

FOOD BANKS and the DEPENDENCE MYTH

June 2014

Relieving hunger today.
Preventing hunger tomorrow.

Food Banks  Banques alimentaires
Canada Canada

THE IDEA that food banks create dependence among the people they help is a common one. Many see food banks as providing – to use a well-worn phrase – a “hand out, not a hand up.” Examples of this idea are not hard to find:

“ Food banks can create a sense of dependence and keep recipients from figuring out their own options, building their own networks and developing their own skills...”¹

- London Free Press, April 17, 2011

“ Does our present food bank system that is supposed to be a mere safety net, actually create a dependence upon it by its patrons? ... I think they do...”²

-Ottawa West End Community Chaplaincy

“ The problem with food banks is that they are not proactive. Like many charities, they do not solve the problem of poverty. Instead, they exacerbate it by making people dependent.”³

-S. Richardson

“ Giving away this food also creates new forms of dependency (on the food banks), an anathema to those on the right when it takes the form of public dependency on social assistance.”⁴

-G. Riches

“ Loaves & Fishes sees its mission as providing a hand up in a crisis, not a hand out which fosters dependency upon our program as a regular food source. Therefore, clients are screened to determine need and may only visit a pantry once every thirty days to prevent dependency.”⁵

-Loaves and Fishes, Charlotte NC

“ Food banks are an emergency food service: to prevent dependency on food banks our clients are entitled to up to three consecutive food bank vouchers.”⁶

-Trussell Trust, United Kingdom

THE BELIEF at the root of these statements seems to be that the act of receiving food from a food bank somehow makes a person less likely or less able, on their own, to make an effort to earn the money required to purchase the food they need without help. Put simply, it says: *food banks make people lazy.*

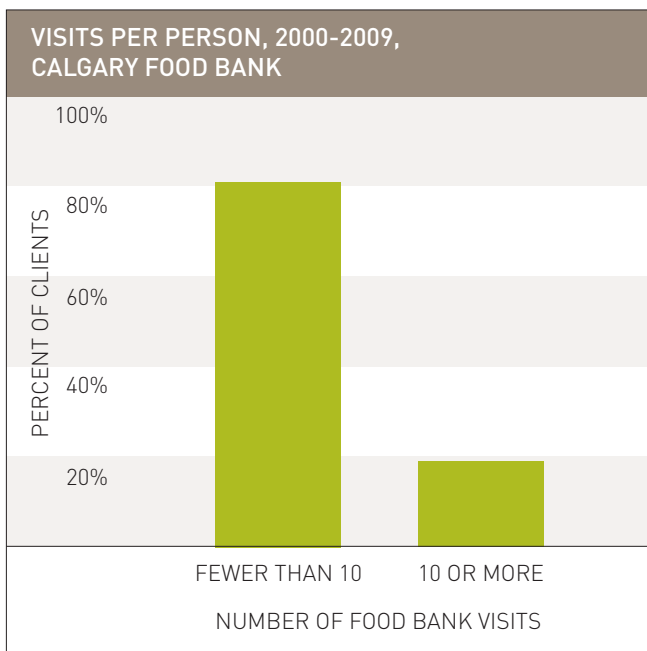
SO HOW DOES THIS BELIEF HOLD UP UNDER THE FACTS? LET'S LOOK AT A FEW INSTRUCTIVE PIECES OF DATA:

CALGARY FOOD BANK

The Calgary Food Bank, in operation since 1982, distributes 15 million lbs of food per year in Calgary and southern Alberta. In partnership with other city agencies, the food bank helps more than 100,000 people and families within the city (population 1.1 million) each year.⁷

Between 2000 and 2009, 165,000 people accessed the food bank's 11th Street location directly. On average, clients received food six times in total – that is, six times over the course of nine years. Further, one in three of those helped received food only one time in those nine years. While there are certainly those who have needed help for longer periods, short-term use is clearly the rule.⁸

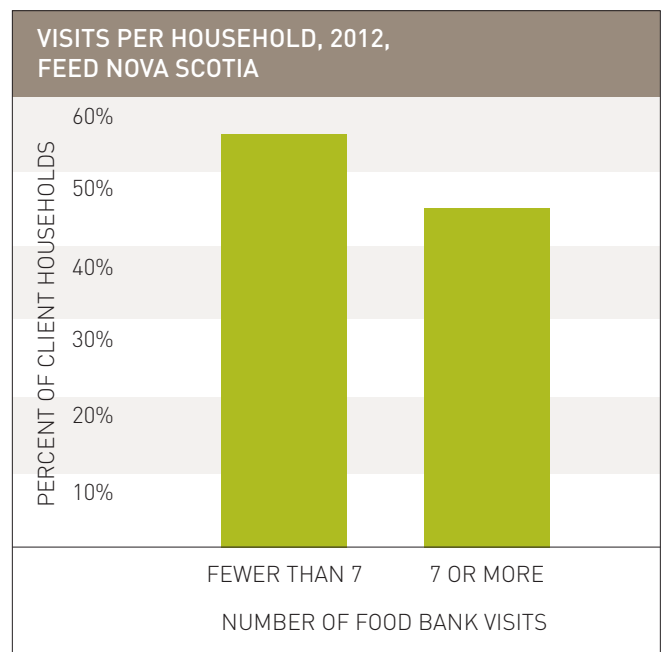
The distinction between those who have received food less than ten times, and those who received food ten or more times between 2000 and 2009, is instructive:



FEED NOVA SCOTIA

FEED NOVA SCOTIA, which was founded as the Metro Food Bank Society in Halifax in 1984, distributes nearly 5 million lbs of food to charitable organizations across Nova Scotia each year.

In 2012, the network provided food to 18,272 households (containing 37,449 individuals) across the province. Although the general rule is that a household can ask for food once per month, 55% requested help fewer than 7 times during the year, with 45% receiving food more often. On average, client households in Nova Scotia received food five times over the course of 2012.⁹

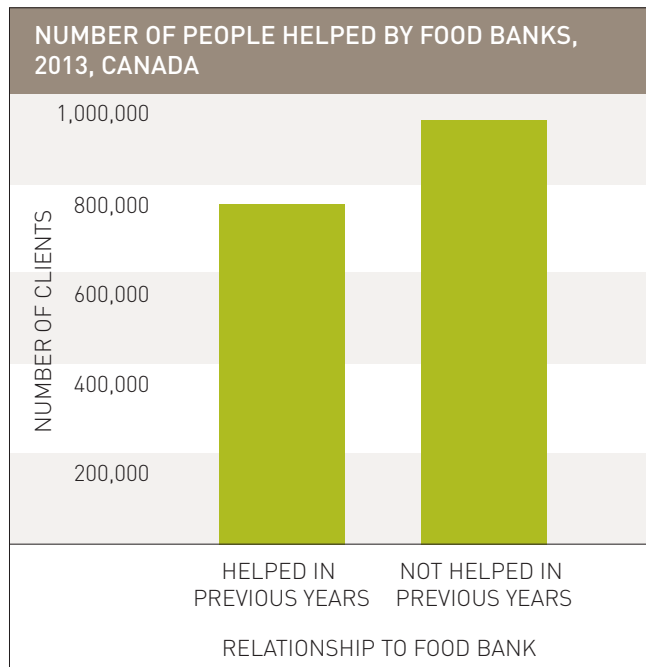


HUNGERCOUNT 2013

At the national level, information from the 2013 *HungerCount* study (with information from more than 1,800 food banks) suggests that there is a continual flow of people into and then away from food banks, with a minority accessing help for longer periods:

- Every month, 78,000 people receive food from a food bank for the first time, accounting for nearly 1 in 10 of those helped each month.¹⁰ Given that food bank use goes up and down with economic cycles rather than simply increasing year after year,¹¹ and that usage is relatively stable through any given year,¹² we know that these new clients in large part replace those who have stopped asking for help.
- Over the twelve months of 2013, first-time clients accounted for more than half of those assisted overall – 930,000 of the 1.7 million people helped by food banks had not stepped inside a food bank prior to 2013.¹³

The flip side of this fact is that an equivalent number stopped using a food bank in 2013.



GIVEN THE DATA PRESENTED HERE, we can confidently say that the food bank-dependence theory is false. Nevertheless, the theory deserves closer attention: just what is it really saying? It seems to suggest that all it takes is three or four days' worth of free food to make a person unable to care for themselves; that people lose the will to improve their lives because they got a bit of help; that people, on the whole, lack resilience.

This kind of thinking has real consequences. The corrosive idea that aid leads to dependence is central to the debate about how to best address food insecurity and poverty in Canada and elsewhere. On one side of this debate are those who criticize food banks and other charitable agencies because of a misguided belief that they make people soft, or that they reward laziness – the very same argument that

is often used to criticize social programs. On the other side of the debate are those who believe that the overwhelming majority of people want to better themselves and their lives, and will use the help that is available only for as long as they need it. The facts about food bank use are clearly on the second side of this debate.

ENDNOTES

- 1 D. Van Brenk (2011). *Heroes or villains?* London Free Press, Tuesday April 17. <http://www.lfpress.com/news/london/2011/09/29/18760506.html>.
- 2 Ottawa West End Community Chaplaincy (d/u). *Food bank study*. <http://www.owecc.org/publications.html>.
- 3 S. Richardson (2005). *Food insecurity in Canada : Food banks, injustice, and social inequality*. <http://www.tigweb.org/youth-media/panorama/article.html?ContentID=5791>.
- 4 G. Riches (1986). *Food banks and the welfare crisis. Ottawa: Canadian Council on Social Development*. See page 122.
- 5 Loaves and Fishes, Charlotte NC (d/u). *Q & A*. <http://www.loavesandfishes.org/questions-and-answers.php>.
- 6 Trussell Trust (2013). *The Trussell Trust's UK food bank network*. <http://www.trusselltrust.org/resources/documents/Press/TrussellTrustFoodbanksMay2013Small.pdf>.
- 7 Calgary Food Bank (2013). *2012 Annual Report*. <http://www.calgaryfoodbank.com/calgary-food-bank-2012-annual-report>.
- 8 Calgary Food Bank (d/u). *Feeding hungry Calgarians: A closer look at the people we serve (Executive Summary)*. Calgary Food Bank.
- 9 FEED NOVA SCOTIA (2013). *2013 Annual Report*. http://www.feednovascotia.ca/images/2013_Annual_Report.pdf.
- 10 Food Banks Canada (2013). *HungerCount 2013*. <http://foodbanksCanada.ca/getmedia/b2aecaa6-dfdd-4bb2-97a4-abd0a7b9c432/HungerCount2013.pdf.aspx?ext=.pdf>. Toronto: Food Banks Canada.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Based on information from Food Banks Canada internal research.
- 13 For those who are interested, here's the math behind these statements:

 $1.7 \text{ million individuals} = ((833,098 - 77,920) + (77,290 * 12))$, or: separate individuals helped in March, minus those helped for the first time, plus individuals helped for the first time multiplied by 12 months.

 $930,000 = 77,920 * 12$, or: individuals helped for the first time in March multiplied by 12 months.

The following chart illustrates how the number of new clients each month adds to the number who had not been helped in previous years; where the red indicates the number of first-time clients in a given month, and where the blue illustrates the sum of monthly first-time clients over the course of 12 months.

ABOUT FOOD BANKS CANADA

Food Banks Canada supports a unique network of over 3,000 food-related organizations in every province and territory, that assists more than 800,000 Canadians each month. Together our network shares over 200 million pounds of essential, safe, quality food annually, provides social programs that help to foster self-sufficiency, and advocates for policy change that will help create a Canada where no one goes hungry. Visit foodbankscanada.ca for more information.

Relieving hunger today. Preventing hunger tomorrow.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT:

Shawn Pegg,

Director of Policy and Research, Food Banks Canada
shawn@foodbankscanada.ca

Food Banks Canada

5025 Orbitor Drive, Building 2, Suite 400
Mississauga, Ontario L4W 4Y5
Tel. (905) 602-9234
Toll-free 1-877-535-0958