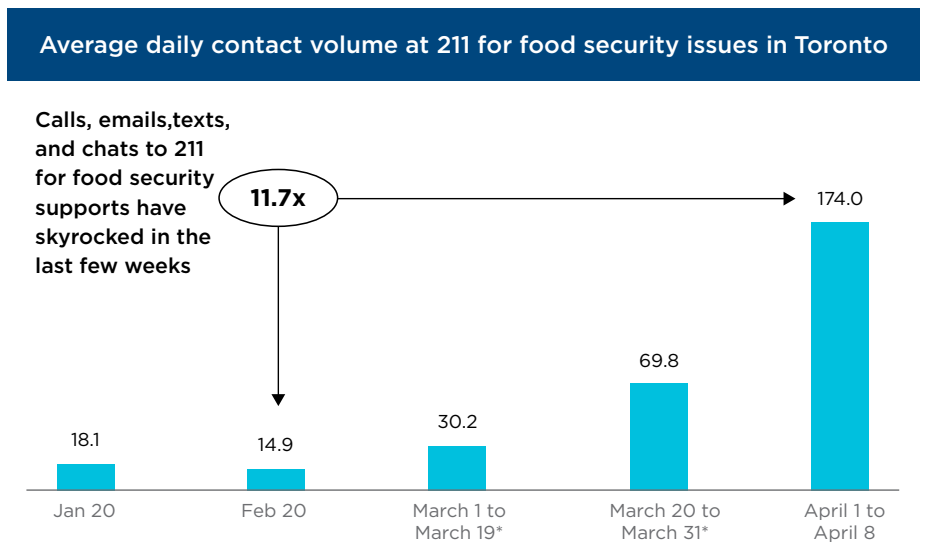


# Food Security during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Toronto’s food crisis is imminent

## Need for food surging as unemployment skyrockets

As the pandemic unfolds in Toronto and many residents have lost their jobs, the demand for food has increased enormously. Nationally, from March 15<sup>th</sup> to April 10, we have seen an additional 5.6 million people file for new emergency government benefits and employment insurance<sup>1</sup>, about five times higher than the 1.1 million unemployed Canadians at the end of February. With the Toronto CMA representing 19% of the unemployed in the country<sup>2</sup>, at least 1 million additional Toronto residents are likely relying on government support now as they lost their jobs, overshadowing the 210,000 unemployed Toronto residents at the end of February. And this only reflects a portion of the total impact - a Leger survey running from April 3 to April 5 found that while 21% of Canadians reported losing their jobs, an additional 14% reported declines in their incomes<sup>3</sup>. If this pattern holds in Toronto, we should expect that more than 600,000 other Toronto residents had significantly reduced income but may not be eligible for any government benefits as they stand.

With the stunning magnitude of the number of people that have lost income, it is not surprising that food banks are experiencing unprecedented increases in demand. It is hard to get real-time information on the growing food insecurity needs in the city. There are indicators that food insecurity is multiplying, such as Daily Bread Food Bank reporting a 53% increase to their central warehouse, which only reflects part of the increased demand in the city<sup>4</sup>. With about 40% of food banks in the city closed<sup>5</sup>, increases in any given location represent only a fraction of the heightened demand for food.



**Sources:** 211 Ontario, 211 Central Region. Calculations by Steven Ayer. See details in the endnotes. \*Data estimated by the author.

One way we can get rapidly updated information about the increasing demand for food services is via 211 Ontario’s contact data. Those who need support in Toronto can call, text, email, or chat with 211 to get directed to all sorts of appropriate social services, including those providing food security. From April 3 to April 8, average daily calls related to food security in Toronto were 13.8 times higher than they were in February<sup>6</sup>. Alarming, the trend appears to only be accelerating so far, though new federal emergency benefits began rolling out on April 6<sup>th</sup>.

Average daily contact volume to 211 in Toronto has surged by 112% in April versus February, with 452 calls per day in April versus 212 in February, driven by food security needs. Food security issues have grown from the 7<sup>th</sup> most common reason that people contacted 211 in February (7% of needs identified) to the number one issue so far in April (38% of needs identified).<sup>7</sup>

Additional data provided by 211 Central Region for this brief shows that from April 1 to April 8, 2020, there were 2726 referrals to food banks in Toronto, about six times higher than the 461 referrals in the same period in 2019. There were also 1644 calls related to grocery ordering and delivery, 38 times higher than the 12 contacts received over the same period last year. Food delivery went from a non-existent issue to one of the most pressing in the city.

As Carrie Moody, 211 Central Region's director, strategic solutions, reports, "Most of this increase is unique" individuals, reflecting unprecedented numbers of people seeking help obtaining food. In other words, it is not the same individuals calling back repeatedly. She reports that 211 Central Region is also getting more messages from Toronto residents that, after being referred to appropriate services, are unable to get through to the provider as agencies struggle to cope with increased demand. It is noteworthy that contact volume was increasing several times faster than website traffic, reflecting the profound challenges of trying to navigate food security services in such a rapidly evolving environment.

And even as the volume continues to increase, there are no signs of the demand slowing down. According to an Angus Reid poll of Canadians conducted from March 20 to 23<sup>8</sup>, 6% of those who had income drops reported that they had used a food bank. Twice as many (13%) indicated they worry that relying on a food bank is something they may have to do in the future. A later poll also by the Angus Reid Institute from April 1 to 3 found that of households that have experienced job or hours loss, about 1 in 3 reported they could not manage an unexpected \$100 expense<sup>9</sup>. While new government benefits are now being rolled out and will alleviate some of this stress, even small income drops will have pushed many to the edge of financial disaster.

### **Charities and community organizations stepping in to address hunger**

Even minimal increases in food insecurity among this large group of newly unemployed could easily more than double severe food insecurity in the city. In turn, this will cause long-term spikes in demand for food banks and other social services designed initially as stopgaps to prevent the most vulnerable from going hungry.

Unsurprisingly, charities that provide food to Canadians are already under unprecedented strain. The Stop Community Food Centre in Toronto's west end was serving 200 meals a day in their drop-in space. On April 9 they provided "a staggering 400 meals," says Leigh Godbold, their executive director. With social distancing, they have had to stop much of their regular programming that uses food to build community and shift all of their focus to emergency food assistance. Leigh highlighted, "If we see another 50% increase in demand, we would not be able to cope. We would not be able to handle line ups. We are working with skeletal staff... while our largest fundraising event in June is cancelled."

While vast numbers of food banks have had to close, new grassroots organizations have popped up to fill the gaps. The Scarborough Food Security Initiative was launched in south Scarborough after the local food bank closed, leaving 100s of regular clients uncertain of where to turn. According to Suman Roy, who is leading the initiative, the food bank that closed was serving 248 families in social housing. By April 4, their new organization was already serving more than 600 families comprising more than 2000 people. Suman noted that, “Community demand is high at the best of times. Right now, the demand is staggering.”

Second Harvest, Canada’s leading food rescue charity, diverts food from going to waste and uses it to feed the hungry. With unexpected closures in many foodservice businesses, they had more donations in the most recent month than at any point in their 35-year history, according to Kiera Toffelmire, vice president of programs and partnerships. However, they are expecting that spike in food donations to slow as the months go on, a real concern given the rising demand for food security supports. At the same time, many other food banks are reporting decreased donations from individuals. The diverted food is supporting more than 140 organizations around the city. But the massive volume of food comes with its complexities and costs, with increased demands on staff, transportation, processing, and storage.

Second Harvest recently surveyed more than 100 recipient agencies to better understand their needs. More than 70% of those organizations need donations of both fresh and shelf-stable food, as well as cash and sanitation supplies like gloves, masks, and hand-sanitizers in order to remain operational. A follow-up survey of their agencies currently in the field found that 30% of respondents to date reported that they were unable to accommodate the increase in clients with many of the remaining worrying that they will soon hit their maximum capacity.

Seniors’ food insecurity has also fundamentally changed with recent recommendations for seniors 70 and older to remain indoors. To help cope, UHN OpenLab launched the Friendly Neighbourhood Hotline, a service involving over 1000 volunteers throughout Toronto who help seniors in low-income housing receive food and medicines. The Hotline went live on March 23. In their first week of operation, they averaged 170 calls per day. Since then, it has risen to an average of 230 calls per day, and they expect volumes to continue to climb as the isolation drags on, according to Tai Huynh, the creative director of UHN OpenLab. “One of our highest costs is interpretation,” says Hunh. “Call centre volunteers can patch in a third-party interpreter so that we are able to communicate with seniors in over 180 different languages.” Despite the cost, Huynh believes “It’s the only way to provide an equitable service.”

### **New benefits programs will reduce food insecurity but not eliminate it**

Prolonged food insecurity has dire consequences. Studies have found that the rates of death among those who are severely food insecure can be three times higher than those who have adequate food<sup>10</sup>. And as COVID-19 threatens the health of Canadians, the risk for those who are chronically hungry is even higher. Severe food insecurity increases the rate of diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, ulcers, and numerous other health conditions<sup>11</sup> – and many of these are also the primary risk factors for hospitalization and death due to COVID-19.<sup>12</sup>

The federal government,<sup>13</sup> provincial government,<sup>14</sup> and municipal government<sup>15</sup> are all contributing to food security initiatives, but organizations are reporting that the need remains high. The City has rolled out several initiatives, including diverting municipal staff to help support food security organizations, and it is even using several public libraries to provide food in locations where food banks have closed.

Even under the best of times, getting enough food to people was a challenge. Only one in five people who were severely food insecure reported using a food bank. And throughout 2017, Daily Bread Food Bank reported that 77% of food banks in Toronto had to give people less food than usual at some point as food supplies dwindled.<sup>16</sup>

The Stop Community Food Centre has always taken a systemic approach to tackling food insecurity. “Food banks have never been an ideal solution to food security,” says Godbold. “Providing income directly to people is a much better long-term solution.” The government’s wage subsidy program for employers and Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) for individuals are their best efforts to prevent people from needing food assistance. The new CERB will pay up to \$500 per week for those who have lost their jobs or are unable to work due to Coronavirus.<sup>17</sup> For many, this will prevent them from experiencing the most severe hunger. But in Toronto, where the average new 1-bedroom apartment was listed for \$1729 per month in 2019,<sup>18</sup> and the typical person was paying \$1354 per month, this leaves very little room for food, transportation, medicine, and all other expenses, especially for households relying on one income.

## Need for philanthropy

Right now, food banks and food delivery organizations are on the frontlines of keeping hunger back. They require support to buy food, pay staff, and transport and store food to those who need it most. Many are looking for volunteers, and all are looking for donations. Organizations are innovating under the most challenging circumstances to ensure social distancing, adding food hampers and delivery to support those stuck at home, and retooling operations to offer more prepared food. Philanthropy can step in to ensure these organizations have sufficient resources to provide emergency food assistance. But just as critical is supporting organizations that help vulnerable people access benefits. Prosper Canada estimates that more than \$1 billion per year in benefits go unclaimed in average years.<sup>19</sup> If even a small portion of these new benefits go unclaimed, many will be living in poverty who would not otherwise need to. Numerous neighbourhood organizations and food banks also play a crucial role in helping individuals apply for benefits and they need support too. Challenges are mounting, and only the combined efforts of government, businesses, charities, and individuals can help avert the biggest food crisis in the city’s history.

*Brief prepared by Steven Ayer of Common Good Strategies on behalf of Toronto Foundation.*

- <sup>1</sup> Beatrice Britneff, 'Coronavirus: All CERB Claims to Be Approved, Feds Will Check Eligibility Later - National | Globalnews.ca', *Global News*, 10 April 2020, <https://globalnews.ca/news/6804623/coronavirus-all-cerb-applications-approved/>.
- <sup>2</sup> Statistics Canada, 'Table 14-10-0295-01 Labour Force Characteristics by Montréal, Toronto and Vancouver Census Metropolitan Areas, Seasonally Adjusted and Unadjusted, Last 5 Months', accessed 9 April 2020, <https://doi.org/10.25318/1410029501-eng>.
- <sup>3</sup> Leger, 'COVID-19 TRACKING SURVEY RESULTS ', 6 April 2020, <https://leger360.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/COVID-19-Tracking-Study-April-7-2020.pdf>.
- <sup>4</sup> Chris Fox, 'Toronto Food Banks Report "worrisome" Increase in Use amid COVID-19 Pandemic | CTV News', *CTV News*, 8 April 2020, <https://toronto.ctvnews.ca/toronto-food-banks-report-worrisome-increase-in-use-amid-covid-19-pandemic-1.4887864>.
- <sup>5</sup> Alexandra Harvey, 'Canadian Food Banks Struggle to Stay Open, Just as Demand for Their Services Skyrockets - The Globe and Mail', *Globe and Mail*, 11 April 2020, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/toronto/article-canadian-food-banks-struggle-to-stay-open-just-as-demand-for-their/>.
- <sup>6</sup> All data in the chart was derived from the COVID Dashboard provided by 211 Central and another 211 Ontario dashboard that is periodically refreshed. As they report data monthly, data was converted to an average daily call volume. Data provided by 211 Ontario and 211 Central Region covered slightly different dates so the author estimated daily average call volume for some periods in March based on combining the two data sources. Ontario 211 data is available from <https://211ontario.ca/about-211-ontario/our-services-annual-report/2018-2019/211-data/>. While 211 Central data is available from <https://www.211toronto.ca/COVID19Snapshots>. For any questions, please contact Steven Ayer at [steve@goodstrategy.ca](mailto:steve@goodstrategy.ca)
- <sup>7</sup> '211 Data', accessed 9 April 2020, <https://211ontario.ca/about-211-ontario/our-services-annual-report/2018-2019/211-data/>.
- <sup>8</sup> 'COVID-19: Those Least Equipped to Endure Economic Downturn Bearing the Brunt of Layoffs - Angus Reid Institute', accessed 9 April 2020, <http://angusreid.org/covid-19-economic-impact-canada/>.
- <sup>9</sup> 'COVID-19: Canadians near-Unanimous in Expectations of Economic Woe as Pandemic Enters Second Month - Angus Reid Institute', accessed 9 April 2020, <http://angusreid.org/covid-19-canadians-expect-worse/>.
- <sup>10</sup> Craig Gundersen et al., 'Food Insecurity Status and Mortality among Adults in Ontario, Canada', 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0202642>.
- <sup>11</sup> 'The Impact of Food Insecurity on Health', accessed 9 April 2020, <https://proof.utoronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/health-impact-factsheet.pdf>.
- <sup>12</sup> Wei-jie Guan et al., 'Comorbidity and Its Impact on 1590 Patients with Covid-19 in China: A Nationwide Analysis', *European Respiratory Journal*, 26 March 2020, 2000547, <https://doi.org/10.1183/13993003.00547-2020>.
- <sup>13</sup> Rachel Aiello, 'Military Heading to Quebec, \$100M Coming for Food Banks: PM | CTV News', *CTV News*, 3 April 2020, <https://www.ctvnews.ca/health/coronavirus/military-heading-to-quebec-100m-coming-for-food-banks-pm-1.4881058>.
- <sup>14</sup> 'Newsroom : Ontario Protecting the Most Vulnerable During COVID-19 Crisis', accessed 9 April 2020, <https://news.ontario.ca/opo/en/2020/03/ontario-protecting-the-most-vulnerable-during-covid-19-crisis.html>.
- <sup>15</sup> 'News Releases & Media Advisories – City of Toronto', accessed 9 April 2020, <https://www.toronto.ca/home/media-room/news-releases-media-advisories/?nrkey=C2D444D3B3701A3C85258542006AAB4A>.
- <sup>16</sup> Daily Bread Food Bank, '2017 Profile of Hunger in Toronto', 2018, <https://www.dailybread.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Whos-Hungry-2017-Report.pdf>.
- <sup>17</sup> 'Canada Emergency Response Benefit - Canada.ca', accessed 9 April 2020, <https://www.canada.ca/en/services/benefits/ei/cerb-application.html>.
- <sup>18</sup> Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 'Average Apartment Rents (Vacant and Occupied Units)', 2019, <https://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/en/data-and-research/data-tables/average-apartment-rents-vacant-occupied#shareDeveloping>.
- <sup>19</sup> Prosper Canada, 'If They Had a Billion Dollars...', 2017, <http://prospercanada.org/News-Media/News/If-they-had-a-billion-dollars.aspx>.