



**HARVEST**  
*nourishing our communities*

**2024**

# VOICES

Stories of Hunger and Poverty In Manitoba

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## Acknowledgements

Harvest Voices is a report dedicated to uplifting the voices of people who access food banks across Manitoba. This report provides statistical data gathered through surveys, identifying trends in poverty and food security across our province.

A special thank you to all Harvest Manitoba food bank recipients who participated in our survey, sharing their experiences and ideas. Thank you to our Community Food Network for helping us work towards a Manitoba where no one goes hungry.

Thank you to our team of staff and student volunteers for their help in gathering information, conducting research, and creating this report – Steve Boyd, Amber Cotteau, Aleecia Doyle, Reese Egyed, Meaghan Erbus, Jen Gair, John Heim, Maslen Johnston, Allison Kolynchuk, Stephanie Mikos, Jazlyne Saromo, Heather Grace Taylor. We appreciate your commitment, time and support in developing and authoring this report.

Harvest Manitoba acknowledges that we are located on the original lands of the Anishinaabeg, Cree, Anishinew, Dakota, Dene, and on the homeland of The Red River Metis.

We respect the sovereignty of each nation and the Treaties made on these territories. We are committed to continuously reflecting on our role as Treaty partners. We recognize the serious harms caused by colonialism and its lasting impacts on Indigenous peoples across our province, and our country.

Indigenous people have deep connections to the land and have made significant contributions to this territory. In the spirit of reconciliation and collaboration, we dedicate ourselves to moving forward with Indigenous communities. We honour the land itself and those who remain protectors of it, The Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island.

# Executive Summary

Harvest Manitoba is Manitoba's food bank, and the need for our work has never been greater. Harvest Manitoba hit record-high numbers this past year, with over 50,000 people accessing our food banks each month somewhere in our province. We continue to share food through our 380+ agency food partners, a total of 13 million pounds of food this year.

Nationally, food bank use has skyrocketed to over 2 million visits this past March. Food bank capacity is being reached, and more and more people are worried about where their next meal will come from.

Over the past three years, Harvest Manitoba has surveyed food bank recipients to better understand why people access a food bank and what needs to happen for them to stop. This report provides an in-depth look at the experiences of food bank recipients in Manitoba, the impacts of food insecurity, inflation, and the rising cost of living. The findings are based on a survey conducted from May 2024 to September 2024.

The data reveals that food bank usage is a diverse issue, impacting a wide range of the populations, from those relying on employment and income assistance to seniors and individuals living with disabilities.

The rising costs and dwindling purchasing power over the past few years have had a significant impact on families and individuals. Harvest Voices illustrates the profound real-world impact of the challenges facing Manitoba families and individuals as they struggle to keep up with the increased cost of living.


Harvest Manitoba continues to assist the community by addressing immediate needs through our food banks and other community partners. However, we must focus on tackling the underlying economic factors contributing to food insecurity, such as making life more affordable.


Through policy change, we can make people's lives better. People can regain autonomy over their choices and increase their livelihood.


It is essential that all levels of government implement policies that build people up and improve the economic and social structures in our province.


Harvest Voices shines a light on the heartbreaking realities of food insecurity in Manitoba. The personal stories of individuals who have turned to food banks highlight the immense challenges they face daily. By courageously sharing their experiences, these resilient community members offer a glimpse into the human struggle against hunger. Their vulnerability and hope for a food-secure province are both inspiring and serve as a powerful call to action.


## KEY FINDINGS INCLUDE:


 Almost half (45%) of clients rely on employment as their main income source.

 Half of all clients (50%) are living with a disability.

 Almost all clients (85%) live in rented housing, including subsidized and rent-geared-to-income housing.

 Most clients (68%) are female.

 Nearly two-thirds (62%) of respondents have children.

 Two-thirds of food bank clients (66%) earn \$20,000 or less per year, which is below the poverty line in Manitoba for a single person (\$25,471).

*“In our family, only my husband works. I can't go to work because of the small children. When I can work full-time, I hope we won't need to go to the food bank.”*

*- Harvest Voices Respondent*



# Respondent Demographics

Respondents to the Harvest Voices Survey are predominantly female (68%), with an average age of 42. However, due to the high cost of food prices, inflation, and housing costs, we are seeing an increase in food bank use from all groups of people. Wages and higher education are not enough for people to make ends meet when 45% of food bank clients rely mainly on employment income and more than half of respondents have some form of post-secondary education (56%).

The average household size is three people. Around two-thirds of respondents have children (62%), and of those respondents, 47% have children under the age of 18. One in ten clients access food banks because they are single parents (14%), and of unemployed clients (63%), 22% cannot work due to caregiving roles.

*“... what I get paid from disability benefits just isn’t enough to get by.”*

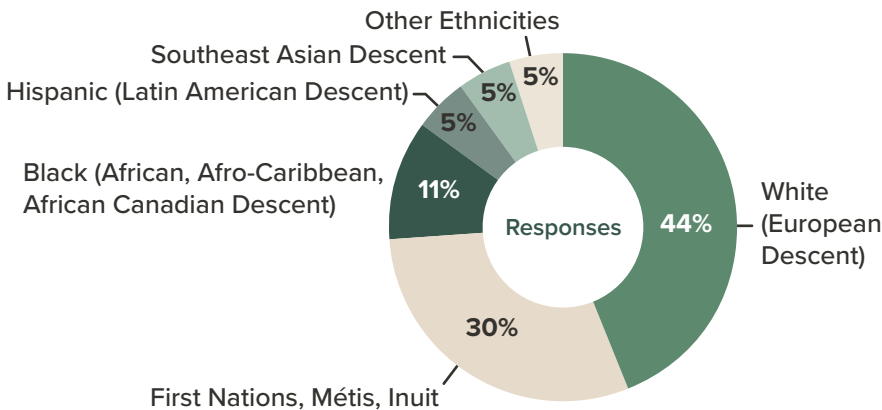
- Harvest Voices Respondent

Almost half of respondents have been accessing food banks for less than a year (47%) and just over one-third of respondents have been accessing food banks for 1-4 years (35%). Most clients access food banks due to a general lack of income to make ends meet (58%). Other reasons include living on savings (16%), loss of job (15%), and being a newcomer (14%). All clients admit that food prices affect the way they shop (97%) and most clients run out of food at home before they can buy more (74%).

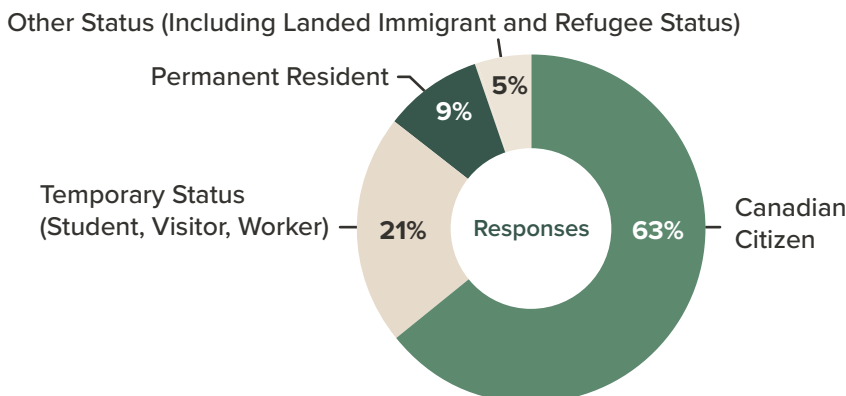
Housing costs put pressure on food bank clients: most rent a space, including subsidized or rent geared to income homes (85%). Two-thirds of respondents say that they make \$20,000 or less per year (66%), which is below the poverty line in Manitoba of \$25,471 for a single person.

Half of food bank clients are living with a disability or health condition (50%). For those who are unemployed, almost half of respondents say that their illness or disability is preventing them from working (47%). When it comes to reasons for getting food from a food bank, about a quarter of respondents say it is because of their disability or condition (22%).

## ETHNICITIES OF CLIENTS:



## CITIZENSHIP OF CLIENTS:



## WHAT CAN HARVEST MANITOBA DO TO HELP SHRINK OR END YOUR NEED FOR A FOOD BANK?

- 1 Help with access to employment (training, education, etc.)
- 2 Advocate for more affordable housing
- 3 Advocate for increased social assistance benefits (EIA/Disability)
- 4 Consult people with lived experience
- 5 Advocate for improved support for newcomers

*“Things were going good for a while but prices at grocery stores are going up more and more.”*

- Harvest Voices Respondent



### **INFLATION:**

The rate at which the prices for goods and services in Manitoba are rising, and in effect, the purchasing power of families is decreasing.

### **INDEXING TO INFLATION:**

Financial supports are indexed to inflation when they increase annually along with the rate of inflation instead of remaining the same year after year. Some examples include Rent Assist, the Canada Child Benefit, and Canadian Pension Plan payments.

## Experiences with Rising Costs

Those who live on lower incomes feel the effects of inflation more than anyone, as they often spend a greater part of their income on food, transportation, and shelter, with little left over afterwards.

Food bank clients experience high levels of food insecurity; most clients consistently run out of food before they can buy more (75%). One in three food bank clients is left hungry at least once a week because they cannot afford enough food (36%). Over half of food bank clients are satisfied with the food they receive from Harvest Manitoba (60%); understanding that hampers are meant to supplement their diets, they request more protein (72%), more fresh vegetables (63%) or dairy products (51%).

All food bank clients admit that the current food prices affect the way that they shop (97%), and almost all are unable to afford to buy healthy food (88%). According to Statistics Canada, Manitoba has one of the highest rates

of food inflation in the country and our inflation rate is well above the national average.<sup>3,4</sup> Over the past few years (2021 to 2024), grocery prices have risen by a significant 22%.<sup>4</sup> There are several reasons for the rising prices we all see at the store. Recognizing that grocery stores are not free of outside influences; for example, the cost of food production has increased along with the cost of animal feed, global events cause disruptions in supply chains, climate change affects yields from farms, labour shortages and increased costs in the trucking industry.<sup>5</sup>

Given the many factors that contribute to inflation, approaches to solving inflation need to be wide-ranging and can take time to be put into place.<sup>5</sup> Food Banks Canada has recommended a new benefit for all Canadians called the Groceries and Essentials Benefit (GEB). This support would meet some of the immediate needs of lower-income families to put food on their tables. The structure of this benefit is already in place; it would be paid out in a similar way to the quarterly GST payments families are already receiving. It is encouraging that a similar benefit, the Working Canadians Rebate, is set to roll out in early spring 2025. Although, it is important that a benefit directly addressing food costs such as the GEB is considered.

*“As a single mom raising two teens, you’re constantly working just to make ends meet. All your energy goes into surviving.”*

*- Harvest Voices Respondent*



## Impacts on Families and Children

Many families with children are seen at food banks in Manitoba. Two-thirds of all clients have children (62%) and 47% have children under the age of 18 years. Almost half of food bank clients are single (42% single, 32% married). One-in-five clients cannot work due to caregiver roles (22%).

### UNIVERSAL SCHOOL NUTRITION PROGRAM

Every child has the opportunity to eat healthy meals and snacks at school at no cost to the student, regardless of perceived need.

There is a need for more childcare services in Manitoba; 76% of children in our province live in areas without adequate childcare space.<sup>7</sup> Only half of children under 5 years old have a childcare spot and one-quarter of children under 5 years are on a waitlist.<sup>8</sup> Finding childcare is a top challenge for parents.<sup>8</sup> In general, women do more unpaid caregiving roles than men and when childcare is not available, it is usually the mother who is the lower-earning parent and stays home with the children. This sets women behind in their careers and lifelong social, economic outlook because of reduced work options and the need to postpone returning to work.<sup>7,8</sup>

Single parents can access provincial and federal income supports, allowing them to stay at home with their children, but these benefits get reduced when the child turns 7 years old and again when they turn 12 years old. The benefits are also reduced if the parent finds part-time work, which discourages their career development.<sup>9</sup>

Daycare is important for child development and leads to more success in school. When lack thereof is combined with poverty, children and their families are put at a disadvantage.<sup>10</sup> For example, universal childcare in other provinces was shown in studies to reduce the poverty rate for single-parent households from 60.3% to 20.45%.<sup>11</sup> Our provincial government is increasing their investment into childcare, including creating more \$2-10/day childcare spaces and extending that program to non-school days.<sup>12</sup> Subsidized daycare costs are a benefit to families, but only if they are able find a licenced daycare spot among the web of limited spaces and long waitlists.<sup>8</sup>

The Manitoba Government has recently announced a Universal School Nutrition Program, including grants for school divisions to obtain equipment and staff to run the



programs.<sup>13</sup> The federal government will be providing additional funding of \$17.2 million over the next three years for school nutrition in Manitoba, topping up the provincial investment of \$30 million for this program.<sup>14</sup>

The Universal School Nutrition Program is a positive step forward for our province, as many food bank clients have asked Harvest Manitoba to advocate for a universal school nutrition program (23%). For years, Harvest Manitoba has consistently supplied schools with healthy food for snack programs. Our Meals2Go program provides children with take-home food for weekends and during summer break. Fifteen schools throughout five school divisions, including the Opaskwayak Educational Branch in Northern Manitoba, are signed up for the Meals2Go program. Harvest Manitoba is incredibly grateful to the Government of Manitoba for their generous support of the Meals2Go program, enabling us to provide nutritious meals to 5,000 children every week.

*“I must help support [my son] with my disability income while remaining in my own home. When I have a disability, it's a loss in income, having to support someone with no income.”*

*- Harvest Voices Respondent*

It is proven that children who have reliable, healthy food at school develop lifelong food literacy habits and have an improved learning experience.<sup>15</sup> Nutrition programs are a safe space where children can find encouragement, build relationships within the school and come together with other children of various ages and backgrounds.<sup>16</sup>

## Kenny's Story

Kenny arrived in Winnipeg on April 11, 2023, determined to build a better future for herself and her four children while her husband remained in Nigeria. As a full-time student studying business management and working as a support worker, she quickly realized how challenging it would be to make ends meet.

Her savings started to dwindle as tuition fees, rent, and basic living expenses piled up. Working 20 hours a week as an international student, the cost of living in Winnipeg became overwhelming and it seemed impossible to get ahead.

Amid these struggles, Kenny found support from Harvest Manitoba. "When I first got food from Harvest, I was like, 'Wow, these people are doing excellent work by giving us a helping hand and not letting us go hungry,'" she explains. Her food bank ensured that her children had enough to eat and provided much-needed stability and community during a difficult time.

Though she cannot contribute financially, Kenny is determined to give back to Harvest Manitoba. She and her children have become volunteers and are incredibly grateful for the support they have received. "I'm praying to God that I get a good job so that I can make an impact in people's lives and give back to Harvest Manitoba," she shares.

Unfortunately, Kenny's story of struggling to provide for herself and her family is not unique. Many low-income individuals work tirelessly yet remain on the edge of financial and food insecurity and are unable to get ahead. With rising living costs and limited job opportunities pushing more people into an unbreakable cycle of poverty, the call for systemic change has grown more urgent than ever before.

*\*See recommendation #5 on page 17.*



## Susan's Story

Susan, 63, grew up in Minnedosa and now lives alone, relying on the Canada Pension Plan Disability (CPPD) benefit as her main source of income.

Once active and always on the go with family and camping trips, her world shifted drastically when her husband passed away 15 years ago. Her health worsened, and with heart issues requiring stents and a heart patch, working became impossible. Five years ago, she turned to her local food bank for support. "I was so active before, and I worked, and all of a sudden, that all dropped and faded away. Now, I have to learn to adapt to everything from having a roof over my head to buying clothes to buying food," she says.

With food prices rising, Susan often puts items back on store shelves and chooses only what she can afford. She relies on Harvest Manitoba to stretch her budget and free up money for bills like her phone—the connection she treasures most to stay in touch with her family every day. Without a car, she walks everywhere despite her declining health and relies on her family for winter car rides to the food bank.

Affordable housing and increased CPPD payments would help Susan cover expenses without needing a food bank. As a Sixties Scoop survivor, she recently learned she might qualify for settlement support, which would mean finally getting a car and some independence. For now, she is grateful for Harvest's help, which gives her just enough breathing room to stay connected with her family and keep going.

*"I was so active before, and I worked, and all of a sudden, that all dropped and faded away."*

*\*See recommendation #9 on page 17.*



## Supporting our Seniors

Many seniors in our province are struggling every day to put healthy food on their tables and afford the basics of housing, transportation, and health services.<sup>17</sup> Age creates barriers to making ends meet. One of every five (19%) unemployed food bank clients cannot work due to age.

Over one in ten food bank clients (15%) relies on the following social assistance benefits: Canadian Pension Plan, Old Age Security (monthly payments of up to \$800 per month for those aged 65+ years)<sup>18</sup> and/or Guaranteed Income Supplement (additional support of up to \$1086 per month for low-income seniors).<sup>19</sup> It is possible to receive all these benefits so long as a person is eligible. While these benefits are helpful, seniors in Manitoba find that it is not enough to keep up with the high costs of living.

There is hope on the horizon for seniors in Manitoba. In recognition that social assistance payments do not quite meet the needs of older adults, the provincial government has announced that they will increase funding by \$980 million to health and long-term care.<sup>12</sup> This also includes new initiatives like The Safe and Healthy Home for Seniors program that provides grants to those who need help to cover the costs of home care and home accessibility upgrades. Seniors over 65, with incomes lower than \$60,000/year, can apply for up to \$5,000 or \$6,500 in rural areas.<sup>20</sup>

**“Cost of living needs to decrease while income increases. EIA barely covers essentials. Food is unbelievably expensive.”**

**- Harvest Voices Respondent**



*Sheri and Sylvia (food bank clients) pictured at Riverwood Church Food Bank.*

## Living on Less with a Disability

Overwhelmingly, the reason why people turn to food banks is because they do not have enough money to make ends meet (58%) or because they have a disability or medical condition (22%). Half of all food bank clients are living with a disability (50%) and of those, 83.8% say their disability affects their daily life due to physical limits (53%) and/or mental illness (50%). A lesser number of clients with disabilities have learning deficits (17%) or sensory disabilities like hearing or visual loss (11%).

Most foodbank clients are unemployed (63%) and of these, half cannot work due to living with a disability (47%). Many food bank clients (43%) have made it clear that they want Harvest Manitoba to advocate for better social assistance benefits.

### **WELFARE:**

In Manitoba, households that qualify for basic social assistance payments also qualify for: recurring additional social assistance payments from the province, Federal child benefits for households with children, and Federal tax credits and/or benefits. Together, these components form a household's total welfare income.<sup>28</sup>

### **POVERTY LINE:**

The Market Basket Measure (MBM), Canada's Official Poverty Line, identifies households whose disposable income is less than the cost of a "basket" of goods and services that represents a basic standard of living.

### **CANADIAN DISABILITY BENEFIT:**

Set to roll out next summer 2025, the Canadian Disability Benefit (CDB) allows an additional benefit amount of \$200 a month for a total of \$2,400 a year for people who are living with a disability.



Poverty is a social determinant of health, meaning that people who have lower incomes live in a cycle where food insecurity and other issues like unstable housing contribute to their existing health conditions.<sup>21</sup> Disability brings a lot of additional living expenses to be considered, such as equipment, medications, and home care. These costs further push disadvantaged households into poverty.<sup>22</sup> Studies have shown that increased social assistance benefits, for those who rely on them, are able to reduce food insecurity by a quarter (23%).<sup>23</sup>

A new federal support called the Canada Disability Benefit (CDB) is in the works to be released next summer 2025. This benefit will increase the amount of monthly income a person will receive when living with a disability in Manitoba by up to an additional \$200 per month. The CDB is important as the first statutory disability benefit in Canada.<sup>24</sup> It will also be indexed to inflation, meaning that the benefit amount will increase along with the cost of living.<sup>25</sup> When a person on social assistance earns additional income, there is a risk that their provincial income support will be “clawed-back”, in other words, reduced. Fortunately, Manitoba has announced a commitment to not claw back a person’s benefits when they receive the CDB.<sup>26</sup> This significant step forward could not have been possible without the advocacy work of Daily Bread Food Bank, Harvest Manitoba, organizational partners and 27,000 supporters who came together to call for a fully funded and accessible Canadian Disability Benefit (CDB). We will continue to advocate for further improvements to ensure the benefit effectively meets its intended goals of poverty reduction and support for people with disabilities.

Employment and Income Assistance (EIA and EIA Disability) is currently not enough to meet the basic needs of households who rely on it. A person on EIA receives less than a few hundred dollars every month for basic needs; this is meant for food, as well as other costs of daily life, transportation, clothing, hygiene items, and recreation.<sup>27</sup>

Alongside Make Poverty History Manitoba and other community groups, Harvest Manitoba has been advocating for a Liveable Basic Needs Benefit (LBNB). The LBNB would replace the basic needs portion of EIA/Disability with a new benefit that would be available for all low-income households, including those not currently receiving EIA/Disability. In combination with other social assistance benefits already available, the LBNB would raise the total welfare income of households in Manitoba to at least Canada’s official poverty line. It would provide a floor for every Manitoban to meet their basic needs.<sup>27</sup>

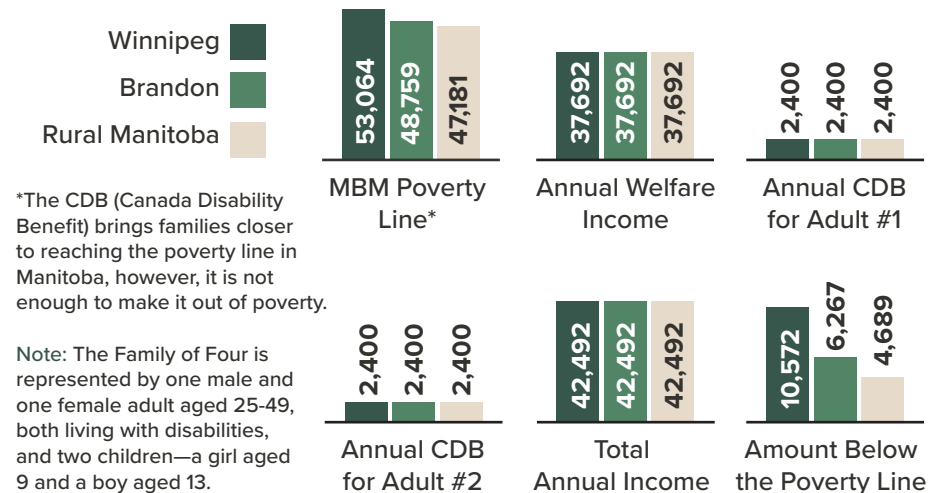


Harvest Manitoba food bank client and volunteer sorting potatoes.

*"To end my need for a food bank, I'd have to not be disabled and not on EIA assistance. The amount provided for people with a disability is not enough to cover even basic food costs in the current economy."*

- Harvest Voices Respondent

**LIVING AS A FAMILY OF FOUR ON DISABILITY SOCIAL ASSISTANCE.<sup>29,30</sup>**



# With and without: Jobs and Food Security

There is an increasing number of people with jobs who are facing hunger and turning to food banks when their hard work does not meet their household needs. Almost half of food bank clients rely on part-time or full-time employment as their main source of household income (45%). At the same time, most food bank clients earn a household income of less than \$20,000 per year (66%) and almost all food bank clients earn household incomes of less than \$30,000 per year (82%). These annual incomes are well below the poverty line for the average family in Winnipeg (\$53,064 per year).<sup>30</sup>

Wages in our province are not keeping up with the cost of living. Although Manitoba's minimum wage increases annually with inflation (currently \$15.80 per hour), it falls below the living wage in our province (\$19.21 per hour) which is calculated by considering the costs of housing, transportation and groceries.<sup>31</sup>

One in four workers in Manitoba earns less than a living wage, and most of these workers are women, newcomers or youth.<sup>2</sup> Raising the minimum wage in Manitoba to a living wage would reduce gender, racial or age-related pay gaps and ensure that all families can afford their basic needs,<sup>2</sup> especially since lower income-earning households feel the pressure of inflation more deeply; more of their income is directed towards essentials such as food and shelter, and they have a smaller financial cushion to rely on when those prices rise.<sup>2</sup>

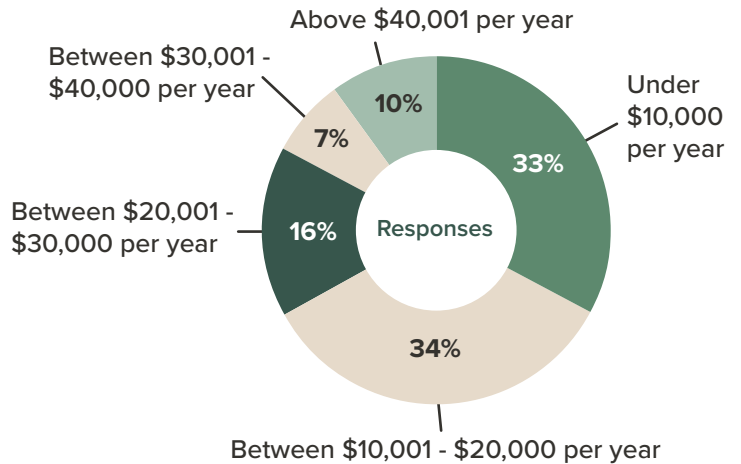
*“My partner couldn't find work. I was the single income earner in the family.”*

- Harvest Voices Respondent

Among unemployed food bank clients (63%), some are unable to find work because they are newcomers to Canada (15%). In terms of advocacy, half of food bank clients (47%) want Harvest Manitoba to help with employment training, and one quarter (23%) want Harvest Manitoba to advocate for improved support for newcomers. Newcomers face unique challenges when adapting to the workplace in Manitoba, including language barriers and an assessment process to recognize foreign schooling/credentials.<sup>32</sup>

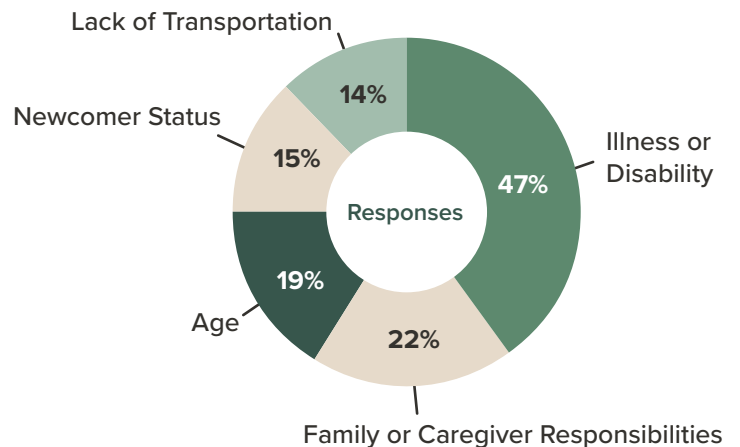
In terms of employment type, fewer people attend food banks when they are employed in professional trades (5%) compared to when they have employment from other full-time or part-time sources. Harvest Manitoba understands the value of skilled work; for years, we have operated a Warehouse Training Program. Operating on a referral basis, this program provides on-the-job training and professional skills such as resume-writing. Since 2022, there have been 15 groups of students. The employment rate upon graduating is 80%. Especially for newcomers, the Warehouse Training program is valuable in establishing connections, references and an introduction to workplace culture.

## HOUSEHOLD INCOME LEVELS:



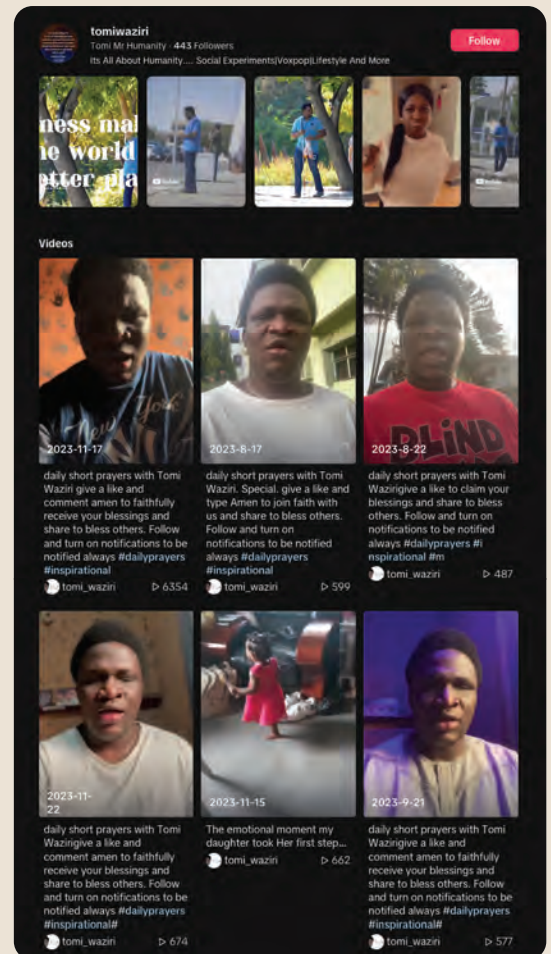
## REASONS FOR UNEMPLOYMENT:

\*Note: respondents could select more than one answer.





# Oluwatomi's Story



Tomi on TikTok (@TomiWaziri)

Oluwatomi's (Tomi's) journey to Canada was a leap of faith driven by the hope for a safer, better life for his family. In November 2023, he and his wife Maria arrived in Winnipeg with their two young children, William, 4, and Star, 2, hoping to escape the hardships and violence of Nigeria. Five years ago, Tomi faced a tragedy that changed his life forever—he was robbed and shot in the face, leaving him permanently blind. The trauma of that day solidified his decision to start anew in Canada. But beginning again has not been easy.

Life here is safer, but the challenges of raising a young family on a tight income are endless. Tomi's blindness makes finding work especially difficult. He would love to take on jobs like driving for Uber to earn extra income but is unable to due to his disability. While Maria works as a support worker, the family also relies on Tomi's disability assistance to get by. The rising cost of basics such as milk, fruit, and vegetables stretch their budget to its limit. To make ends meet, Tomi and Maria often skip meals, eating only twice a day so they can prioritize feeding their children.

For Tomi, the emotional burden of being unable to give his children everything they need is heavy. He shares, "When my son wants chocolates from the grocery store, and I'm not able to afford it, it makes me feel sad." The inability to give his children everything he wants pains him deeply, and it's made even harder by the frustration of knowing his blindness limits his options.

Harvest Manitoba has been a critical support for Tomi's family and helps them get by when money is tight. The food they receive allows them to stretch their budget further and ensures they can provide nutritious meals for the entire family. Help from Harvest Manitoba has eased some of the immense pressure they face, but the struggle to afford everyday items remains.

*"When my son wants chocolates from the grocery store, and I'm not able to afford it, it makes me feel sad."*

Still, Tomi is determined to create a better life for his family. He has channelled his story into purpose as a lifestyle content creator and shares his journey as a blind father on TikTok (@TomiWaziri) and YouTube (@TomiDilluminator). Tomi dreams of growing his content creation into a way to earn income for his family and give his children the life he envisions for them.

\*See recommendation #6 on page 17

## A Place to Eat: Housing Affordability

We recognize that having a home to share meals in can be just as important as having enough to eat. Half of all food bank clients (45%) are concerned with housing and want Harvest Manitoba to advocate for more affordability. Nearly all clients rent their homes (84%), including a quarter of clients (26%) living in subsidized housing. According to Statistics Canada, there has been a growth of rental households in the past decade: the number has doubled since 2011. This is particularly the case for newcomers, young adults and in downtown neighborhoods. People who live in poverty are three times more likely to be renters.<sup>33</sup> Given that many clients want more affordable housing, market prices do not meet the needs of those who are renting their homes.

### **AFFORDABLE HOUSING:**

In Manitoba, housing is considered “affordable” if it costs less than 30% of a household’s income. It is a broad term that is used freely. It can be applied to all types of housing provided by the private, public, and non-profit sectors.

### **RENT-GEARED-TO-INCOME:**

Otherwise known as subsidized housing, Rent-geared-to-income is strictly set to 30% of a household's income. This is targeted at households with low or fixed incomes. Renters in these units have their rent costs assessed yearly. Rent-geared-to-income is provided by the Manitoba Housing Authority, Winnipeg Housing and Rehabilitation Corporation and various non-profit and cooperative housing providers.

Housing is called ‘affordable’ when less than 30% of an individual’s monthly income is dedicated to rent.<sup>34</sup> Yet, over half of clients (58%) admit they do not have enough money every month to make ends meet, let alone comfortably pay rent. Affordable housing is scarce in Manitoba, and many low-income families are forced into less-suitable units when trying to manage their monthly costs. The average rent of a 2-bedroom apartment in Winnipeg is \$1,427 per month.<sup>35</sup> Food bank clients report that, on average, their rental costs are not far behind, at \$1,011.67 per month. In theory, food bank clients would need to have a household income of \$3,372 per month for their average rent to be affordable according to the 30% rule. Most client households (82%) earn less than \$30,000 per year or \$2,500 per month. Two-thirds (66%) earn less than \$20,000 per year, or \$1,666 per month. The reality is that most food bank clients are unable to find appropriate, affordable housing for their families.

Few opportunities exist to reduce rental costs. Programs such as The Residential Renters Tax Credit offer savings of up to \$575 annually for renters (recently increased from \$525).<sup>12</sup> Rent Assist is indexed to inflation and offers up to \$636 monthly to help renters with affordability. Rent Assist is useful for households living with low incomes, particularly those on EIA. However, the program excludes those living in assisted living spaces or in student housing.<sup>36</sup> Fortunately, the Manitoba government is taking notice of housing issues. It has dedicated a substantial portion of its budget to building and maintaining affordable housing, including incentives for building multi-unit developments.<sup>12</sup>

Even when reasonable housing has been found, families in Manitoba are still at risk of annual rent increases. The Residential Tenancies Act sets guidelines every year for rent increases. After a two-year freeze, the guideline was set at 3% in 2024 and will fall to 1.7% in 2025. However, there are many housing types that these guidelines do not affect. For example, units renting for more than \$1,640 per month, several types of social housing and rental units built after 2005.<sup>37</sup> The Residential Tenancies Act also permits landlords to request above guideline increases, which puts renters at risk of eviction if they cannot afford the elevated rent cost.<sup>38</sup>





# Transportation and Daily Life

Food security is defined not just by food availability but also by reliable access to that food. Almost one in five food bank clients (14%) cannot find work due to lack of transportation and struggle with finding a means to get to and from grocery stores or food bank appointments. Riding a bus and walking are the main modes of transportation for food bank clients (58%). Affordability is important for these clients, as full-fare bus rates are \$3.25 one-way, which means that a person commuting to work each day on the bus would pay \$130/month, let alone an additional \$2.75/trip per child.<sup>39</sup>



*“The whole program is very helpful for newcomers like us. It helps us save money for other monthly bills and kick off our new start. In the future, once we are stable and settled, we’d like to pay it forward.”*

*- Harvest Voices Respondent*

Through previous Harvest Voice reports and conversations, we find that clients typically opt for the use of bus tickets rather than bus passes because of the difficulty to afford a large monthly payment for a pass. Most food bank clients (82%) have household incomes less than \$30,000 per year, meaning that they qualify for the Winnipeg Transit WINNpass, which offers a 50% discount on transit fares. The WINNpass program has recently expanded to include youth who are living in low-income households and newcomers who have been in Canada for less than one year.<sup>40</sup> For riders not eligible for WINNpass, the Peggo card offers some affordability by reducing bus fares by 35 cents one-way in comparison to coin tender.<sup>39</sup> Considering that most food bank clients (85%) do not have leftover funds for recreational activities, affordable bus fare makes a substantial difference for families when they are going for outings or enjoying daily life.

However, the accessibility of the Peggo system leaves room for improvement. These low-income bus passes can only be purchased from Winnipeg Transit customer service stalls or from limited retail locations.<sup>41</sup> Oftentimes, Peggo cards are purchased from small convenience stores, but barriers are created when these stores close.<sup>42</sup> The loss of convenience stores creates

an additional hurdle for those without additional options nearby.

Half of all food bank clients are living with a disability (50%). While most say that their disability limits their daily activities (84%), only 2.95% have made use of Handi-Transit, known officially as Winnipeg Transit Plus. Handi-Transit provides flexible on-demand service at the same fare rate as regular service (\$2.75 one-way).<sup>43,44</sup>

The low ridership of our food bank clients, despite the quality of this service, suggests uneasy access: that it needs to be advertised better, or that the needs testing may be too strict. For example, two requirements for use are the inability to walk 170 meters or the use of a wheelchair; primarily leg-related disabilities are addressed, while someone with a disability affecting their arms or an individual with sensory needs would have more difficulty accessing Handi-Transit.<sup>45</sup>

Surprisingly, given the costs of car ownership, one in four food bank clients drive their own vehicle (26%). An additional 20% participate in ridesharing/carpooling, and 6% regularly borrow a vehicle. There has been some improvement in vehicle costs: Manitoba has been continuing a gas tax holiday which lowered fuel prices,<sup>12</sup> and Manitoba Public Insurance (MPI) has put a pause

on increasing basic vehicle insurance rates.<sup>46</sup> However, these solutions are not perfect: studies show that policies disproportionately reducing the cost of car insurance or gas improve affordability for higher-income earners, as their savings are directly linked to the amount spent.<sup>10</sup>

## MOST COMMON MODES OF TRANSPORTATION:



Taking the bus and walking



Use own car



Carpool or ride-share



Cycling



Handi-Transit

# Building Partnerships in the North

One-third (30%) of food bank clients identify as First Nations, Métis, or Inuit. In the past two years, we have strengthened our support for remote northern communities through government backing and strong community partnerships to tackle food insecurity.

We were proud to become the first food bank in Canada to join the Government of Canada's Nutrition North Program, which offers crucial subsidies to help transport food to remote areas. This program has allowed us to deliver over 250,000 pounds of nutritious food last fiscal year to ten northern First Nations communities.

Through partnerships, including Memorandums of Understanding with Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak (MKO) and the Wiiche'iwaymagon collaborative, we are expanding our impact. Our recent efforts include supporting the Thompson Food Bank, with plans to create a central Thompson Hub for more efficient food distribution. By working directly with local leaders, including the Chief and Council, social assistance caseworkers and volunteers, we ensure that food reaches those who need it most: especially Elders, children and those who are home-bound or living with disabilities.

*"Luckily for us, my husband and I just both got jobs. My husband's pension has also started coming in and will increase in April with his Old Age Security—so for us, things may be a bit different. We used Harvest Manitoba for many years when the kids were little, to the point where I actually worked there for about a year."*

- Harvest Voices Respondent

Getting food to northern communities is no easy feat and requires a mix of air cargo and ice road shipments, with local volunteers managing on-the-ground distribution. Funding for these initiatives comes from donors and the Nutrition North program's transportation support.

Northern Manitoba faces severe food insecurity, with about 60% of on-reserve households struggling<sup>47</sup>. High food costs are driven by isolation, limited road access, seasonal transportation, and reliance on air freight.

Looking forward, we are committed to expanding partnerships with Indigenous organizations, supporting local food production, and advocating for sustainable, community-led food solutions to help reduce food insecurity in every corner of the province.



## COMPARISON OF FOOD PRICES IN WINNIPEG VERSUS NORTHERN COMMUNITIES:<sup>49</sup>



Apples 3 lbs:  
Winnipeg (\$5.97)/Attawapiskat (\$7.99)



Flour 2.5 lbs:  
Winnipeg (\$3.77)/Moose Factory (\$9.99)



Salad Kit:  
Winnipeg (\$4.97)/Brochet (\$11.99)



Boneless Smoked Ham:  
Winnipeg (\$10.92)/Brochet (\$30.89)



Water Bottles 24 pack:  
Winnipeg (\$3.27)/Island Lake (\$32.99)



# Sheldon's Story

In Red Sucker Lake First Nation, food insecurity is a daily reality that Sheldon, a local food bank coordinator, knows well.

For over a year, he has seen firsthand how high transportation costs lead to higher prices, making it nearly impossible for families to afford essentials like baby formula, which often costs over \$100. "Harvest Manitoba has been an amazing help to our community," Sheldon says. Harvest Manitoba's food deliveries are a much-needed help in this remote area, where many have limited options for affordable food.

About a quarter of the community relies on the food bank, and Sheldon has noticed more young adults coming for support. But he has also seen the positive impact of their involvement in distributing the food they receive. "The youth are always bugging me, 'When's your next shipment from Harvest? I can't wait to go help and deliver food,'" Sheldon shares. For many, volunteering has given them purpose, and ten young adults have even become sober through this newfound hobby.

Beyond distributing food to the residents of Red Sucker Lake First Nation, Sheldon and other mentors teach the youth traditional practices like growing, gathering, hunting, and fishing sustainably. By passing down these skills, they encourage the next generation to eat culturally appropriate foods and keep traditional food-sharing networks alive.

Indigenous food sovereignty is essential to improving food security and reclaiming their culture, language, and community. Harvest Manitoba is proud to work alongside Red Sucker Lake First Nation in helping them achieve this vision for a healthier, more resilient future.

*\*See recommendation #10 on page 17*



*"Harvest Manitoba has been an amazing help to our community."*



# Katherine & John's Stories

Katherine, John, and Debbie have been friends for over 21 years, and their close bond led them to make the decision to pool their resources and share a single household. Together, they face the daily struggle of balancing bills, food costs, and an ever-tightening budget.

John spent the early days of the pandemic as a security guard working gruelling hours—12 to 16-hour shifts, seven days a week. This exhausting routine worsened his diabetes and advanced his osteoarthritis, eventually confining him to a wheelchair and forcing him out of work. John initially received Employment Insurance, but that support eventually ran out. "Everything is a juggling act," Katherine reflects. "I have so many balls up in the air and so many bills to pay; I'm never able to get ahead." Katherine, a call escalation specialist, is the primary income source for the 3-person household, while Debbie, John's wife, contributes through her disability benefits.

For Katherine and John, food has become a point of constant anxiety. With prices rising, Katherine is forced to scour five or six grocery stores in search of deals. "Groceries that used to fill ten bags barely cover three now," John shares, which is barely enough for their household. Additionally, his diabetes has worsened as the affordable food choices are often the least nutritious ones, which has made him insulin dependent.

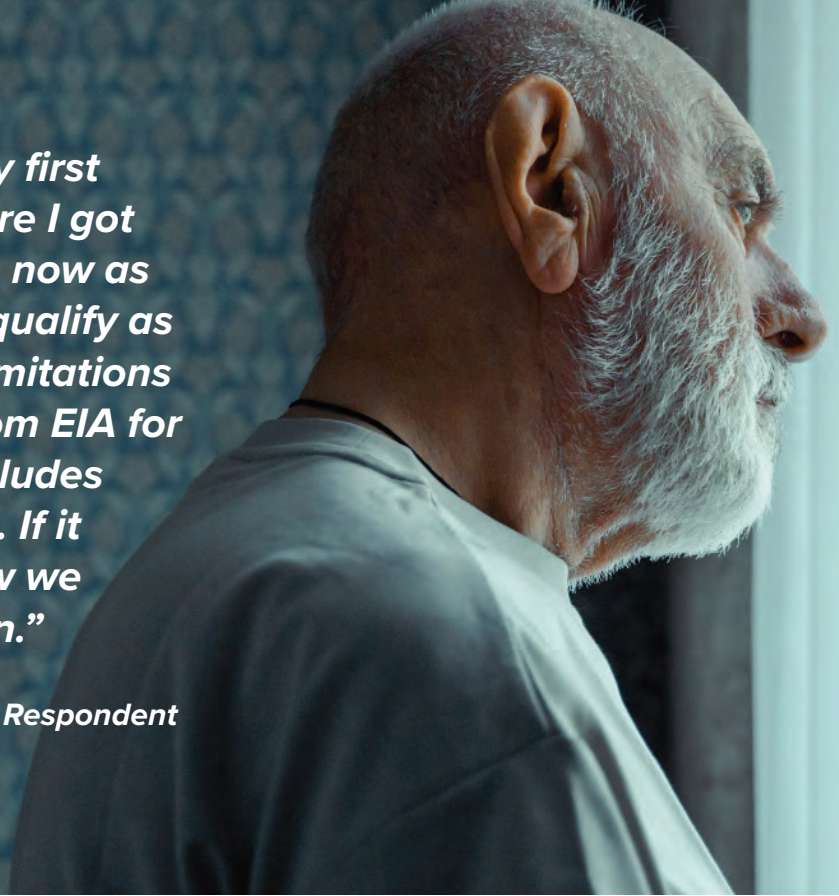
Two years ago, they turned to their local food bank for support. "You have to do what you have to do sometimes," John says, while Katherine adds, "...and every bit of help is greatly appreciated." If they had extra money, it would go toward buying fresh, healthy food or catching up on bills.

Katherine dreams of a society where neighbours support one another without question, and a sense of community lifts up those in need instead of being judged for using a food bank. "If society remains ignorant of poverty issues, it will be the downfall of our society," she states.

*\*See recommendations #6 and #7 on page 17*

***"I had to be on assistance with my first born in 2004 for a few years before I got on my feet. Benefits are the same now as they were 20 years ago. I do not qualify as disabled even with the physical limitations I have. I receive \$400 a month from EIA for food and other expenses. This includes paying for my phone and internet. If it were not for the food bank, I know we would go hungry much more often."***

***- Harvest Voices Respondent***



## Conclusion

Every person has the right to a proper standard of living and enough food to feed their families. Food bank use continues to increase year over year, which means that the root causes of food insecurity need to be addressed directly.

Over the past two years of this report, there has been an increase in respondents who are employed. Although minimum wage continues to rise, Manitobans still do not earn enough to make ends meet. The minimum wage falls behind a living wage in our province. No one should be going without food, especially when working full-time.

For unemployed food bank clients, the most reported reason for unemployment is illness or disability. Additionally, 41% say their disability affects their daily life. With such an overwhelming response, we must emphasize the need for adequate support so people living with a disability can have access to a higher quality of life. The gap between social assistance rates and cost of living is not exclusive to disability benefits. This disparity is present within all social assistance, including EIA and senior income support.

A substantial number of food bank clients want Harvest Manitoba to advocate for affordable housing. Our data displays the imbalance of rental expenses to income, leaving Manitobans with very little left over at the end of the month for necessities, let alone savings.

Affordable housing options are limited in Manitoba, and this needs to change before people can create a comfortable budget that meets their needs.

Families are faced with unique challenges when supporting their children and loved ones. Expenses increase significantly for people living with dependents, and a child benefit can only act as a supplement for people living in low-income households. Parents have spoken to us about the struggle between their wish to provide for their family and the need to limit their spending when faced with increasing costs.

Although we see common themes and obstacles, it is important to consider the individual as their response to each question lets us into vulnerable parts of their life. Their generous participation allows us to highlight the importance of speaking to those with lived experience. The stories we hear are shining examples of the resilience that exists in the community and the injustices that urgently need to be addressed.

Every month, over 50,000 people use food banks across Manitoba. This number is staggering, but there are ways we can change it. As a community, alongside other groups, including First Nations, Métis, Inuit, Indigenous-led organizations and Government, we hold more power if we work together. We can learn from one another and move forward with action that will lead us to a healthier future for all where no Manitoban goes hungry.



# Recommendations

Individuals and families have found it harder than ever to keep up with the cost of living. Throughout this report, real people have shared their stories of the financial strain these increased costs have caused them. This is a nationwide issue. All levels of government must implement policies that build people up and improve our economic and social systems to ensure Canadians are not condemned to a lifetime of poverty.

- 1** All levels of Government must consult people with lived experience in poverty when deciding on solutions. Personal voices must be at the forefront of policy change.
- 2** Harvest Manitoba urges the Government of Manitoba to act by creating a comprehensive, province-wide food security strategy. This would position Manitoba as a leader in addressing the critical issues of food insecurity and poverty that are plaguing our province. To develop and implement a successful strategy, we need the Government's full collaboration and support, working in partnership with key stakeholders from the community, non-profit, and private sectors.
- 3** Inflation and food prices must be addressed while considering the many factors that contribute to increasing costs. Solutions must be wide-ranging and will take time to be put into place. We recommend the implementation of the Groceries and Essentials Benefit (GEB) proposed by Food Banks Canada.
- 4** Too many people with jobs are left without enough food at home. We ask for the provincial government to make continued increases to minimum wage, keeping up with inflation.
- 5** Harvest Manitoba sees the need for improved access to lower-barrier employment, skills training, and educational opportunities for groups that are over-represented in poverty. This includes improved support for newcomers who have difficulty finding work.
- 6** Employment and Income Assistance (EIA and EIA Disability) payments are currently not enough to meet the basic needs of households. We recommend an increased investment in social assistance, and we ask for serious consideration of a Livable Basic Needs Benefit (LBNNB) that would ensure no household is left living below the poverty line in Manitoba.
- 7** Harvest Manitoba appreciates the Canadian Disability Benefit (CDB) increase in the 2024 Federal Budget. However, the \$200 monthly support allocated remains insufficient and is still below our official poverty line's Market Basket Measure (MBM). We urge the federal government to raise the CDB benefit to \$500 per month, enabling people with disabilities to adequately cover their basic living expenses and bring them closer to the MBM.
- 8** Harvest Manitoba acknowledges the recent investments into affordable childcare in Manitoba. Still, we also realize that licensed daycares are often at capacity, and long wait times create barriers for families wanting to access these programs. Childcare must be accessible and affordable so that parents have the freedom to go back to work or school if they so choose.
- 9** Too many families are living in less-than-suitable housing because of the high cost of renting a home in Manitoba. All levels of government must work together to address the housing crisis, prioritizing the need for more affordable housing with rent geared to 30% of a household's income.
- 10** Harvest Manitoba asks for continued action to be taken by all levels of government to address food insecurity in Northern Manitoba, where it is significantly higher than national averages. This will require a broad approach, including increasing local food production, enhancing transportation and storage infrastructure, supporting Indigenous-led strategies, and encouraging economic growth in northern communities.

# Methodology

Harvest Manitoba staff and volunteers surveyed adult Manitobans who registered to receive food support from one of the food banks within the Harvest Manitoba Community Food Network. Each household was allowed to complete one survey.

The survey consisted of 64 questions, which collected information on demographics, education, income, health, wellness, and food insecurity. Food bank clients were invited to participate in the survey by phone, in person during food bank visits, or online. Harvest Manitoba staff went to 19 separate food banks across the province to conduct surveys.

Information about the survey was communicated on flyers that were inserted into food bank hampers, promotional posters were displayed at food banks, and social media posts on Harvest Manitoba platforms. Cold calling was also done for existing food bank clients. Clients were compensated for participation: one in every hundred survey respondents was given a gift card of their choice. All those who shared stories were given gift cards.

The survey was conducted from May to September 2024, resulting in 649 surveys successfully completed and included in the analysis. The results represent a

snapshot in time of food bank usage during those months, and some results pertain to 2023.

The results are influenced by an underrepresentation of Manitobans living in Northern Communities, particularly those of First Nations, Inuit or Métis descent. We limited surveying in remote regions out of respect for autonomy and self-governance. Most surveys were completed by food bank clients within Winnipeg (82%), with a lesser amount being completed rurally (16%) or by Northern Communities (2%).

Results and analysis were generated using an online tool called Survey Sparrow. The data was cleaned to remove any invalid responses. The final analysis was completed by Harvest Manitoba in consultation with community partners. Our findings are reflected in this report. Any percentages referenced in this report that do not add up to 100% are due to rounding or the allowance of multiple answers being allowed for a single question.

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# Food. Funds. Time.

*On behalf of all of us at Harvest, we want to thank the thousands of Manitobans who help us work toward a healthier future for all where no Manitoban goes hungry.*

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