



**PARKDALE**  
**FOOD CENTRE**

# Knowing our *Neighbours* report



ottawa community  
food partnership

NOURISHING COMMUNITY, TOGETHER

COOKING  
FOR A  
CAUSE

# Knowing our *Neighbours*

## Executive Summary

Since our inception over thirty years ago, the Parkdale Food Centre has evolved from a traditional food bank to one of the leading voices and trusted advocates on food security and poverty issues.

The heart of our work is devoted to building healthier and more connected communities and we strive to provide kind and nutritious food access for anyone that needs it.

Over the last few years, COVID-19 has further magnified the long overdue need for more equitable solutions to food insecurity and poverty. We believe there is no time like the present.

In the early months of 2021, we conducted a survey “Knowing Our Neighbours” to obtain a detailed picture of the households who access our programming to better inform the services we provide and support our ongoing commitment to healthy communities where everyone has the means and opportunity to thrive.

From the information collected, it was clear that many of our Neighbours represented vulnerable segments of the population:

- 53% had an income of \$15,000 per year or less.
- An additional 20% had an income of \$10,000 or less.
- Even with the nutritious food made available to these households through our various food programming, 71% of the respondents remained highly food insecure.
- Over the last year, 51% went without eating because they could not afford enough food.

From this data, it is clear that food banking and accompanying food programs do not have a significant and demonstrable impact on food insecurity in large urban areas. Even with regular access to healthy foods in a choice-based model, as is offered by Parkdale Food Centre, approximately half of respondents reported going hungry because there wasn't enough food available to them.

Food insecurity is a product of poverty. The Parkdale Food Centre and our partner agencies have become a go-to but often undignified resource for an underserved population. We will never solve the food insecurity problem by offering boxes of non-perishable foods once a month and it is unrealistic that anyone should expect us to.

# Knowing our *Neighbours*

## Recommendations

It is the recommendation of the Parkdale Food Centre, that the provincial government:

- 1- In light of the unprecedented inflation, rising cost of housing, spiking food costs and the other impacts of COVID-19, it is our recommendation that there be an IMMEDIATE emergency supplement for everyone receiving Ontario Works (OW) and Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP).
- 2- Recognize that OW and ODSP are insufficient, and undertake a robust review of their standards within the first quarter of 2022 . This effort will help ensure Ontario provides an equitable 2022 and that everyone can meet their basic needs.
- 3- To collaborate with the province on a pilot project that will provide increased access to affordable, healthy food outside the traditional food banking model. Additionally, we would look to you to support the expansion of this program in neighbourhoods where food access is limited as well as to enable the development of a toolkit which would allow PFC to share it's experience and provide the resources necessary to replicate this work across the province and to ensure a hopeful future for low income Ontarians.



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## Recommendations (continued)

4. PFC created the Ottawa Community Food Partnership with 9 partners in 2016, to support a shift away from the traditional food charity model by moving towards meaningful community engagement and food security. During the COVID-19 public health crisis, the Ottawa Community Food Partnership launched the Cooking for a Cause Ottawa initiative in response to a sudden and desperate community and economic need - many lacked income to purchase food, access to meal programs was extremely limited and food businesses were crippled under unprecedented operating restrictions.

Cooking for a Cause Ottawa is helping a variety of food businesses keep their lights on and continue to employ staff - paying them to produce delicious food - while making a profound impact in their communities. Over 20 food businesses have participated in the project, providing food for 31 social service agencies to distribute to their clients.

In 2021 the Ottawa Community Food Partnership rescued 86,969 kilograms of food and distributed between 3,500 & 5,000 meals each week for a total of 196,894 meals to our Neighbours struggling with food insecurity in the Ottawa area.

Healthcare and harm reduction workers report significant behavioural, physical, and emotional impacts on their clients while business owners report feeling more connected to their communities and grateful for the income during a time when they feared losing their business.

This project can be easily replicated in other cities and with the Provinces support is a viable solution to community economic development during this turbulent time. Given \$1million per year the impact could be substantial.

# Knowing our *Neighbours*

## Parkdale Food Centre

At the Parkdale Food Centre (PFC), we believe in an Ottawa where everyone has the means and opportunity to live a healthy, connected and fulfilling life. Our mission is to build healthier, more connected Neighbours and neighbourhoods through good food, innovative community partnerships and by challenging inequalities in order to create lasting impacts.

## Knowing Our Neighbours

While the staff and volunteers at the Parkdale Food Centre know many of our Neighbours by name, detailed information of the people who use our services had never been collected. As part of our efforts to remove barriers to accessing healthy food and to preserving the dignity of Neighbours, Parkdale Food Centre does not routinely gather demographic information on those who use our services. As a result, we do not have access to data on such things as ethnicity, income and disability status of those who access our food bank, meal programs, cooking workshops or youth programming.



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NEIGHBOUR TO NEIGHBOUR

# Knowing our *Neighbours*

## Knowing Our Neighbours

The aim of the Knowing Our Neighbours survey was to obtain a detailed picture of the households who access our programming in order to inform the services we provide and support our ongoing advocacy efforts. Some specific questions included:

- Who uses the services of Parkdale Food Centre?
- What is the food security status amongst Neighbours?
- What are the food-related habits of Neighbours?
- How has Covid-19 impacted the lives of Neighbours?
- How well does Parkdale Food Centre address the needs of Neighbours?
- What can Parkdale Food Centre do better?

Though we originally performed this survey during the first full-year of the Covid-19 pandemic, the intention is to administer this survey on an annual basis. In doing so, we will be able to see how the identified characteristics of Neighbours change, and can begin to better determine the impacts the Parkdale Food Centre is having on the community. Additionally, we will be able to better include Neighbours' voices and perspectives in the visions, goals, and activities of our organization.



# Knowing our *Neighbours*

## The Study

Neighbours of the Parkdale Food Centre were invited to participate in the Knowing Our Neighbours survey during February and March 2021. Information about the goals and the procedures of the survey was provided during telephone calls and emails when food bank orders were made. The majority of respondents were those who access our food bank, but we also offered the opportunity to take part in the survey among those who participate in our cooking classes, no-cost produce markets, and our youth program named 13: A Social Enterprise.

The questionnaire was made available online and as a paper document in English, French and Arabic. All questions were voluntary. No identifying information was recorded with the survey data. A total of 270 individuals fully completed the questionnaire on behalf of their household. Each received a \$10 gift card to compensate them for their time and effort in completing the questionnaire.

This report will outline some of the significant findings of the study. All quotes were taken from answers Neighbours gave in response to the qualitative questions in the survey.



# Knowing our *Neighbours*

## Our Neighbours

While not all of our Neighbours responded to the survey, we are confident that the households in the survey provide a broadly representative sample of those who use our services. From the information collected, it was apparent that many of our Neighbours represented vulnerable segments of the population of Ottawa:

- 71% of households had at least one individual with a disability.
- 35% had at least one person who was BIPOC in their household.
- 42% of Neighbours were not born in Canada. A total of 25% of total Neighbours were households in which members did not have Canadian citizenship, and 14% of all households surveyed were refugees.
- 61% live in supportive housing, social rental housing, subsidized housing, rooming houses, with family/friends, or are homeless.





# Knowing our *Neighbours*

## Household Income

Of the households in the survey, 69% had an annual income before taxes of less than \$20,000. Just less than 53% had an income of \$15,000 per year or less, while almost 20% had an income of \$10,000 or less. Noteworthy here is that 61% of the households had at least one adult who had completed at least some college or university.

Only the minority of households had an adult in full- or part-time employment. The majority (58%) had at least one adult on the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP), and 27% had an adult on Ontario Works (OW). Almost 20% had an adult on the Canadian Pension Plan (CPP) and/or Old Age Security (OAS).

“There is not enough money to survive on ODSP”  
The basic annual social assistance rates for a single person on ODSP is \$14,028 and on OW is \$8,796. Adding in Federal and Provincial tax credits, these increase to \$10,385 and \$15,731, respectively. Note how this is far below the cost of a modest, basic standard of living as estimated by Statistics Canada’s Market-Based Measure (MBM). In 2019, the MBM for a single person household in Ottawa/Gatineau was \$21,480. Note that households with an

1. [Welfare in Canada - Canada - Maytree](#)

2. [Hunger-Report-2019-Feed-Ontario-Digital.pdf\(feedontario.ca\)](#)



# Knowing our *Neighbours*

## Household Income

income of less than 75% of the MBM are classified as being in Deep Income Poverty (DIP). The majority of households in the survey are below this threshold and so would be classified as in DIP.

Statistics Canada also calculates a Low Income Cut-Off (LICO) to identify households that are likely to spend a disproportionately large share of their income on the necessities of food, clothing and shelter. The LICO for large urban areas in 2019 was \$21,899. The vast majority of households in the survey were below this threshold.

*"I totally rely on PFC as my rent consumes so much (80%) of my ODSP"*

*"My current income is \$30 less than my rent"*

1. [Welfare in Canada - Canada - Maytree](#)

2. [Hunger-Report-2019-Feed-Ontario-Digital.pdf\(feedontario.ca\)](#)



# Knowing our *Neighbours*

## Food Security Status of Neighbour Households

To assess the degree of food insecurity among those who use the Parkdale Food Centre's Food Bank, the Household Food Security Survey Module (HFSSM) used by Statistics Canada was included in the questionnaire. The HFSSM provides a reliable and validated way in which to assess the food security status of households, and of adults and children within those households.

Of the households responding to the survey, 71% were severely food insecure, and a further 19% were moderately food insecure (see Figure 1). Only 7% of households were food secure. It is important to note that all these households had access to and used the food bank of Parkdale Food Centre. Even with the nutritious food made available to these households through the food bank, and opportunities to access our weekly no-cost produce market and meals to go, most remained highly food insecure.

3. Low income cut-offs (LICOs) before and after tax by community size and family size, in constant dollars (statcan.gc.ca).ca



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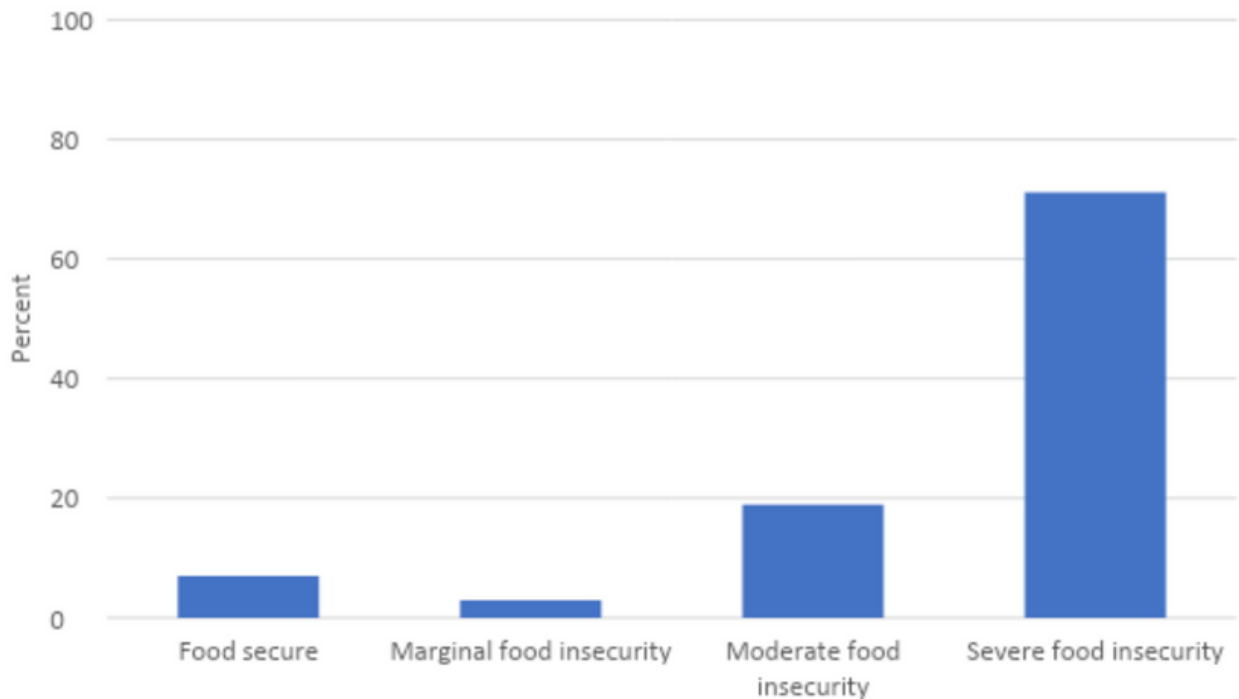
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# Knowing our *Neighbours*

FIGURE 1. LEVEL OF HOUSEHOLD FOOD SECURITY AMONGST SURVEY RESPONDENTS



The survey results showed how many of our Neighbours continually worried about how they would obtain enough food. Over the last year, 88% had worried that food would run out before they got money to buy more. Around 73% had eaten less than they felt they should because there wasn't enough money to buy food.

*"I worry a lot about having enough money to put food on the table for my family. I am never sure I will have enough, especially when it gets to the end of the month."*



# Knowing our *Neighbours*

For many of our Neighbours, going without food is an all too familiar norm. Over the last year, 51% had gone hungry because they could not afford enough food. Just over 40% had not eaten for a whole day because there wasn't enough money to buy food.

For 19% of households in the survey, this had happened almost every month over the last year.

*"I am ashamed to say it, but sometimes I never have the money to buy food. Then I go hungry."*

Where there are children in the household, adults do all that they can to ensure that they have enough to eat. In many cases, this means that adults go without food themselves. Households often also compromise on the food they feed to their children to ensure that they do not go hungry. In the last year, 77% of households with children had often or sometimes relied on a few kinds of low-cost food to feed their children. Despite this, in 41% of households with children, the children were often or sometimes not eating enough because they could not afford enough food.

*"I go without food myself. Never will my kids go hungry."*



# Knowing our *Neighbours*

## Getting and Preparing Food

Households in the survey spent a significant part of their income on food. On average, 29% of the monthly expenditure of these households was on food; this compares to less than 10% for the Canadian population in total. Most households shopped for food in discount stores (such as Giant Tiger and Food Basics). Over 60% purchased at least some of their food in a dollar store. Most households in the survey purchased food from multiple stores as a strategy to make their limited food budget go as far as possible.

*"I shop around to find the best deals on food. I never buy everything in one place. Still I need the food bank to get enough food to feed my family."*

Almost 60% of households prepared all or most of their food from raw ingredients. Most indicated that they enjoyed cooking. Over 75% rarely or never purchased takeout food or ate in a restaurant.

Sharing of food, within families and/or members of the community was common amongst the households in the survey. Almost 40% received food from family or friends. Most of these households received at least some food every one to two weeks.



# Knowing our *Neighbours*

## Food Bank Use

Most households that responded to the survey had been using a food bank for an extended period of time. Less than 15% had been using a food bank for less than one year (Figure 2), while 27% had used a food bank for between one and two years. Over 30% of our Neighbours had been using a food bank for five years or more.

For most of our Neighbours, the food bank is an established and ongoing source of food; it is far from an emergency measure that is used when money gets tight. Indeed, over the last year, well over half of households in the survey had used a food bank for eight months or more.

*"I didn't have enough money before the pandemic, and I certainly do not have enough money now"*

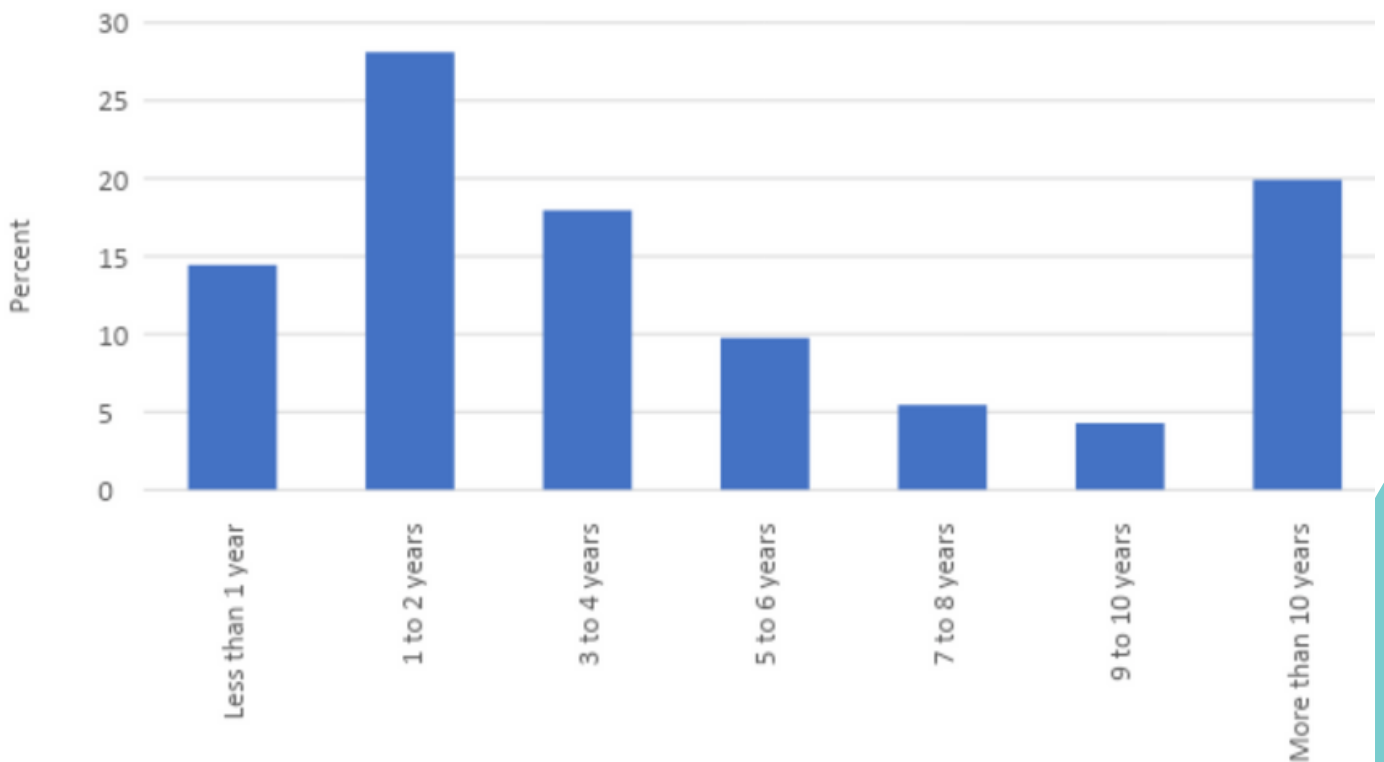
*"The financial instability became even worse due to Covid-19"*





# Knowing our *Neighbours*

FIGURE 2. NUMBER OF YEARS THAT HOUSEHOLDS HAD BEEN USING A FOOD BANK



For most households that responded to the survey, the only food bank they used was at Parkdale Food Centre. Indeed, only 26% of households in the survey had used another food bank in the last year. Our Neighbours are distributed across the City of Ottawa, with the majority coming from outside of the catchment area laid down by the Ottawa Food Bank. Those Neighbours from out of our catchment come to our food bank for a variety of reasons, but especially because of the types of food that Parkdale Food Centre makes available and the respect shown to our Neighbours.



# Knowing our *Neighbours*

*"Because you give me and my family healthy food to eat. You guys are compassionate, caring and even respond to me very well, like a family"*

*"I come because they often get donations that are better for my health and so I don't have to suffer with food that makes me sick. I love to look and Parkdale has raw ingredients that allow me to be creative"*

*"Because you get healthy food. The people are very helpful and pleasant. We get choice"*

*"For good quality food for our kids and my heart condition when I was pregnant. Our doctor referred me to this food bank because the food that you provide is clean, safe and healthy."*



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# Knowing our *Neighbours*

## What are the Implications?

The data collected from this survey supports the notion that food banking does not have a significant and demonstrable impact on food insecurity in large urban areas like Ottawa. Even with regular access to healthy foods in a choice-based model, as is offered by Parkdale Food Centre, approximately half of respondents reported going hungry because there wasn't enough food available to them.

The households in the survey used a multitude of strategies to make best use of their limited income and make use of the support services in the community. Thus, households visited a food bank, received food from friends and/or family, accessed meal programs, shopped for food at discount stores, prepared the majority of food from scratch, and avoided getting take-out and restaurant meals. In most cases, however, these habits were insufficient to keep households out of moderate to severe food insecurity.



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## What are the Implications?

Even before the survey, we were aware that the majority of our Neighbours identify with one or more mental and physical disabilities. For these households, the income provided by ODSP is way below what is needed to meet basic needs, especially given the extra costs that many people with disabilities face on a day-to-day basis, like special diets, adaptive equipment and services, and medications, among others. Furthermore, ODSP and OW rates have not changed significantly in 35 years when measured in relation to inflation, and have even gone down. The Parkdale Food Centre can only hope to make a limited dent in the hardship these Neighbours face.

The bottom line is that food insecurity in cities like Ottawa is a product of poverty. Food insecurity is a structural issue, that is an inevitable consequence of the fact that the social safety nets in a province like Ontario are nowhere near to providing basic needs that even Statistics Canada considers to be the minimum. The Parkdale Food Centre and other food banks are a critical resource for the poor, but will never solve the food insecurity problem. Change is needed at a policy level to ensure that all Canadians have the income to fulfil the basic needs for themselves and their families.

# Knowing our *Neighbours*

*“Food is a human right. Advocacy needs to be done...we need to decrease need for services that challenge our dignity”*



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