of dedicated volunteers. With funds raised and generous support from the community, a food bank was added to meet the needs of Help Centre clients.

Over the years the Help Centre grew and changed, improving its infrastructure and services through things like storage space, running water, and refrigeration to keep perishable foods. During this time the agency was able to tap into a variety of funding avenues including Food Banks Canada and Manitoulin Sudbury District Services Board to continue improving operations. For approximately a decade MFR has been a member of the province's largest collective of hunger relief organizations, Feed Ontario. This gave them access to a number of tools to aid in things like client intake, food acquisition, and training, as well as a standard of practice designed to improve the overall quality of services.

After seeing a significant jump in Food Bank use and added challenges with maintaining health and safety following the introduction of the COVID-19 virus, staff began to discuss what changes would need to be made in order to maintain Food Bank operations. In the fall of 2020 Manitoulin Family Resources was presented with an opportunity to build a brand new food bank and thrift store.

In September 2022, Treasures Thrift Store opened its doors for the first time since the global pandemic was announced in March 2020. This much needed service offers emergency clothing and household goods at a nominal fee, while generating

income to support food bank operations. Around the same time, the Food Bank moved everything over to its new location next to the thrift store and with the help of volunteers, continued its work providing food hampers to families across Manitoulin Island.

About this Report

The summaries in this report are based off of data collected from Manitoulin Family Resources Food Bank, in addition to a few external sources including Feed Ontario’s 2022 Hunger Report. We recognize that the Manitoulin Family Resources Food Bank is one of several hunger relief initiatives on Manitoulin Island and therefore the information presented is not representative of all food insecure households on Manitoulin. The aim of this report is to share knowledge with the wider Island community in an effort to promote meaningful discussion and collaboration, and to advocate for change with the ultimate goal of ending food insecurity on Manitoulin Island.

Food Bank Use

The statistics below were calculated based on Food Bank visits from March 31st, 2022 to April 1st, 2023. Unknown data and anonymous visits were removed from the dataset for the purpose of improving data accuracy.

Food Bank Visits			
	2022-2023	2018-2019	Percentage Increase/Decrease
Individuals Served	4289	3139	36.6%
Households Served	1569	1161	35.1%

*The figures above indicate duplicate visits, meaning multiple visits from the same individuals and households are counted.

New Vs Existing Households	
Existing	72.4%
New	27.6%

Demographics

Community	
M'Chigeeng FN	27.2%
Wiikwemikoong UT	23.4%
Mindemoya	8.9%
Aundeck Omni Kaning FN	8.9%
Sheguiandah FN	6.9%
Gore Bay	6.6%
Little Current	5.1%
Providence Bay	2.0%
Manitowaning	1.8%
Tehkummah	1.8%
Spring Bay	1.5%
Zhibaahaasing FN	0.8%
Evansville	0.8%
Sheshegwaning FN	0.5%
Kagawong	0.3%
Meldrum Bay	0.3%
Sandfield	0.3%
Outside of Manitoulin Island	3.1%

Age	
0-6 Years	15.9%
7-13 Years	17.5%
14-17 Years	6.4%

18-24 Years	9.2%
25-35 Years	18.1%
36-50 Years	16.0%
51-59 Years	8.5%
60+ Years	8.4%

Income Type	
Ontario Works	39.9%
ODSP	23.7%
No Income	8.7%
Other	6.2%
Child Tax Benefit	5.0%
EI	4.0%
Employed: Part-Time	3.7%
OAS	3.1%
Pensions	2.5%
Employed: Full-Time	2.3%
CPP	0.4%
Child Support	0.4%
Student Loans	0.2%
Spouse/Family Support	0.2%
Private Disability	0.2%

Cost of Living Crisis

COVID-19 and Inflation

In March of 2020, the Thrift Store closed its doors to protect staff, volunteers, and visitors from the rapidly spreading COVID-19 virus. The Food Bank however remained open as an essential service, operated by a skeleton team of three. For a few weeks, Food Bank visits were at an all time low. When concerns began to grow that families who regularly visited the Food Bank were no longer accessing services, staff began to reach out to local agencies and the general public, letting them know that services were still available. Not long after the Food Bank started receiving calls and numbers quickly surpassed any they had seen before.

As the pandemic continued, the economy began to feel its effects. With supply chain disruptions and consumer demand at an all time high, the province began to see extreme shortages in household goods. Not only did this quickly empty shelves of essential items, but it caused the economy as a whole to skyrocket. In fall of 2022, the cost of food alone rose 10% (King & Quan, 2022). With 1 in 4 Food Bank visitors receiving services for the first time between March 2022 and April 2023, food insecurity has become a reality for many households across Manitoulin for which it never has before.

In an attempt to stretch what funds are left after paying housing and other costs, individuals often make food choices that are cost-effective, regardless of whether these choices are suitable for their dietary needs.

Jane is referred to the Food Bank by a nurse at the hospital. After paying her housing costs, cell phone bill, vehicle insurance, and an unexpected vet bill, Jane had less than \$100 left in her bank account to pay for food. Too embarrassed to come to the Food Bank, Jane resorted to eating the only foods left in her pantry: peanut butter and soda crackers. As a diabetic, the high sugar content in her diet landed her in the emergency room.

Despite inflation beginning to slow, Food Bank numbers continue to rise, never falling below pre-pandemic levels. The growing gap between income and the cost of living for a basic standard of living has left hundreds of households across Manitoulin turning to food banks for support.

Housing Unaffordability

Like with all other aspects of the economy, inflation has had drastic impacts on housing costs. According to the 2022 Hunger Report, vacant rental units in Ontario in September 2022 were a staggering 18.4% higher than only one year before (King & Quan, 2022). With a significant increase in work-from-home arrangements following the pandemic, many households chose to move out of the city and into rural neighbourhoods where homes could be bought at much more affordable prices. As demand for housing grew, so did the price.

Watching the value of their homes increase, many landlords across the province saw this as an opportunity to sell their rented homes for profit. With an already limited supply of rental units on Manitoulin Island, finding affordable housing options became increasingly difficult for those needing to relocate. Low-income households priced out of the market who sought subsidized housing were hit with the reality that they could be waiting up to 5 years for an apartment. In conversations with these families, feelings of defeat and hopelessness were not uncommon.

As a highly sought after vacation spot, Manitoulin has also seen a significant increase to the short-term rental market in the last couple of years. Seeing the popularity of services like Air BnB and VRBO, more and more real-estate owners have chosen this option over long-term lease agreements. As a result of these trends, many households have been forced to move back in with parents, sleep on friends' couches, or live in seasonal trailers in an effort to keep a roof over their head.

Rural Living

Poverty in Rural Settings

With its lakefront views, acres of vacant land, and slow pace of life, it is no surprise that many families have chosen Manitoulin Island to call home. For some, roots on the Island go back several generations while for others, it is a hidden oasis discovered only in the last few years. Rural living draws many people to this area each year, but it doesn't come without its challenges.

Despite its growing population, Manitoulin Island continues to be defined by its large geographic size and low population density. It is made up of approximately 22 small communities, including six First Nation reserves, and spans about 2,766 square kilometres. As research continues to show, rural communities like Manitoulin can prove more challenging for vulnerable populations. According to Statistics Canada (2023), the average income for residents of Manitoulin District in 2020 was \$43,280, significantly below the provincial average of \$56,350. Residents of northern communities like Manitoulin Island also see inflated consumer prices on things like food and gas as a result of higher shipping costs.

In addition to lower incomes and higher consumer prices, rural communities consistently report things like lower education levels and poorer health outcomes. As social determinants of health, these factors play a large role in the rate of poverty.

Lack of Transportation

With a lack of public transportation, getting to and from essential services on the Island can pose a challenge for those without access to a reliable vehicle or the ability to drive. Accessing emergency food assistance from the Food Bank is one such service, with people often citing a lack of transportation as the reason for missed visits.

For those that are homebound due to mobility restrictions from age or illness, getting to the Food Bank can be next to impossible without the support of friends, family, or support workers. Though seniors represented only 8.4% of those who visited the Food Bank between March 31st, 2022 and April 1st, 2023, provincial statistics indicate that food bank use for seniors is on the rise (King & Quan, 2022). As a popular retirement community, the limited transportation options on Manitoulin could have significant impacts on food bank use in the years to come.

Stigma

Stigma surrounding food bank use continues to deter people from accessing much needed services. It produces a harmful “us” vs “them” mentality that only perpetuates stigma further. In small, rural communities like those on Manitoulin Island, visiting a food bank can also induce much fear. What if word spreads that I was here? What if someone recognizes me? Will I be safe there?

No one needs a food bank, until they do. This was the slogan for a campaign run by Feed Ontario in 2022 aimed to reduce stigma and bring awareness to the reality of food insecurity across the province. The campaign had much success in reaching people across the province and yet, there is still much work to be done.

Structural Inequalities

Inadequate Social Safety Net

Despite its name, food insecurity isn't simply a food issue. Many different and often intersecting structures play a part in why someone might visit a food bank. However in most cases, food insecurity is the result of the inability to afford food.

Of those who visited the Food Bank between March 2022 and April 2023, 64% or 2 of every 3 visitors reported their primary source of income as either Ontario Works or ODSP (Ontario Disability Support Program). In 2022, a single adult on ODSP could receive up to \$1228 per month. Even after a 5% increase by the Government of Ontario in the fall of 2022, this amount is \$832 below the poverty line (King & Quan, 2022). Social assistance was developed to provide a safety net for those in need, but instead it has allowed people to fall even deeper into poverty.

Precarious Employment

Employment is no longer a deterrent of food insecurity. Data from food banks across the province showed that between 2020 and 2022 there was a 16% increase in the number of food bank visitors who were employed (King & Quan, 2022). With a rise in precarious employment and a minimum wage rate falling below a living wage, more individuals have found themselves working part-time or even full-time hours and not receiving enough income to support their basic needs.

Despite only 6% of Food Bank visitors reporting employment as their primary source of income, MFR recognized that the growth of employed visitors was unlikely to slow down. With the understanding that offering Food Bank hours during business hours can create a barrier to some people receiving food assistance, MFR leadership decided to begin opening one evening a week from 4pm to 8pm. The purpose of this decision was twofold: to open up a window of time that would allow those working or in school to visit the Food Bank and to address the growing number of visitors each month by adding more hours.

Indigenous Overrepresentation

According to the 2021 Census, people with Indigenous identity (First Nation, Métis, and Inuit) made up about 40% of Manitoulin District's total population (Statistics Canada, 2023). Data collected from March 31st, 2022 to April 1st, 2023 showed that 68% of Food Bank visitors resided on one of the six First Nations reserves on Manitoulin Island. It is important to note that these numbers do not include those

with Indigenous identity living off of the reserve, however the point remains clear - Indigenous people are vastly overrepresented among Food Bank visitors.

Among the many external policies and practices that were imposed upon First Nations peoples in Canada during colonization was the loss of control over traditional food systems (Truth and Reconciliation, 2015). As a result, Indigenous communities lost access to the knowledge, practice, and relationship with Indigenous foods, affecting overall food security (King & Quan, 2022). In addition to the separation from traditional ways of eating, Indigenous people were subjected to the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual abuse of residential schools, including a severe lack of nutritious foods (Truth and Reconciliation, 2015). The impacts of these traumatic experiences are still felt today by residential school survivors and the generations that have gone after them.

Eliminating food insecurity on Manitoulin Island will require a commitment to restoring the relationships to Indigenous land and culture.

Substance Use

Opioid Crisis

Data published by the Community Drug Strategy for the City of Greater Sudbury indicate that in 2022, 130 residents of the Sudbury and Manitoulin districts died from an opioid-related overdose (Community Drug Strategy, 2023). This is 28 more deaths than just one year before. According to reports, the local annual mortality rate for opioid-related overdoses in 2022 was 62.8 deaths per 100,000 population per year, far above the overall provincial rate of 16.7 deaths per 100,000 population per year (Community Drug Strategy, 2023).

The opioid crisis has had significant effects on the communities of Manitoulin Island, including the rate of food insecurity. Addiction and substance use has serious health implications, but it can also impair other aspects of daily life including the ability to budget to meet basic needs and manage time. The debilitating effects of addiction can cause individuals to miss payments, lose productivity, and in the worst cases, lose a job or a home. The cost of addiction is substantial, especially for those whose income is already low.

Addiction and Poverty

Many people turn to substances as a means of coping. As was mentioned earlier in the report, poverty can take a serious emotional toll on people. When everyday is met with new challenges, substances provide a temporary escape from reality. Surrounded by loved ones who use substances, children can also grow up observing these behaviours and begin modelling after them. Intergenerational poverty is greatly impacted by the presence of substances.

Todd arrives at the food bank only a week after his last visit. He explains that what little money he had was stolen from his bank account by one of his children who was struggling with an addiction to alcohol.

Food bank use continues to be driven by substance use and addiction on Manitoulin. As individuals spend a greater portion of their income on substances, often spiralling into further debts and precarious circumstances, food insecurity becomes a normal part of their daily lives.

Conclusion

Food banks, originally designed to support people in emergency situations, have now become essential to the lives of many households across the province and in our own communities on Manitoulin Island. They have also become widely accepted as the leading solution to addressing food insecurity, a particularly problematic truth.

Drivers of food insecurity, if left unrecognized, will cause food bank numbers to grow even higher. The cost of living crisis, combined with challenges of rural living, structural inequalities, and substance use are keeping hundreds of households across Manitoulin Island from meeting their basic needs every month. With limited resources, it is very likely that this need will begin to outpace what food banks like Manitoulin Family Resources Food Bank are capable of supporting.

Without the influence of federal, provincial, and municipal governments to make policy shifts, along with local leaders and advocates to offer supports to those in need, the health of our communities will continue to decline. In order to achieve food security and eliminate hunger on Manitoulin, we must combine emergency food assistance with long-term, sustainable solutions to issues experienced by those walking in our doors.

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