Beyond the Bank

Understanding the depth of food assistance work in Eastern Nova Scotia

December 2025

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Acknowledgements

The development of this research has been a collaborative effort by the **Beyond the Bank Working Group.** Members of this group included:

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Members of the working group above played a crucial role in guiding and supporting the initiative throughout its development. Members met regularly to review progress, offer constructive feedback, and help shape the direction of the research. They actively participated in data collection efforts, helping to generate interest in surveys and focus groups. Significantly, they also facilitated connections with local community organizations, strengthening the project's relevance and impact at the grassroots level.

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organizing and facilitation of the focus groups, and sharing insights about community-based research and the local context of food assistance efforts in Eastern Nova Scotia.

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This research was conducted in Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq. We acknowledge that this territory is covered by the Peace and Friendship Treaties, which the Mi'kmaq and Wolastoqiyik (Maliseet) People first signed with the British Crown in 1725, and which did not involve the surrender of land or resources.

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Executive Summary

This project examined the role and impact of food assistance programs in Eastern Nova Scotia, including their characteristics, networks, and challenges. Food assistance was defined as programs that provide food at no or reduced cost, such as food banks, meal programs, community kitchens, and other activities that enhance access to healthy, affordable food, including nutrition education and the development of community gardens. Data collection combined a community survey with focus groups and interviews to capture both quantitative and qualitative insights.

Findings highlight the strengths of community-based food programming in connecting the community or feeding the community. These grassroots initiatives recognize the interconnectedness of food with broader aspects of life and provide more dignified alternatives to traditional charitable models for food assistance. However, they face persistent challenges such as unstable funding, volunteer burnout, and fragmented service delivery, which limit their ability to meet rising demand. While they provide immediate relief, they cannot alone address systemic drivers such as poverty, wage inequality, and structural barriers. These programs demonstrate strengths that reflect the value added of community food assistance work and suggest directions for enhanced food security efforts in Eastern Nova Scotia.

Recommendations emphasize the need for systemic change, including higher wages, stronger income supports, and consistent funding for community-based food assistance models that prioritize dignity, choice, and long-term, integrated support. Sustainable strategies should focus on addressing systemic barriers, ensuring adequate resources for local programs, improving accessibility, and adopting holistic approaches that integrate food security into broader poverty reduction efforts. These steps would strengthen resilience, improve food access, and better support vulnerable populations across Eastern Nova Scotia.

Introduction

This project originated with New Dawn Enterprises' development of an Island Community Data Portal, designed to support conversation and action for community change. Its initial focus was on poverty and related issues, including income, employment, education, housing, and food security. A small research initiative was launched to gather baseline data on food insecurity across Cape Breton Island. However, growing concern about food access, combined with ongoing conversations with community partners, led to an expanded and more comprehensive research focus.

The Eastern Zone Healthy Communities team within Nova Scotia Public Health joined with New Dawn to co-lead this research. Following the pandemic, it reengaged with community partners to determine post-pandemic needs. Food insecurity emerged as one of the top issues highlighted by community groups. Together, New Dawn and Public Health convened a set of government and community partners to examine the state of food security in Eastern Nova Scotia and better understand the changing landscape of community food assistance programs.

For the purposes of this research project, **food assistance** is defined as any program or service that provides food at no cost or subsidized cost to participants. Examples of food assistance may include food banks, meal programs, community pantries, community kitchens, and community gardens.

Since 2020, community-based food assistance groups have found themselves increasingly using their limited resources to support clients and communities with food, resulting in mandate creep, burnout, and strained capacity. For example, local libraries began offering food programs and pantries, while organizations that provided transitional housing received calls from clients seeking food assistance. At the same time, such groups were evolving a rich array of responses to food security in their communities.

Despite the growing importance of such programs, research examining the breadth and scope of this work remains scarce. Accordingly, *Beyond the Bank* set out to better understand the characteristics, networks, trends, and challenges of food assistance programming in Eastern Nova Scotia.

Specific goals of the project were to:

1. Develop a deeper understanding of how food assistance programs support people in feeding themselves and their families.
2. Foster relationships among groups engaged in community food assistance.

3. Identify the challenges and opportunities food assistance programs face.
4. Look for potential policy levers that can change the state of food insecurity in Eastern Nova Scotia.

Food assistance programs face several gaps and limitations that hinder their effectiveness in addressing food insecurity. One significant gap is inconsistent and inadequate funding, which limits organizations' ability to plan long-term and expand services to meet growing demand. Additionally, many programs lack sufficient staffing to manage programs effectively and are heavily reliant on a limited base of volunteers, risking burnout for those involved. Furthermore, there is often a lack of coordination among different organizations, resulting in fragmented services that can leave some individuals without the support they need. Lastly, while these programs provide immediate relief, they may not adequately address the underlying issues of poverty and systemic barriers that contribute to food insecurity.

Food assistance programming remains highly relevant even when food security is not the core mandate of an organization for several reasons. Many organizations recognize that food insecurity is a pressing issue that directly impacts the populations they serve, making it essential to address this need alongside their primary objectives. Further, integrating food assistance into broader social services can create a holistic approach to support, helping to alleviate the interconnected challenges of poverty, health, and nutrition.

Methodology

Community-Based and Collaborative Research

This project was grounded in collaborative, community-based research, emphasizing a partnership between researchers and community members. Employing the principles of community-based research, the project brought together a local network of partners to examine local food assistance programs.

The Beyond the Bank Working Group, led by representatives from New Dawn Enterprises and Nova Scotia Health, created a team from a variety of sectors, including municipalities, food assistance programs, and Community Health Boards. While certainly not exhaustive, this team consisted of members across most counties in the Nova Scotia Health Eastern Zone. Each member of the working group offered contacts based on their knowledge of food assistance programming in their communities. The working group met regularly to receive updates, provide feedback, and review project progress. Researchers at Cape Breton University and the University of British Columbia provided collaborative research support and guidance.

This collaborative research approach aimed to empower communities and build capacity by centering the voices and experiences of those doing grassroots food assistance work. The approach prioritized a deep understanding of the community's socio-cultural, economic, and environmental contexts, ensuring that the research was both relevant and respectful. Action-oriented in nature, the project sought practical outcomes and policy changes that would directly benefit the community. Ethical principles and a commitment to social justice guided the work, with a focus on amplifying the perspectives of marginalized groups.

Ethics and Data Management

All qualitative data, including transcripts from completed focus groups and interviews, have been securely stored in the Food Odyssey/UBC SharePoint folders provided by Dr. Eric Li. These folders serve as the central repository for the project's research materials.

Ethics approval for the survey portion of this project was sought and received from Cape Breton University's Research Ethics Board. Ethics approval for the focus group portion of this project was sought and received from the University of British Columbia's Research Ethics Board. To ensure the anonymity of participating organizations, only categories with more than 5 responding organizations have been included in this report.

Survey

To better understand current trends in Food Assistance Program provision across Eastern Nova Scotia, the Beyond the Bank research team conducted a survey sent to an email list of 110 food assistance providers in the region. The email detailed the project's goals and hopes for the data. Two reminder emails followed the initial invitation.

The survey included closed-ended questions designed to explore key aspects of food assistance work. These questions focused on funding sources, organizational mandates, and the types of community partnerships formed to address food needs. A copy of the survey is included in Appendix B. The primary goal of the survey was to provide a clearer picture of food assistance programming in Eastern Nova Scotia. Participants expressed enthusiasm about being involved and provided positive feedback, noting that they appreciated the opportunity to contribute and be included in the initiative.

Concluded in May 2024, the survey was completed by 53 unique organizations. Five organizations submitted two responses each because their organizations offer multiple food assistance programs. This resulted in 58 total survey responses.[1] The survey results were synthesized into a visual infographic that highlighted key findings and patterns in food assistance across Eastern Nova Scotia. This infographic was then shared with all organizations that received the survey, allowing them to see how their input contributed to a broader understanding of regional food security efforts (see Infographic in Appendix A).

Focus Groups

The survey results provided valuable insights into the current landscape of food security. The data revealed that many organizations are engaged in food provision, even when it is not their primary mandate. This information, along with the infographic generated from the survey findings, directly informed the development of the focus group questions and guided the direction of the discussions, ensuring they were grounded in the realities and needs expressed by the participating organizations.

A total of 5 focus groups and 3 individual interviews were conducted, involving 23 participants. Group sizes ranged from one to five participants, with some sessions effectively functioning as interviews due to low attendance. This level of participation falls within the target range of 20 to 30 individuals, providing a solid foundation for qualitative analysis.

[1] Note: the survey achieved a 58% response rate. All data were aggregated and put into a statistical software package. In total, 53 different organizations responded out of those invited, creating a response rate of 48%.[1]

Focus groups were facilitated by members of the working group in counties across Eastern Nova Scotia. These sessions used the infographic—created from the survey results—as a starting point for discussion, inviting participants to reflect on how their organizations identified with the data presented. Facilitators encouraged representatives to share additional insights, including the challenges they face, the strengths of their programs, and the changes they would like to see to better support food security efforts in their communities.

Qualitative data collected through focus groups and interviews were systematically coded and analyzed using qualitative data analysis software. This facilitated the organization, categorization, and interpretation of emerging themes and patterns in the data, supporting a rigorous, transparent approach to qualitative analysis. The top three themes that emerged through the focus group and interview data were funding, volunteers, and community partnerships.

Context on Food Insecurity in Eastern Nova Scotia[2]

Food insecurity is defined as the inadequate access to sufficient, culturally appropriate, and nutritious food necessary for maintaining a healthy life. [3] Health Canada defines food security as the condition in which all people, at all times, have reliable access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food. It is measured using the Household Food Security Survey Module (HFSSM).[4] Food Insecurity can arise from a range of structural, environmental, economic, and geographical factors, [5] and may affect individuals, communities, or society overall. [6] The research team acknowledges that there are vast and varying definitions of food security. Research consistently highlights correlations between food insecurity and various community-level factors such as housing affordability, unemployment rates, and public transportation infrastructure, as well as individual-level determinants such as educational attainment, vehicle ownership, and household income.[7] Notably, urban populations tend to experience higher rates of food insecurity compared to rural residents, often due to disparities in social support networks and levels of social capital. [8]

In Nova Scotia, food insecurity has become increasingly prevalent, with the province reporting some of the highest rates of poverty in Canada. These challenges disproportionately affect racialized communities, exacerbating existing social inequities. Currently, approximately 41,500 children in Nova Scotia live in low-income households, and many adults continue to earn below the poverty threshold.[9] In 2022, the Market Basket Measure—a benchmark for poverty—set the annual income thresholds for a family of four at $52,439 in Halifax and $48,287 in Cape Breton, while the thresholds for individuals were $26,291 and $24,143, respectively. Despite incremental increases in income levels, a significant number of families remain unable to meet

[2] Parts of this section and statistical analysis throughout the report were originally drafted by Kristen Desjarlais-deKlerk

[3] Leung, C. W., Kullgren, J. T., Malani, P. N., Singer, D. C., Kirch, M., Solway, E., & Wolfson, J. A. (2020). Food insecurity is associated with multiple chronic conditions and physical health status among older US adults. *Preventive medicine reports*, *20*, 101211; Schroeder, K., & Smaldone, A. (2015, October). Food insecurity: a concept analysis. In *Nursing forum* (Vol. 50, No. 4, pp. 274-284).

[4] Health Canada.(2020). Household food insecurity in Canada: Overview. Retrieved from http://canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/food-nutrition/food-nutrition-surveillance/health-nutrition-surveys/canadian-community-health-survey-cchs/household-food-insecurity-canada-overview.html

[5] Bartfeld, J., & Wang, L. (2006). Local-level predictors of household food insecurity. *Institute for Research on Poverty Discussion Paper*, (1317-06).

[6] Bartfeld, J., & Wang, L. (2006). Local-level predictors of household food insecurity. *Institute for Research on Poverty Discussion Paper*, (1317-06); Schroeder, K., & Smaldone, A. (2015, October). Food insecurity: a concept analysis. In *Nursing forum* (Vol. 50, No. 4, pp. 274-284).

[7] Bartfeld, J., & Wang, L. (2006). Local-level predictors of household food insecurity. *Institute for Research on Poverty Discussion Paper*, (1317-06).

[8] Bartfeld, J., & Wang, L. (2006). Local-level predictors of household food insecurity. *Institute for Research on Poverty Discussion Paper*, (1317-06).

[9] Frank, L., Saulnier, C., & Harrington, R. (2024). 2024 Report Card on Child and Family Poverty in Nova Scotia. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

these basic standards, underscoring the urgent need for targeted interventions and policy reforms.[10]

Figure 1: Map of Nova Scotia, darker area representing Eastern Nova Scotia

Food insecurity is an important predictor of adverse physical, emotional and mental health for both children and adults.[11] It reduces an individual's access to fruits and vegetables, which, in turn, reduces access to important nutrients that sustain health and well-being[12] and aid early childhood development.[13] The consequences of food insecurity extend beyond an individual's physical health because of the social nature of food.[14] Food insecurity creates feelings of shame and guilt, thereby increasing household conflict and feelings of social exclusion.[15] Furthermore, the experience of food insecurity produces stress.[16] Leung et al. found that it creates psychological distress in children, particularly as they develop coping skills to mitigate not having enough food and the family conflict related to not having enough. Food insecurity has grown rapidly across Canada over the last five years, as evidenced by escalating food bank

[10] Frank, L., Saulnier, C., & Harrington, R. (2024). 2024 Report Card on Child and Family Poverty in Nova Scotia. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

[11] Hanson, K. L., & Connor, L. M. (2014). Food insecurity and dietary quality in US adults and children: a systematic review. *The American journal of clinical nutrition*, *100*(2), 684-692.

[12] Hanson, K. L., & Connor, L. M. (2014). Food insecurity and dietary quality in US adults and children: a systematic review. *The American journal of clinical nutrition*, *100*(2), 684-692; Johnson, A. D., & Markowitz, A. J. (2018). Associations between household food insecurity in early childhood and children's kindergarten skills. *Child Development*, *89*(2), e1-e17.

[13] Drennen, C. R., Coleman, S. M., Ettinger de Cuba, S., Frank, D. A., Chilton, M., Cook, J. T., ... & Black, M. M. (2019). Food insecurity, health, and development in children under age four years. *Pediatrics*, *144*(4), e20190824.

[14] Hadley, C., & Crooks, D. L. (2012). Coping and the biosocial consequences of food insecurity in the 21st century. *American journal of physical anthropology*, *149*(S55), 72-94.

[15] Nanama, S., & Frongillo, E. A. (2012). Women's rank modifies the relationship between household and women's food insecurity in complex households in northern Burkina Faso. *Food Policy*, *37*(3), 217-225.

[16] Leung, C. W., Kullgren, J. T., Malani, P. N., Singer, D. C., Kirch, M., Solway, E., & Wolfson, J. A. (2020). Food insecurity is associated with multiple chronic conditions and physical health status among older US adults. *Preventive medicine reports*, *20*, 101211; Nanama, S., & Frongillo, E. A. (2012). Women's rank modifies the relationship between household and women's food insecurity in complex households in northern Burkina Faso. *Food Policy*, *37*(3), 217-225.

use.[17] In 2022, Canadians accessed food banks 1.5 million times, with an expected 60% increase in 2023.[18]

In Canada, one in four children under the age of 18 living in the ten provinces reside in a food-insecure household. The Atlantic provinces, in particular, are experiencing disproportionately high and steadily increasing rates of food insecurity. Recent data from 2022 indicates that the Atlantic region recorded the highest percentage of individuals living in food-insecure households, with Nova Scotia leading at 28.9%. Within the province, approximately 71,000 children are affected, highlighting the urgent need for targeted policy responses and community-based interventions to address this growing crisis. [19]

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly exacerbated food insecurity across Nova Scotia, primarily through widespread job losses.[20] and the disruption of essential services such as school-based food programs. The economic fallout from the pandemic has had lasting effects, contributing to elevated poverty rates and deepening food insecurity throughout the province. In 2022, 57.1% of lone-parent households in Nova Scotia were food insecure, with nearly half (47.2%) experiencing moderate to severe levels of insecurity. [21] In response to these challenges, many social service organizations and non-profits expanded their mandates to include food assistance programming, aiming to address the growing needs of their communities during the crisis.

Despite the transition of COVID-19 into an endemic phase and a return to relative societal normalcy, the demand for food assistance programs continues to rise. In Eastern Nova Scotia, the full scope of the food assistance network remains unclear, as existing data primarily captures formalized systems of provision, leaving informal community-based efforts underrepresented. Moreover, there is limited understanding of the funding structures and sustainability of these programs—an issue of growing concern given their rapid expansion during the pandemic and the anticipated reduction in emergency funding. This uncertainty underscores the need for comprehensive mapping and evaluation of food assistance initiatives to ensure long-term support for vulnerable populations.

[17] Ripley, A. (2023). Household food insecurity: it's not just about food. *Canadian Public Health Association. January*, *13*.

[18] Pasieka,C. (2023, January 11) 60% more Canadians per month expected to use food banks, other programs in 2023, survey finds. *CBC News.* Retrieved from https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/60-rise-use-of-food-banks-programs-canada-2023-1.6711094#:~:text=The%20organization's%20report%20includes%20the%20results%20of,climb%20to%208%2C208%2C679%2C%20a%20roughly%2060%25%20increase

[19] Statistics Canada. Table 13-10-0834-01 Food insecurity by economic family type DOI: https://doi.org/10.25318/1310083401-eng

[20] Niles, M. T., Bertmann, F., Belarmino, E. H., Wentworth, T., Biehl, E., & Neff, R. (2020). The early food insecurity impacts of COVID-19. *Nutrients*, *12*(7), 2096.

[21] Statistics Canada. Table 13-10-0834-01 Food insecurity by economic family type DOI: https://doi.org/10.25318/1310083401-eng

The 2024 Report Card from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives highlights alarming child poverty rates in Nova Scotia. Based on 2022 data from Statistics Canada's Income Statistics Division, T1 Family File, the counties (or census divisions) across Eastern Nova Scotia are showing high child poverty rates with Cape Breton County at 32.4%, Inverness at 24.4%, Richmond at 26.4%, Victoria at 26.5%, Guysborough at 28.3, and Antigonish at 18.3%. All of these rates have increased from 2021 data.

Table 1: Eastern Nova Scotia Child Poverty Rates

Census division	Child poverty rate	Number of low-income children	Change from 2021
Cape Breton	32.4%	5510	17.4%
Victoria	26.5%	360	9.1%
Richmond	26.5%	390	10.0%
Inverness	24.4%	730	18.4%
Guysborough	28.3%	300	21.5%
Antigonish	19.6%	750	7.1%

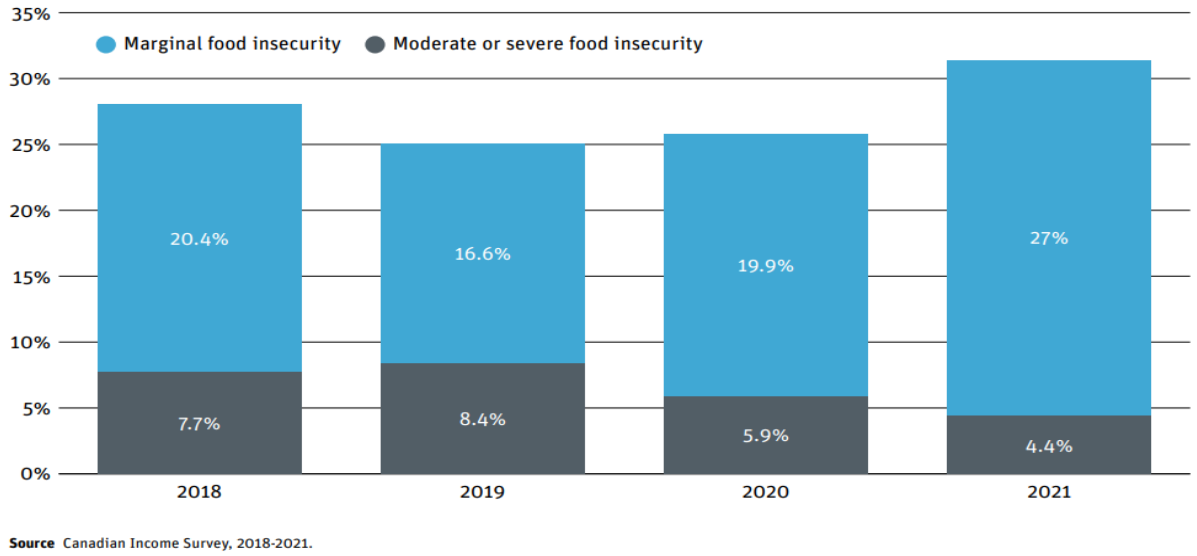
Source: 2024 Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives Report Card on Child and Family Poverty in NS; from Statistics Canada, Income Statistics Division, T1 Family File, 2022

Complementing this, 2022 data on household food insecurity reveal that 21.3% of households in the province were food insecure, including 5.9% experiencing severe food insecurity.[22] The graph below shows the prevalence of marginal, moderate, and severe food security from the 2023 Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives Report Card on Child and Family Poverty in Nova Scotia. [23]

[22] Li T, Fafard St-Germain AA, Tarasuk V. (2023) Household food insecurity in Canada, 2022. Toronto: Research to identify policy options to reduce food insecurity (PROOF). Retrieved from https://proof.utoronto.ca/

[23] Frank, L., Saulnier, C., & Harrington, R. (2024). 2024 Report Card on Child and Family Poverty in Nova Scotia. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

Table 2: Prevalence of persons under 18 living in food insecure households in Nova Scotia 2018-2021



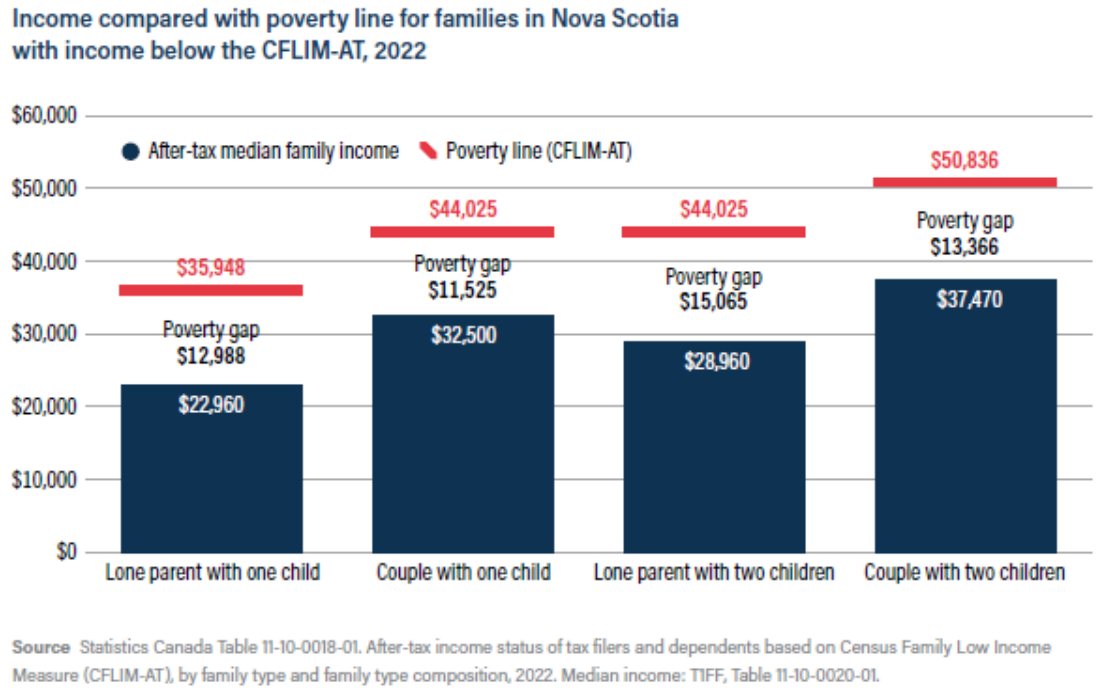
Source: 2023 Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives Report Card on Child and Family Poverty in NS

Child poverty rates are particularly high in rural areas of Cape Breton. For instance, Richmond County experienced a 22% increase in child poverty compared to 2020 levels.[24] Rural communities within Cape Breton County, such as Louisbourg, with a 30% child poverty rate in 2023 and 2024, continue to face significant socioeconomic challenges that compound food insecurity.[25] For example, in the graph below, from the 2024 Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives Report Card on Child and Family Poverty in NS, the disparity between income and the poverty line is clearly shown from 2022 Census Family Low Income Measure (CFLIM-AT) data.

[24] Frank, L., & Saulnier, C. (2023). 2023 Report Card on Child and Family Poverty in Nova Scotia. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

[25] Frank, L., & Saulnier, C. (2023). Frank, L., Saulnier, C., & Harrington, R. (2024).

Table 3: Poverty gap by family type and size



Source Statistics Canada Table 11-10-0018-01. After-tax income status of tax filers and dependents based on Census Family Low Income Measure (CFLIM-AT), by family type and family type composition, 2022. Median income: T1FF, Table 11-10-0020-01.

Source: 2024 Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives Report Card on Child and Family Poverty in NS

Food insecurity remains a pressing challenge in Eastern Nova Scotia, where child poverty rates have consistently outpaced national trends. Many families struggle to meet basic needs because provincial income supports and benefit thresholds are set so low that thousands of children are excluded from assistance. The gap between the highest-earning households and those at the bottom is stark, with incomes in the top decile more than 15 times those in the lowest. In rural and under-resourced communities, this inequality translates into limited access to affordable, nutritious food. Food assistance programs in Eastern Nova Scotia are responding to these high levels of need to ensure vulnerable families are not left behind.

Organizations Offering Food Assistance

This project aimed to deepen understanding of the food assistance landscape in Eastern Nova Scotia by examining the scope, capacity, and sustainability of programs that support vulnerable populations across the counties of Antigonish, Guysborough, Richmond, Inverness, Victoria, and Cape Breton. Food assistance initiatives—such as grocery box distribution, meal services, nutrition education, and community gardens—play a vital role in improving access to nutritious food, particularly for low-income families and children. These programs not only address immediate food needs but also foster long-term health and food literacy through partnerships

with local farms and community-based efforts. Yet, despite their importance, there remains limited insight into how these programs are structured, funded, and sustained, especially in rural and under-resourced areas.

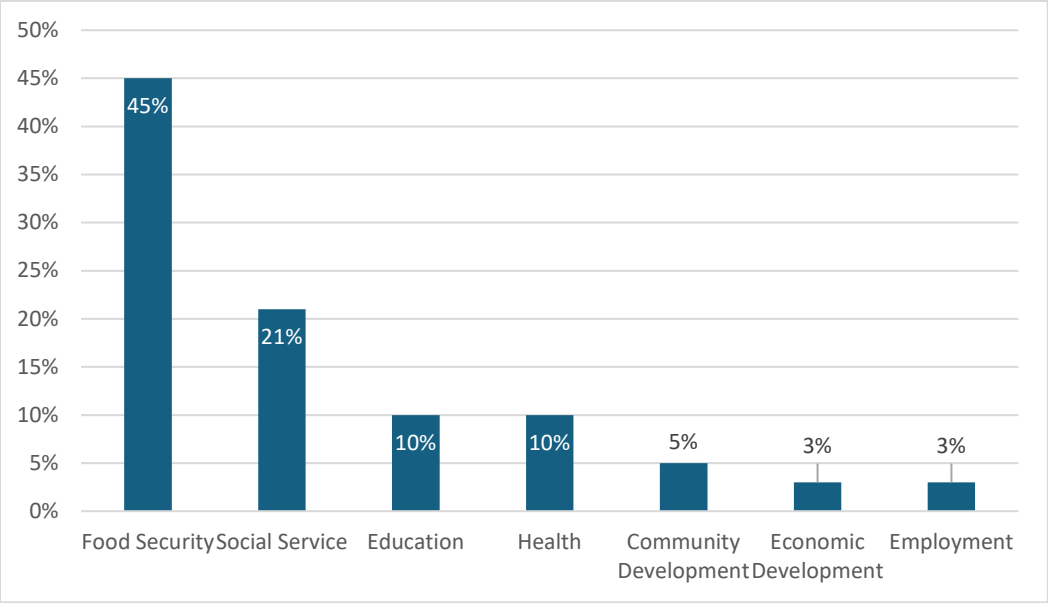
Through focus group discussions and analysis of regional data, our project has identified significant gaps between available resources and organizations' capacity to address food insecurity effectively. Participants emphasized the need for a fuller appreciation of both the opportunities and the challenges they face as food assistance providers. This aligns with broader trends, such as the 27% increase in food bank usage reported by Feed Nova Scotia since 2019, and alarming child poverty rates in Cape, as highlighted above in Table 1.[26]

Survey results indicate that a diverse range of organizations are actively engaged in food assistance programming, with many operating as subordinate entities within larger organizations (33%). (For a visual depiction of survey findings, see Appendix A – Infographic). A significant portion of these organizations offer direct support through vouchers or gift cards (48%). In comparison, others provide essential services such as food and nutrition education (40%), prepared meals (36%), grocery boxes or hampers (33%), cooking skills training (33%), healthy snacks (33%), and food bank services (29%). Additional community-based initiatives include free pantries (21%), gardens (21%), advocacy efforts (17%), and community-delivered dinners (12%). These varied offerings reflect a multifaceted approach to addressing food insecurity, extending beyond simple food provision to include education, skill-building, and community engagement.

Groups and organizations responding to the survey reported a wide range of primary areas of work, with food security being the most common (45%), followed by social services (21%), health (10%), and education (10%). However, for the majority of organizations (55%), food-related programming is a secondary focus, integrated into broader service mandates. The programs offered demonstrate an understanding that food insecurity is a complex issue influenced by more than just financial constraints. Respondents emphasized that factors such as transportation, access to cooking equipment, and mental health challenges also play critical roles in shaping individuals' ability to access and prepare nutritious food. Likewise, they recognized that access to food plays an important role in helping people meet other vital needs such as for social connection, physical and mental health, education and employment. This holistic perspective underscores the value of integrated, community-informed approaches to food assistance.

[26]Frank, L., Saulnier, C., & Harrington, R. (2024). 2024 Report Card on Child and Family Poverty in Nova Scotia. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

Table 4: Organization's Main Area of Work



Source: Beyond the Bank Survey Data

Population Being Served

Most of the respondent organizations provided food assistance to fewer than 20 clients weekly (36%). Others served 20-60 clients weekly (24%), 61-100 clients weekly (16%), and 200+ weekly (10%). Clients could access food daily (33%), weekly (21%), monthly (10%), as needed (19%), or without limits (10%). Respondents provided food services at various intervals: daily (38%), weekly (19%), monthly (9%), seasonally (9%), and intermittently, depending on funding (9%). Of note, many purported to provide services on other cycles (16%), but it's unclear what this means. These services were typically available for all ages (53%), some for only adults (17%), some for families (10%), and others for only seniors (9%). Despite so many services being open to many different groups, there was a high degree of consistency among respondents about the population groups they primarily serve: women (91%), people with disabilities (81%), people experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness (79%), those with mental health concerns (76%), racialized groups (69%), students (67%), newcomers (66%). Organizations have noticed an increase in seniors experiencing food insecurity; however, they also notice that pride often prevents this population from seeking the assistance they need.

Alignment with Organizational Mandate

Although food assistance is not part of the core operational mandate for many organizations, they have integrated food programming into their services in response to pressing community needs, nonetheless. This shift reflects a broader trend of organizations expanding beyond their original focus to address food insecurity, particularly among vulnerable populations. While the provision of food support is not central to their mission, its inclusion underscores both the growing demand for such services and the organization's capacity to adapt in response to pressing social challenges. It further reflects an acknowledgment that without food security, individuals face significant barriers to addressing other essential needs, including mental health, education, and employment.

While some organizations believed the demand for food assistance provision had stayed roughly the same from 2019-2023, the vast majority (87.3%) saw increases during that period. To address the growing need, respondents identified working with a wide range of partners: nonprofit organizations (45%), community/service organizations (41%), the provincial government (34%), local churches/religious communities (34%), businesses such as grocers and restaurants (34%), schools or libraries (28%), local farms/market gardens (24%), other organizations (19%), municipal government (17%), and the federal government (10%).

Non-profit and faith-based organizations are increasingly stepping beyond their traditional mandates to meet urgent social needs in their communities—particularly around food insecurity. While these groups are deeply embedded in their local contexts and uniquely positioned to identify and respond to emerging needs, they often lack the capacity and resources to provide comprehensive social support. The growing demand for basic necessities like food is a direct result of rising poverty levels. Yet, these organizations are being relied upon to fill gaps that government systems should address. As frontline responders, they are becoming de facto entry points for individuals and families in crisis, despite not being equipped or funded to serve in this role.

This expanded responsibility often brings them into contact with more complex issues, such as mental health concerns, which go far beyond their original scope. Volunteers in food assistance programs are increasingly approached with serious health and psychological challenges, yet many lack the training or time to provide adequate support or referrals. While some organizations make efforts to connect individuals to appropriate services, the intersection of social determinants of health—such as housing, income, and access to care—creates challenges they cannot fully address. The burden of these systemic issues is being downloaded onto community organizations simply because they are closest to the need. There is an urgent call

for government to listen to grassroots realities and respond with policies and funding that reflect the lived experiences of those on the ground.

Organizations also indicated they are engaged in a wide array of issues beyond food. Survey respondents provided health support (43%), clothing closets (26%), newcomer supports (22%), 2SLGBTQIA+ supports, education/library programming (22%), family supports (21%), cultural programming (21%), housing (17%), harm reduction services (17%), disaster resources (16%), violence/abuse supports (14%), other support services, financial supports (12%), shelter (10%), disability supports (10%), and Indigenous programming (9%). Focus group data saw that staff and volunteers were regularly referring clients to other service providers and also had non-food requests such as furniture, housekeeping services, home care, and wellness checks.

Challenges Faced in Food Assistance Programming

Food assistance programming in Eastern Nova Scotia faces a range of interconnected challenges. Many rural food banks operate with limited hours—some as infrequently as once a month—while Meals on Wheels programs are struggling to stay afloat. Organizations report a sharp rise in demand since 2021, yet sustaining funding remains a significant concern. A limited volunteer base, high transportation costs, and few grocery options in rural areas further complicate service delivery. Rising living costs, stigma around accessing help, and the need to serve increasingly diverse communities all contribute to the strain on these essential programs.

Sustainable Funding

> SUSTAINED FUNDING IS THE KEY CHALLENGE

Food assistance organizations across Eastern Nova Scotia are facing mounting concerns about the sustainability of their funding. Many rely on a patchwork of private donations, charitable grants, and provincial support, but the future of these sources remains uncertain—particularly amid shifting political priorities. As one participant stated, *"Sustained funding is the key challenge."* This uncertainty undermines organizations' ability to plan effectively and deliver consistent services to those experiencing food insecurity.

Survey data reveals the precarious nature of current funding models. While 76% of programs rely on private donations and 57% on charitable grants, only 29% of organizations reported having adequate funding for the year. Alarmingly, 70% of programs are either uncertain about their funding, find it inadequate, or are entirely unfunded and volunteer-led. One participant emphasized, *"The survey results show that… 70% of the programs that are trying to do this important work and feed people have uncertain, inadequate funding or are unfunded, which is a huge challenge."* This stark reality highlights the fragility of food assistance infrastructure and the urgent need for stable financial support.

The challenges are compounded by the limitations of existing grant structures. Many organizations report that grant applications are burdensome and often unsuccessful. *"We depend totally on donations and grants, and grants are few and far between,"* one participant shared. Another added, *"The grant applications can be pretty taxing… and we've been denied some grants."* In some cases, organizations were denied funding because their projects didn't fit rigid criteria: *"We were denied… because we didn't have a set project that, you know, [had] a*

start and a finish." These experiences underscore the need for more flexible and responsive funding mechanisms that reflect the realities of community-based food programs.

The lack of funding also affects staffing and service delivery. Many organizations rely on volunteers or staff whose primary roles are not food-related. Only 34% of programs have a mix of volunteers and paid staff dedicated to food work, while 33% are entirely volunteer-led. This reliance on unpaid labour places immense pressure on individuals and threatens the sustainability of services. *"We unfortunately have to limit our support more now because the funding is dwindling,"* one participant noted. *"We're concerned, like we're kind of in this scarcity mindset that I hate being in."* Without adequate funding, organizations are forced to make difficult decisions about who they can help and how often.

Non-profit and faith-based organizations are increasingly competing for limited funding sources, particularly in the realm of food assistance. Many organizations participating in this research repeatedly cite COVID-19 as the turning point when their missions expanded to include food assistance work. While funding surged during the pandemic, those resources have since contracted, intensifying the struggle to secure grants and support. As one participant noted, *"One of the issues is, so when COVID was around, there was much more money available for food security. Now they talk about food, there's more talk about security, but there's no funding to go with it. Or there's so much competition for the grants that are available and it's becoming harder and harder to be successful."* This post-pandemic shift has led to a landscape where Feed Nova Scotia-affiliated programs and independent food initiatives are often vying for the same financial backing.

The current funding model, which inadvertently forces organizations to compete rather than collaborate, underscores the urgent need for more integrated approaches, such as joint applications or shared funding opportunities, to foster cooperation and strengthen the overall impact of food security efforts across communities. There is hesitancy for groups to work together to address shared concerns because of territorial mindsets and fear that collaboration may impact existing sustained funding from Feed Nova Scotia for those who have it.

Despite these challenges, the commitment of food assistance providers remains strong. Some organizations have managed to secure stable funding through persistent grant applications, with one participant noting, *"We do apply for a lot of grants… we have been able to stay very profitable and we're very fortunate for that."* However, these cases are exceptions rather than the norm. The broader landscape is one of financial instability, overburdened staff and volunteers, and growing concern for the future. To ensure the survival and effectiveness of food assistance programs, there is a critical need for sustained, flexible, and comprehensive funding strategies that prioritize community needs and long-term impact.

Volunteers and Staffing

Organizations providing food assistance across Eastern Nova Scotia rely heavily on volunteers, many of whom work in small, rural communities. In these settings, the volunteer base is often limited, leading to increased workloads and higher rates of burnout. As one participant shared, *"There is a lack of volunteers and those who volunteer are getting burnt out."* The informal nature of social voluntarism in rural areas—often based on personal relationships and community ties rather than formal networks—can be both a strength and a vulnerability.[27] While these tight-knit communities offer strong social support, the limited pool of volunteers places immense pressure on those who step forward. [28]

In many cases, organizations are seconding full-time staff to assist with food provision, a strategy that may offer short-term relief but poses long-term risks. Without dedicated staff focused solely on food security, the sustainability of these programs is threatened. One participant emphasized, *"Volunteers are the service providers, and there are no significant paid staff to offer programs."* This reliance on unpaid labour, while reflective of community commitment, underscores the urgent need for structural support. Volunteers, especially in small communities, deeply understand the importance of these resources, yet their capacity to serve is stretched thin.

> "We have a number of volunteers, but it's like any business. Some people are out sick, some people aren't able to come, some people are caregiving. Sometimes it's a challenge to have enough every week.

The lack of operational funding compounds these challenges. Across regions, organizations consistently report being under-resourced and overextended. Grants often fail to cover both food and staffing costs, leaving programs vulnerable. As one participant noted, *"Programs are volunteer-led—no government or service support."* Another added, *"We need to provide*

[27] Turcotte, M. (2005). *Social engagement and civic participation: are rural and small town populations really at an advantage?* (pp. 21-006). Ottawa: Statistics Canada, Agriculture Division.

[28] Garasky, S., Morton, L. W., & Greder, K. A. (2006). The effects of the local food environment and social support on rural food insecurity. *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition*, *1*(1), 83-103.

support for volunteers to avoid burnout." These statements reflect a widespread concern: without increased funding for staff and operations, the burden on volunteers will continue to grow, jeopardizing the longevity and effectiveness of food assistance efforts.

Despite these obstacles, the dedication of volunteers remains a cornerstone of food security initiatives. Their commitment is evident in the way they continue to serve, even with limited resources. *"The volunteers that we have... are really the powerhouse, all our volunteers are the powerhouse of our operation of our food bank,"* one participant shared. This sentiment highlights both the strength and fragility of the current system. To ensure the survival of these essential programs and protect the well-being of those who serve, there is a pressing need for coordinated support, sustainable funding, and strategic investment in community-based food assistance infrastructure.

Rural Food Options

Limited grocery options in rural areas contribute significantly to food insecurity. In these regions, prices tend to be higher, and choices are fewer, creating what are known as food deserts. Individuals with limited financial resources often face additional barriers, such as the inability to travel to urban centers where groceries are more affordable and diverse. Transportation challenges further exacerbate this issue, making it difficult for many to access essential food supplies.

In Eastern Nova Scotia, the geographic distances between communities pose unique challenges to developing sustainable food initiatives such as food co-ops, buying clubs, and community food centers. The feasibility of these models is often constrained by the dispersed population and lack of infrastructure. Participants in recent discussions identified several key areas for improving food access in rural communities. A primary recommendation was to increase funding for transportation services, which would enable residents to reach food assistance programs more easily. Additionally, the difficulty of delivering food to remote areas was highlighted, with improved coordination of delivery services suggested as a potential solution.

Another recurring theme was the need for stronger collaboration among food banks. Participants emphasized the importance of sharing resources and information to better serve community members. There was also interest in promoting community gardens and local food initiatives as strategies to enhance food security. However, the success of these efforts was seen as dependent on sustained community involvement and volunteer support.

While there is a growing body of research on food insecurity, more contextualized studies are needed, especially in rural settings. This is particularly relevant in regions experiencing demographic growth, both in population size and diversity—such as parts of Eastern Nova Scotia. Although growth is not inherently negative, it often places pressure on informal support systems, necessitating their formalization to meet evolving community needs. While growth may not directly increase food insecurity rates, it likely leads to a rise in the number of individuals accessing food assistance programs, highlighting the need for these programs to scale accordingly.

Cost of Living

> ONE LADY, SHE HAS 30 BUCKS LEFT FOR THE WHOLE MONTH, THAT WAS HER FOOD BUDGET, WAS $30. IT'S HEARTBREAKING TO SEE THAT, BUT WE DO

The rising cost of housing across Eastern Nova Scotia has placed significant financial pressure on residents, forcing many to reduce their grocery budgets to manage overall expenses. This shift is contributing to a growing concern around food insecurity, particularly among families and individuals who were previously able to maintain stable access to nutritious food. As one participant noted, *"Some of our clients are coming in, and the ones with families, like some have medical bills, like the transportation to and from hospitals... the cost of transportation is really cutting into their food budget."* This illustrates how intersecting costs—housing, healthcare, and transportation—are compounding the strain on household finances.

The broader rise in the cost of living has created substantial challenges for communities, especially in relation to food security and the financial strain on working families. In the Cape Breton Regional Municipality (CBRM), food insecurity is increasingly affecting middle-class households, including those earning minimum wage. Organizations are witnessing a troubling shift, with former donors now seeking assistance. This reversal underscores the growing vulnerability of a demographic that was once considered financially stable. One participant observed, *"It's cheaper to feed your family on something that is not nutritious than it is to buy something that is nutritious,"* highlighting the difficult choices families must make between affordability and health.

Food assistance programs are also struggling to meet the evolving needs of their clients. Rising grocery and utility costs are straining both the recipients and the organizations that support them, making it increasingly difficult to provide adequate and culturally appropriate food options. There has been a noticeable increase in dietary restrictions and cultural dietary needs

that cannot be met due to limited resources. These challenges are exacerbated by the financial pressures faced by support organizations, which are now operating with tighter budgets and higher demand.

The economic disparity in Cape Breton is further highlighted by the gap between the minimum wage and the living wage. As of 2023, the living wage was calculated at $22.85 per hour, while the minimum wage stood at $15, with only a modest increase planned for 2024. [29] This gap highlights a pressing need for a provincial strategy that focuses on creating well-paying jobs and accessible training opportunities, especially outside the Halifax Regional Municipality. Without such measures, the cycle of financial strain and food insecurity is likely to persist and deepen.

Groceries in Nova Scotia are increasingly expensive, and focus group participants expressed concern about the lack of effective strategies to reduce overall costs. While corporations do contribute to food pantries, community fridges, and freezers, participants questioned what more could be done, especially in terms of policy reform. Suggestions included implementing a basic income, regulating corporate profits, and providing education on budgeting and distinguishing between needs and wants. These ideas reflect a desire for both immediate relief and long-term structural change.

The discussions often turned toward broader systemic issues, including capitalism, corporate greed, and the emotional toll of living in constant survival mode. Volunteers shared feelings of fatigue and frustration, yet remained committed to their work. They emphasized the need for better mental health support, more assistance for newcomers—particularly immigrants burdened with debt— and a shift toward community-led solutions that prioritize dignity and sustainability.

Participants also highlighted the threat posed by Canada's persistently high inflation rate, which complicates food-related work and stretches the capacity of organizations trying to meet growing needs. As one participant put it, "All we're doing is subsidizing the corporate greed," underscoring the tension between community efforts and the profit-driven systems escalating food prices, with the four largest grocery chains controlling over 72% of Canada's national market share. [30] There was an average food price increase of 3.8% in 2025 across Canada. In Nova Scotia, the change was above the national average, which is projected to continue into

[29] Saulnier, C. (2023). Living wages in Nova Scotia 2023 update: Working for a living, not living to work. CCPA-NS Office. https://policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/living-wages-novascotia-2023-update

[30] Government of Canada. (December 16, 2022). Response from the Retail Council of Canada to the consultation on the Market study of retail grocery. Retrieved from https://competition-bureau.canada.ca/en/how-we-foster-competition/consultations/response-retailcouncil-canada-consultation-market-study-retail-grocery#toc3

2026.[31] This predicted continued increase in food prices in 2026 is understood to be due to rising tariffs, climate events, and policy decisions at all levels of government. It is projected that annual food expenses for a family of four will be up to $17,571.79 in 2026.[32] Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's 2024 evaluation of the Local Food Infrastructure Fund indicates that resource support for organizations serving the food insecure has primarily eased organizational strain from rising client demand, rather than reducing food insecurity itself. [33]

Choice, Safety, and Dignity

Food insecurity carries a significant stigma, often deterring individuals from seeking the assistance they need. This stigma is particularly pronounced in vulnerable populations, such as Indigenous communities, where historical and systemic factors compound the challenges of accessing support. To address this, some organizations are embedding food services within trusted community spaces, aiming to foster environments of safety, dignity, and cultural relevance. These efforts reflect a broader commitment to reducing stigma and promoting inclusivity in food assistance programs.

Despite their intentions, many organizations face constraints that limit their ability to offer meaningful choice to clients. Access to resources, funding, and infrastructure often dictate the extent of support they can provide. While some programs are only able to maintain basic food supplies, others have developed the capacity to respond to more complex needs, offering healthier options and tailored services. The tension between organizational mandates and food support goals can also create barriers, especially when food provision is not the primary mission of the organization.

[31] Canada's Food Price Report (2026). The Agri-Food Lab, Dalhousie University. Retrieved from https://cdn.dal.ca/content/dam/dalhousie/pdf/sites/agrifood/FINAL%20E%20low.res%20DAL_PRICE_REPORT_2026.pdf

[32] Canada's Food Price Report (2026). The Agri-Food Lab, Dalhousie University. Retrieved from https://cdn.dal.ca/content/dam/dalhousie/pdf/sites/agrifood/FINAL%20E%20low.res%20DAL_PRICE_REPORT_2026.pdf

[33] Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada. Evaluation of the Local Food Infrastructure Fund [Internet]. Ottawa (ON): Government of Canada; 2024 Apr [cited 2024 Jun 30]. Available from: https://agriculture.canada.ca/en /department/transparency/audits -evaluations/evaluation-local-food -infrastructure-fund

> And there's an inherent trust between the client and the [food assistance program] that we will do our best to protect your privacy and dignity and then we expect that you will honor the program [...] and we're very confident that [the assistance is] being used for the right reasons.

Participants in food assistance initiatives have highlighted several barriers to access, including transportation challenges, complicated application processes, and the persistent stigma associated with seeking help. Volunteers and staff strive to create welcoming and respectful environments, but mental health concerns and social dynamics can hinder these efforts. Ultimately, the goal is to empower individuals through inclusive services that build trust, promote self-confidence, and uphold the dignity of choice—though many organizations continue to grapple with the limitations imposed by their operational realities.

Diverse Clientele

Organizations across Eastern Nova Scotia are responding to a growing demand for food assistance, serving a diverse clientele that includes low-income families, seniors, visible minorities, and even farmers growing food for others but struggling to make ends meet themselves. Focus group findings reveal that while food programs aim to be inclusive, seniors remain among the least served demographics. The need for food support is expanding, and the population accessing these services is increasingly varied. As one participant noted, "Food assistance programs serve a wide range of populations, including students, newcomers, visible minorities, and families with children."

The CBRM has experienced a notable increase in newcomers, particularly international students from India. Although students are required to demonstrate financial capacity before arriving—often by showing substantial funds in their bank accounts—this amount is frequently insufficient to cover the high cost of living in Canada. "*We really weren't aware of the costs of living here to the same degree*," one respondent shared continuing, *"we see that a lot as well in our space—that they're just blown away by the cost of living here and weren't well prepared for that coming here."* Recent policy changes have further complicated the distinction between newcomers and international students, raising questions about how organizations can continue to support these groups amid limited funding.

Food banks are seeing increased registration from immigrants and newcomers, but challenges persist. Many individuals are unfamiliar with the types of food provided, often returning processed items due to dietary preferences or a lack of knowledge about preparation. Some newcomers express a preference for fresh food and tend to reject items high in salt or sugar. These insights underscore the importance of culturally responsive food programming and the need for sustainable funding to meet the evolving needs of diverse communities.

Volume of Need

> "The children are hungry and crying

The volume of need for food assistance in Eastern Nova Scotia has risen sharply, particularly since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to our survey data, 87% of the organizations we surveyed reported increased demand for food assistance since 2021. This trend has not only persisted but intensified, with one respondent noting, *"We have seen an increase after the pandemic and are above pre-pandemic levels."* The number of clients served weekly varies significantly, ranging from fewer than 20 to over 200, with *"10 percent actually serving 200 or more per week."* Families with children are consistently identified as being in the most urgent need, and many organizations report *"a sustained need for people that call us regularly."*

This growing demand places immense pressure on food assistance providers, many of which operate with limited or no stable funding. Some rely entirely on community contributions, yet these communities are themselves increasingly strained. As one organization shared, *"Not having enough resources to purchase healthy food"* remains a significant barrier. Protein is the most requested item and *"quickly disappears from fridges,"* while vegetable donations are appreciated and have inspired community-based initiatives such as soup-making. Despite these efforts, the volume of food needed and the speed at which it is distributed continue to challenge providers.

In response, organizations have adopted a range of models to meet the evolving needs of their communities. Partnerships with private markets and local farms have helped supplement food supplies, though funding cuts have forced many groups to scale back. One organization explained, *"Support has changed — we now limit gift cards due to funding cuts."* Volunteers often face difficult choices between providing market money or vegetable boxes, with *"market bucks"* remaining popular but limited in availability. These adaptations reflect both the creativity and constraints of current food assistance frameworks.

Overall, the landscape of food support in Eastern Nova Scotia is marked by high demand, resource scarcity, and evolving service models. While community-driven efforts and partnerships offer some relief, the sustainability of these initiatives remains uncertain without stable funding and systemic support. Addressing the volume and complexity of food insecurity in the region will require coordinated action across sectors, with a focus on long-term solutions that prioritize nutritional quality and equitable access.

Strengths and Opportunities

Meeting Direct Community Needs

Food assistance programs across Eastern Nova Scotia demonstrate significant strengths in their ability to meet community needs directly. A key strength lies in the diversity of organizations involved and how their staff and volunteers are deeply connected to the communities they serve. These organizations use what is available to them through multiple funding streams to ensure that food assistance efforts are not only widespread but also responsive to the unique needs of different communities within the region.

Volunteers within these organizations, especially in smaller communities, have a sense of what individuals and families accessing the programs may need beyond food. Because they often know the people they are assisting quite well, they can tailor support by arranging transportation or delivery, or by being attentive to the selection of foods provided. In many cases, volunteers extend their role by connecting individuals to other community services, providing a degree of social contact and interpersonal support at times when people may feel isolated. They may also identify opportunities that align with personal interests, such as encouraging participation in a community garden project or other local initiatives. These forms of engagement illustrate the “value-added” dimension of community food assistance, where support is personalized, flexible, and responsive to the broader circumstances of those served. In this way, food programs become not only a source of nourishment but also a gateway to wider forms of community care and resilience.

Food assistance programs in Eastern Nova Scotia are more than emergency stopgaps; they are becoming vital entry points into broader poverty reduction strategies. While the root of food insecurity lies in inadequate income and the need for stronger basic supports, these programs add value by engaging directly with individuals, understanding their personal needs, and connecting them to essential services such as transportation, housing, and social supports. Unlike larger bureaucratic systems, local programs are embedded in their communities, fostering social connection and trust that allows them to guide clients toward resources that can help address the deeper poverty and income challenges.

These food programs act as stepping stones—linking people to opportunities that may move them out of poverty altogether. As Tarasuk and McIntyre (2025) note, “household food insecurity is not an intractable problem; it persists because its reduction is not an explicit policy

goal of governments," [34] underscoring the importance of community-based initiatives that fill gaps left by policy. When paired with investments in social spaces like food assistance programs or libraries, where people naturally seek help and connection, these programs can contribute to long-term poverty reduction strategies that go beyond emergency responses and strengthen the fabric of support in Eastern Nova Scotia. The existence of food assistance programs like the ones engaged with in this study highlights the need to review food affordability in Canada and the ways that affordability is impacting and shaping consumer behaviour and overall health outcomes. [35]

Food Literacy Education

Food education plays a vital role in strengthening food assistance initiatives by empowering individuals and communities with the knowledge and skills to grow, prepare, and preserve their own food. Many of the organizations were offering or were interested in offering more food literacy education as part of their work. These included workshops, cooking classes, creating cookbooks, and offering classes on how to cook with a slow cooker that participants can bring home with them.

Programs such as community gardens, gardening education, and elderly gardening initiatives foster hands-on learning and social connection, while also increasing access to fresh produce. The data showed that these organizations see food literacy education as part of the long-term solution to addressing food insecurity in the region. For example, one participant noted that seniors seem to be able to stretch the food they receive further because they know how to cook it in a way that makes it last longer, such as freezing or preserving. Continuing these efforts to show people how to grow, cook, and preserve food (through freezing, dehydrating, etc.) will help people use more whole foods and ingredients. One participant reflected on their education efforts, noting, *"we're hoping there is some kind of a ripple effect that, you know, if you learn how, if I ever learned how to do anything of those things, I would teach somebody else."*

[34] Tarasuk, V % Lynn McIntyre, L. (2025). The evidence is in: accountability needs to be injected into the policy-making process for household food insecurity reduction. *The HPCDP Journal*, https://doi.org/10.24095/hpcdp.45.9.04

[35] Canada's Food Price Report (2026). The Agri-Food Lab, Dalhousie University. Retrieved from https://cdn.dal.ca/content/dam/dalhousie/pdf/sites/agrifood/FINAL%20E%20low.res%20DAL_PRICE_REPORT_2026.pdf

Teaching people how to grow, cook, and preserve food—through recipes, workshops, and demonstrations—creates a community of learners who are more resilient and self-sufficient. Increasing food education can help generations to come. As one participant noted, *"kids in schools [are] unable to identify standard vegetables as a result of quick fixed processed foods versus homegrown and homemade food."* These efforts not only improve nutrition and reduce food insecurity but also foster a deeper connection to food systems and sustainable practices.

Reduction of Stigma

Organizations involved in food support initiatives are actively working to reduce the stigma often associated with accessing food banks. Many have adopted practices that increase client anonymity, such as limiting the amount of personal information and paperwork required. This not only protects privacy but also helps individuals feel less exposed or judged when seeking help. Some groups have found that a limited volunteer pool can unintentionally support anonymity, as fewer people are involved in direct interactions. Additionally, offering food deliveries allows clients to receive support discreetly, further reducing the visibility and potential discomfort of accessing services.

For example, one organization explained that they have a system in place where they place plastic bins out with the food they are able to secure through their donations and purchasing and let their clients "shop" the bins for what they would like to take, rather than predetermining what each individual or family is taking home that week. This system offers dignity of choice, places trust in clients, and does not police individual food choices.

Increasing food literacy can also reduce stigma, as one participant explained, *"people stock the pantries, people don't necessarily want to go and get stuff from them because they don't have that safe, comfortable feeling to go and get it. The theory and the idea is great, but going to get it is, you know, a piece of poverty. Whereas if they had something that they had accessibility to like a garden bed, they can grow in their own backyard. It empowers them to have some autonomy and some privacy of what they can consume."*

Creating safe and welcoming environments is another key strategy. Organizations are intentionally placing food services in locations that are already considered safe and familiar—such as schools, libraries, or community centers—or are working to transform their own spaces into places of comfort and trust. These efforts are grounded in the belief that everyone deserves to feel valued and respected, regardless of their circumstances. By reducing barriers to access and fostering a sense of dignity, these organizations are not only meeting immediate needs but also helping to shift public perceptions around food insecurity.

Cooperation and Collaboration

Organizations across the region are increasingly advocating for a holistic approach to addressing food insecurity, emphasizing the importance of building resilient food systems that encompass production, distribution, and sustainable funding. This perspective moves beyond short-term emergency responses and calls for comprehensive strategies that address the root causes of food insecurity. The data reflects a community deeply engaged in navigating these complexities, underscoring the urgency of coordinated efforts to ensure equitable access to food for all.

A recurring theme throughout the research is the need for improved collaboration among food assistance organizations. Participants expressed concern over competition for limited resources, which can hinder the effectiveness of programs and create territorial disputes. As one focus group participant noted, infrastructure limitations—such as inadequate space—can prevent communities from fully utilizing available food resources, including surplus food that could otherwise be repurposed. Transparent communication and stronger partnerships are essential to overcoming these barriers and fostering a more unified regional response.

The collaborative nature of this research project has already yielded significant benefits, including increased research capacity among partners, a deeper understanding of the extensive food assistance network in Eastern Nova Scotia, and the formation of new partnerships and working relationships. These outcomes have sparked innovative ideas for future projects and demonstrated the value of collective action in addressing food insecurity. Highlighting the work already underway within communities is crucial to sustaining momentum and expanding the reach of food-related initiatives.

There are promising opportunities for growth and refinement. Many organizations engaged in food provision do not have food as their primary mandate, which opens up questions about the sustainability and strategic direction of their involvement. This shift in focus presents an opportunity to explore how and why food-related programming is evolving, and whether it aligns with long-term community needs. Focus group discussions have highlighted the importance of ongoing evaluation and adaptation, recognizing that food security is a dynamic issue. By investing in continuous learning and responsiveness, food assistance programs can better anticipate changes in the landscape and ensure that their services remain relevant, equitable, and impactful.

Government Intervention

The persistently high rates of household food insecurity in Nova Scotia highlight the urgent need for governments to move beyond food-based interventions and adopt evidence-informed policies that address the root causes of the problem. Inadequate and insecure incomes are the primary drivers of food insecurity in the province. Food insecurity can be reduced with moderate to high certainty with income supplementation. These measures can include expanded income supports, basic income pilots, or stronger social assistance programs. Rather than continuing to invest in food charity models that have consistently failed to reduce food insecurity, federal and provincial governments must prioritize income-based solutions.

In Nova Scotia, recent policy shifts illustrate both the challenges and opportunities in this area. The provincial Food and Beverage Strategy,[36] which aimed to improve access to healthy local food, was shelved in 2025 after initial consultations, with attention redirected to school lunch programs and initiatives such as the Nova Scotia Loyal program.[37] While these efforts may improve access to nutritious food, they do not directly tackle the income insecurity that drives food insecurity. At the same time, investments in community-based initiatives such as the Cape Breton Food Hub and collaborative networks like the Island Food Network demonstrate the value of strengthening local food systems and building resilience.[38] However, these programs should complement–not replace–income interventions. As scholars have noted, the corporatization of food-based responses and the lack of accountability for pandemic-era food charity programs have perpetuated high rates of food insecurity without addressing underlying poverty. [39]

For both the Canadian and Nova Scotia governments, the path forward requires making the elimination of food insecurity a discrete policy goal. This is an opportunity to embed income interventions into public health strategies, ensuring that families have the financial stability to

[36] Government of Nova Scotia. (2022, November). *Food and beverage strategy: Public input guide* [PDF]. Government of Nova Scotia. https://novascotia.ca/food-and-beverage-strategy-engagement/docs/food-and-beverage-strategy-public-input-guide.pdf

[37] Andrew Lam, "N.S. drops local food strategy, raising concerns over production, access to healthy options," CBC News, June 25, 2025. Available at: https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/food-and-beverage-strategy-abandoned-1.7568458

[38] Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency. (2024, June 27). From farm to table: Building food sustainability [News release]. Canada.ca. https://www.canada.ca/en/atlantic-canada-opportunities/news/2024/06/from-farm-to-table-building-food-sustainability.html; CTV News Atlantic. (2024, November 18). Three new collaborative food networks open in Nova Scotia. CTV News. https://www.ctvnews.ca/atlantic/nova-scotia/article/three-new-collaborative-food-networks-open-in-nova-scotia/

[39] Classens M, Martin M. 'Good morning Metro shoppers!' Food insecurity, COVID-19 and the emergence of roll-call neoliberalism. Cap Class. 2024; 48(4):635-56. https://doi.org/10.1177 /03098168231199912; Mendly-Zambo Z, Raphael D, Taman A. Take the money and run: how food banks became complicit with Walmart Canada's hunger producing employment practices. Crit Public Health. 2021:33(1);60-71. https://doi.org/10 .1080/09581596.2021.1955828

afford food consistently, and aligning local food initiatives with broader poverty reduction efforts. Setting clear targets, such as Nova Scotia's goal of 20% of food spending directed toward local products by 2030, can strengthen food sustainability, but must be paired with income supports to ensure equitable access. By combining income supplementation with investments in local food systems and community networks, governments can move beyond temporary alleviation and toward long-term poverty reduction and food security for all Nova Scotians.

Recommendations

The research conducted for this project has surfaced key insights from individuals and organizations involved in food assistance across Eastern Nova Scotia. In response to the concerns and experiences shared by participants, the following policy recommendations have been developed to guide meaningful action. These recommendations aim to address both immediate needs and long-term systemic challenges, with a focus on improving access, social policy changes, and dignity in food security efforts.

1.0 Recommendations for Government and Policy Makers

1.1. Advocate for **sustained and increased funding** for food assistance programs by leveraging federal interest and addressing the end of short-term COVID-19 funding to ensure program continuity.

1.2. Provide flexible **funding criteria** and **simplify processes** to support direct food provision, reduce stigma, and provide long-term operational resources for strategic planning. Broader support for programs that meet community needs can alleviate organizational concerns, rather than requiring adjustments to programming to meet funding criteria.

1.3. Explore **income policies** to establish a livable income to ensure individuals and families have the financial means to feed themselves with dignity. Implement comprehensive policies that address the root causes of food insecurity by targeting systemic poverty and structural barriers.

1.4. Support the **establishment of community food centres and networks**[40] with funding for dedicated, regularly staffed spaces for food programs that offer consistent access and support. Funding for staff can significantly enhance program success, reduce volunteer burnout, and support collaborative, community-driven food security programming.

1.5. Ensure **funding opportunities match grassroots needs** through collaboration and research to develop sustainable and inclusive solutions

1.6. **Reduce reliance on emergency food assistance** by focusing social policy frameworks on upstream solutions or responses to food insecurity and more equitable social circumstances.

[40] Community food centres are spaces that provide healthy food programs, cooking and nutrition education, and advocacy initiatives to strengthen food security and build social connections. In Nova Scotia, collaborative food networks operate under a lead organization that is funded to work collaboratively with local community partners to tackle shared food-security-related goals.

2.0 Recommendations for Organizations

2.1. Continue to **move beyond charitable food responses,** when possible, to help improve accessibility and dignity in food assistance delivery.

2.2. Participate in **partnerships** with other non-profits, food banks, and social service agencies to provide immediate relief while advocating for long-term solutions.

2.3. Offer programs that **reduce stigma**, such as inclusive community meals or confidential assistance.

2.4. Use research findings as a foundation **for regional advocacy** and strategic planning to inform long-term solutions.

2.5. **Engage directly with government departments** that align with your organizational mission and goals for assistance with programming, grants, and advocacy.

3.0 Recommendations for Community

3.1. Continue to **donate, volunteer, and support** organizations involved in food assistance.

3.2. Share stories and data to build **public support** for structural changes.

3.3. **Advocate for policy change** by working with local leaders and organizations to push for guaranteed livable income and increased assistance rates.

3.4. Support and purchase from **local food producers and distribution systems** to improve access to fresh and nutritious food for Nova Scotians.

3.5. Offer **practical skills** to organizations involved in food assistance – for example, join a board, assist with grant and technical writing, student placements, non-profit knowledge, host workshops, or provide training.

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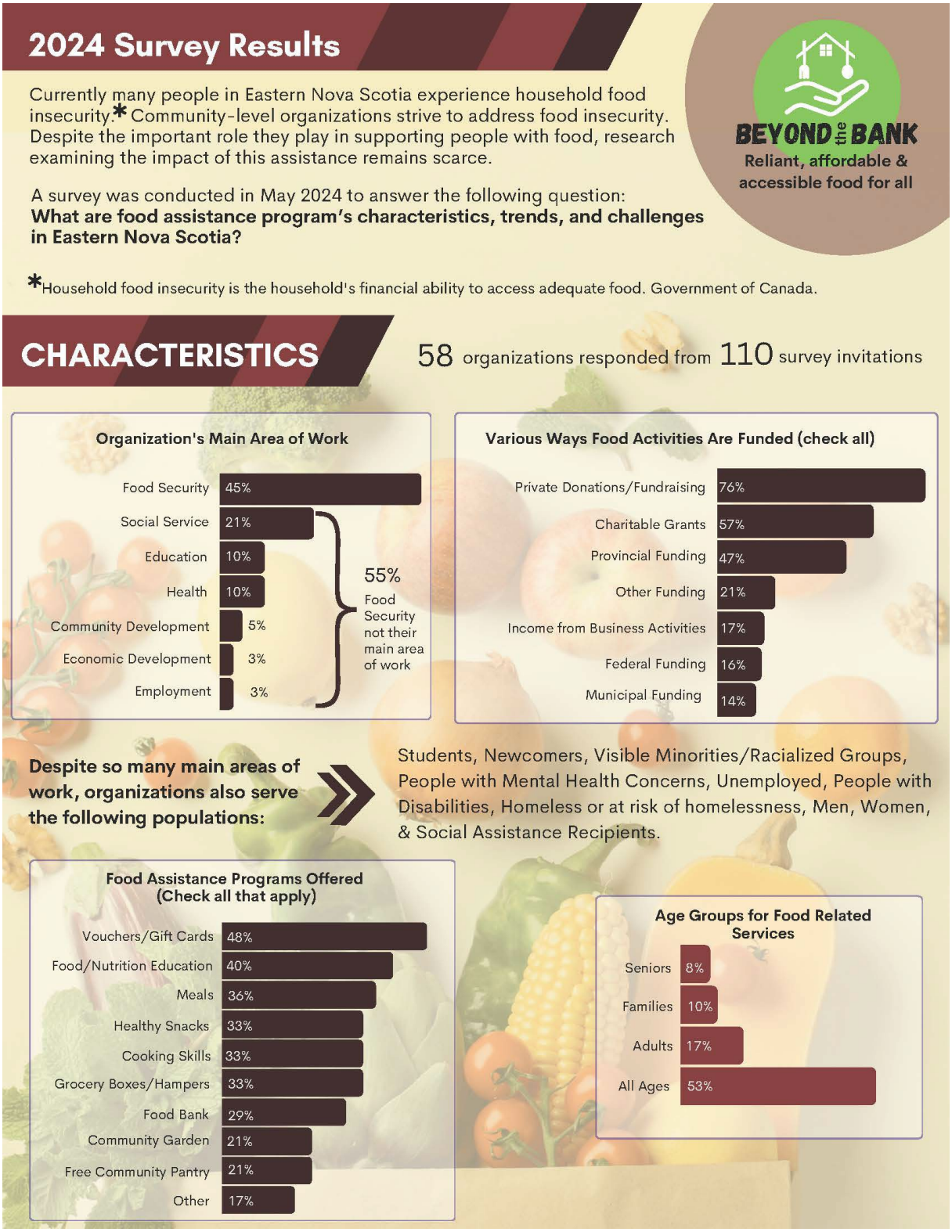
Appendices

Appendix A: Infographic
Appendix B: Survey Questions
Appendix C: Focus Group & Interview Questions

Appendix A: Infographic

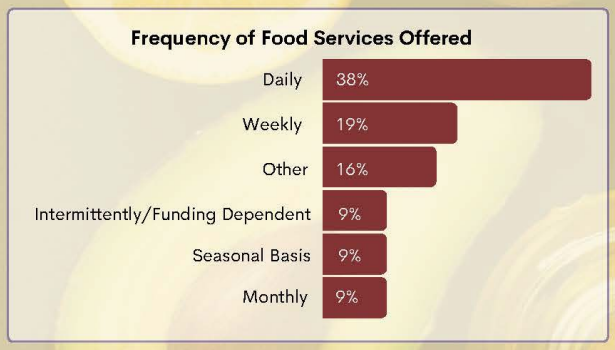


ACCESS

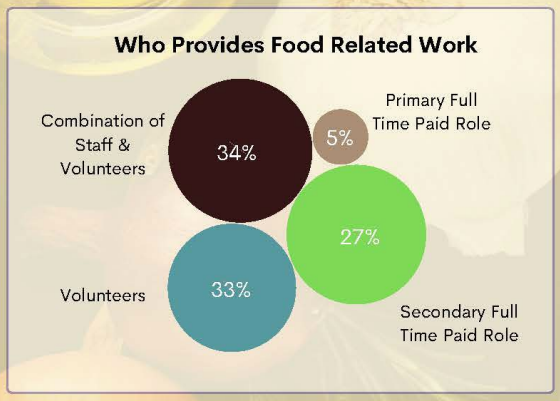
40% of organizations require **applications** to receive food services

22% of organizations require **documentation** from their clients to receive food services

17% of organizations require clients to **pay fees** to receive food services



TRENDS & CHALLENGES



87% of organizations saw increases in the demand for food assistance provision since 2021.

Others reported it had stayed roughly the same since 2019-2023.

Appendix B: Survey Questions

Beyond the Bank
Food Assistance Survey
October 5, 2023

1. What is the name of your organization or group?

2. Please select the BEST description of your organization/group.

- ○ Service Club
- ○ Religious Organization
- ○ Community Group
- ○ Incorporated non profit (NS Joint Stocks)
- ○ Registered Charity (Charities Directorate of Canada)
- ○ Government Agency
- ○ Agriculture/Farming
- ○ Business
- ○ Other: _____

3. Is your organization/group a division of another organization? (Ex program of a larger organization)

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

4. What kinds of activities does your organization undertake around food assistance (check all that apply)?

- ☐ Community (free) fridge
- ☐ Community (free) pantry
- ☐ Food bank
- ☐ Food/nutrition education
- ☐ Community delivered dinners (free/nominal fee)
- ☐ Community garden
- ☐ Grocery boxes/hampers

- [ ] Meals
- [ ] Vouchers/Gift cards
- [ ] Community kitchen
- [ ] Cooking skills
- [ ] Buying club
- [ ] Advocacy
- [ ] Meals on Wheels Program
- [ ] Healthy Snacks
- [ ] Edible Landscape
- [ ] Food Social Enterprise
- [ ] Gleaning
- [ ] Other: _____

5. What would you say is your organization/group's main area of work?

- ○ Food Security
- ○ Health
- ○ Education
- ○ Employment
- ○ Justice
- ○ Social Service
- ○ Community Development
- ○ Economic Development
- ○ Agriculture/Farming
- ○ Other: _____

6. Check off all services that your organization provides:

- [ ] Food assistance programming
- [ ] Shelter
- [ ] Housing
- [ ] Harm Reduction
- [ ] Clothing Closet
- [ ] Indigenous Programming
- [ ] Health Support (Mental, Physical, Spiritual, or Emotional)

- [ ] Family Support
- [ ] Addiction Supports
- [ ] Employment Supports
- [ ] Disaster Resources
- [ ] Newcomer Supports
- [ ] Violence/Abuse Supports
- [ ] Financial Support
- [ ] Legal Support
- [ ] 2SLGBTQIA+ Support
- [ ] Disability Supports
- [ ] Youth Programming
- [ ] Cultural Programming
- [ ] Education/Library
- [ ] Religious Services
- [ ] Business Services
- [ ] Agriculture

7. How often do you provide food-related services?

- ○ Daily
- ○ Weekly
- ○ Monthly
- ○ On a seasonal basis
- ○ Once a year
- ○ Intermittently (dependent on funding/resources)
- ○ Primarily as part of disaster relief

8. What age group do you primarily provide food-related services for?

- ○ Infants/Preschoolers
- ○ School-aged children and youth
- ○ Young adults (roughly 18-30 years old)

- Adults (roughly 30-60 years old)
- Seniors (adults 60+)
- Families
- All ages

9. Which groups do you serve? Check all that apply.

- ○ Women
- ○ Men
- ○ Visible Minorities/Racialized Groups
- ○ Newcomers
- ○ Students
- ○ Homeless or at risk of homelessness
- ○ People with disabilities
- ○ Social Assistance Recipients
- ○ Unemployed
- ○ People with mental health concerns

10. How are your food related service activities funded (check all that apply)

- ☐ Federal funding
- ☐ Provincial Funding
- ☐ Municipal Funding
- ☐ Charitable grants
- ☐ Private donations/givings
- ☐ Fundraising activities
- ☐ Income from business or social enterprise activities
- ☐ Other: _____

11.Funding for your food assistance programming for this (2023) year is (please choose the **best** description for your programming's funding situation):

- Secured--funding is in place and adequate
- Inadequate--current funding will not cover current costs
- Uncertain--funding is unknown

- Funding not needed—volunteer-driven

12. In your organization or group who provides food related work?

- Volunteers
- Full time paid staff--this is their primary role
- Full time paid staff--this is a secondary role
- Part time paid staff
- A combination of paid staff and volunteers

13. Is there an application or screening process for clients to acquire services?

- Yes
- No

14. Do potential clients require documents (such as identification, referral letters, or income tax forms) to acquire assistance/services?

- Yes
- No

15. Is your organization a member of Feed Nova Scotia?

- Yes
- No

18. Are fees charged to clients in your food assistance work?

- Yes
- No

19. What is the catchment of your food related work (which areas do you serve)?

_____

20. Indicate has decreased, stayed the same, or decreased from the previous year for each of the years indicated:

	Decreased	Stayed the Same	Decreased
2019			
2020			
2021			
2022			
2023			

21. Roughly how many clients do you provide food services for in a week when your program is active?

- Less than 20
- 20-60
- 61-100
- 101-140
- 141-180
- 200+

21. Thinking of restricted access, how frequently can clients access food services?

- Daily
- Weekly
- Monthly
- Yearly
- As needed or requested
- Crisis/Emergency situations
- There are no restricted use from food services

22. Who do you collaborate with on food related initiatives (check all that apply)?

- Federal Government
- Provincial Government
- Municipal Government
- Local Churches/Religious Communities
- Schools or Libraries
- Community/Service Organizations (such as Rotary)
- Nonprofit organizations
- Businesses such as grocers, restaurants, or bakeries
- Local farms/market gardens
- Other: _____

Appendix C: Focus Group and Interview Questions

Beyond the Bank Focus Group Questions

Questions	Prompts for Facilitator
1. What is your reaction to the information presented in the infographic?	Are there any surprises? New information? Confirmed what you already knew?
2. We would like you to think about your work helping to feed people in your community over time, in particular since 2020. What trends are you seeing?	Has there been an increase in demand? Who is accessing your services and how has that changed if at all? Has the type of support people are seeking changed? Have you changed your services over time?
3. Again, thinking about your work in helping to feed people in your community, what do you feel are the particular strengths or benefits in the approach you are taking?	What is it about the way you are addressing food needs in your community that make it particularly valuable? Are there things you are hearing/seeing that make you feel that way? Are there community partnerships that have been particularly helpful? Have there been any funding opportunities that have been particularly helpful?
4. **What are the key challenges/barriers affecting your work?**	Funding challenges? Volunteer challenges? Organizational challenges? Challenges in fitting this work into your organizational mandate?
5. We would like to turn our focus to solutions for food insecurity. We will do this in two parts: A. things that would make your work easier in the near term and B. longer-term solutions.	A. What would make the work you are doing easier? Given all the challenges you mentioned what would help you to overcome some of them? B. Do you see any long-term solutions that are needed to eliminate hunger in your community? Government policy? Advocacy? A particular community partnership? Education?

Beyond the Bank 2025

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