

THE GROWTH IN FOOD BANK USE IN CALGARY

Using a food bank is one way of conserving limited income to pay the cost of housing. Increased use is a sign of the rising cost of housing relative to income and a possible future rise in homelessness.

The Calgary Food Bank is the city's foremost hunger relief organization. It is a non-government organization that relies on the generosity of individuals, corporations, and foundations to support its efforts to ensure those experiencing food insecurity have access to emergency food hampers. The food bank collects data on daily food hamper usage, data that we use here.

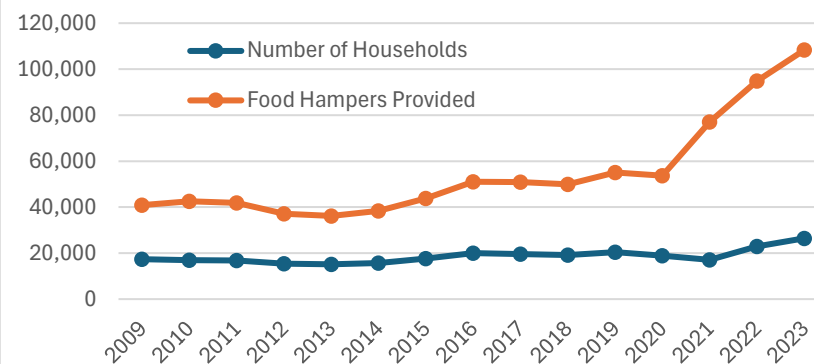
In the chart, the blue line reports, for each year from 2009 to 2023 inclusive, the average annual number of uniquely identified households making use of the food bank's services. Over this period, an average of 18,626 households used the food bank. In more recent years, however, the number has grown from 18,916 households in 2020 to 26,456 in 2023 and has required the food bank increase its capacity.

Between 2020 and 2023, the number of households making use of the Calgary Food Bank increased by 40 per cent. The number of food hampers distributed increased by more than 100 per cent.

The red line reports the average annual number of food hampers provided by the food bank. When a household visits the food bank, it receives a food hamper appropriate for the size and composition of that household. A hamper is intended to provide food for seven to 10 days. As seen in the chart, the total number of food hampers provided dramatically increased after 2020, from an average of 53,701 in 2020 to 108,331 in 2023.

Taken together, these two data series indicate that since 2020, not only have

Growing Reliance on the Calgary Food Bank



Sources: Data provided by Calgary Food Bank. Calculations by the authors.

more households found it necessary to use the food bank, but their reliance on the food bank also increased with the average household using the food bank finding it necessary to receive more hampers.

According to the census, in 2023 there were approximately 541,000 households in Calgary. In that year, about one household in 21 was making use of the food bank. This compares to approximately one in 26 households in 2020. A growing fraction of households in Calgary are having to use the food bank.

In the January 2024 issue of Social Policy Trends we discussed similar data from Toronto. Those data also show increases in reliance on food banks beginning in 2020, suggesting this issue is not unique to Calgary. These data are concerning not only in their own right, but also because of what they may portend. Recent research at the School of Public Policy shows that increased reliance on a food bank is frequently a precursor to homelessness.