

HungerCount 2011 – Saskatchewan Provincial Report

Prepared by Food Banks of Saskatchewan, Member of Food Bank Canada

For many people in Saskatchewan, the past year has been prosperous. In August the unemployment rate stood at 4.6% (the lowest in the country) while the Canadian unemployment rate was 7.3%. Coupled with resurging prices for commodities such as potash and oil, the Saskatchewan economy was certainly a bright spot in a Canada that is still feeling the effects of the last recession. In fact, many in Saskatchewan feel that the province remained virtually unscathed by the last downturn in the economy.

In some respects it appears that food bank figures for 2011 reflect the optimistic outlook for Saskatchewan, as food bank use was down 8.8% from 2010. However, this decrease follows an increase of 20% in 2010, and the 20,655 people helped this year is still higher than the 17,751 assisted in 2008.

One number remaining fairly constant over the years is the percentage of food bank clients who receive social assistance. This year the figure was 57.6%, and this number has hovered around the 60% range for the past several years. This is reflective of the fact that social assistance payments do not adequately provide for the actual cost of living of those who receive it. Our report, *Access and Affordability – Saskatchewan Food Banks Explore the Cost of Healthy Eating*, showed in 2009:

- A single person receiving social assistance through the Saskatchewan Assistance Program (SAP) would spend approximately 97% of their monthly income on rent, leaving just 3% to cover food, transportation, and other monthly expenses.
- A single parent with a child receiving the SAP would spend 78% of their monthly income on rent and food.
- A family of four receiving income through the Saskatchewan Assistance Program would spend approximately 83% of their monthly income on rent and food.

It is apparent that social assistance rates, especially for single people, need to be reexamined in conjunction with an overall poverty reduction strategy that includes food security as an important component. According to Laurie O'Connor of the Saskatoon Food Bank & Learning Centre, "We simply can't afford to ignore hunger and poverty in our community. Poverty is a symptom of an unhealthy community. If we are to grow – to meet our potential – we need to understand that every person in our community is an

asset, not a liability. We must ensure that everyone can participate fully in our community and all it has to offer.”

Another disturbing figure in each annual *HungerCount* is the percentage of Aboriginal persons who use food banks in Saskatchewan. Food banks in this province face first-hand the reality of First Nations poverty, which made national headlines earlier this year in statements made by the outgoing Auditor General of Canada, Sheila Fraser. She is quoted as saying: “Over the past 10 years my office has produced no fewer than 31 audit reports on Aboriginal issues. Yet, despite these reports and actions by the federal government in response to our recommendations, too many First Nations people still lack what most other Canadians take for granted.”

Bill Hall, Executive Director of Food Banks of Saskatchewan, comments, “It will take a concerted effort from all levels of government, the business community, community organizations, and individuals to begin to even make a dent in this real need.”