



Stories of Hunger
and Poverty In Manitoba

2025
VOICES



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 insecurity across our province. A special thank you to all Harvest Manitoba food bank recipients who participated in our survey, sharing their valuable 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 students for their help in gathering information, conducting research, and creating this report – Vince Barletta, Meaghan Erbus, Allison Kolynchuk, Jen Gair, Reese Egyed, Chloe Cosico, Stephanie Mikos, Kelsey Sutherland, Stephen Boyd, Manbir Kaur, Charmae Columna, and Nataya Dias. We appreciate your commitment, time, and support.

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 Métis. 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, the food the land provides, and those who remain honourable protectors of it: The Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This year marks an important milestone for Harvest Manitoba as we commemorated our 40th Anniversary as a leader in food security in Manitoba (1985-2025). The need for food support has been increasing at a staggering rate, and this report will explain the many issues affecting this rise in food bank use. Over 2.2 million people access food banks across Canada each month, up to 60,000 of them are here in Manitoba. The need for food banks in our province has increased by 150% since 2020. More families than ever are turning to food banks for help, and the root causes of their hunger must be addressed.

Harvest Voices 2025 represents five years of listening and learning from Manitoba families experiencing food insecurity. This year's report reveals that food insecurity in our province is a growing systemic challenge that demands comprehensive policy action. Over the past five years, the demographics of food bank clients have shifted dramatically, challenging common assumptions about poverty and food insecurity:

- The average household size increased from 2 to 2.9 people per household.
- Those with post-secondary education increased from one-third (33%) to two-thirds of clients (61%).
- Families with children under the age of 18 years of age have increased from 32% to 45%.
- 62% of families go hungry once a month or more because they can not afford food.

Food bank use continues to increase year over year, this is not a problem that can be solved by emergency food provision alone. The root causes such as inadequate income support, unaffordable housing, insufficient childcare, and barriers to employment require coordinated action across all levels of government.

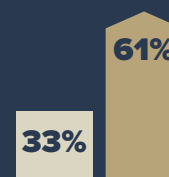
Harvest Manitoba's recommendations focus on systemic change such as implementing a Livable Basic Needs Benefit, increasing the Canadian Disability Benefit to \$500 per month, building affordable housing with integrated supports, expanding employment training, ensuring accessible childcare, and establishing a province-wide food security strategy.

After five years of Harvest Voices, the message is clear; no Manitoban should go hungry in a province of such abundance. Addressing food insecurity requires more than charity, it requires policy change informed by those with lived experience, investments in the social determinants of health, and a collective commitment to ensuring that all Manitobans can meet their basic needs with dignity and respect.

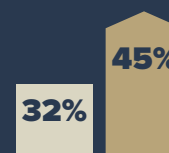
KEY FINDINGS INCLUDE:



The average household size increased from 2 to 2.9 people per household.



Those with at least some post secondary education increased from one-third (33%) to two-thirds of clients (61%).



Families with children under the age of 18 years of age have increased from 32% to 45%.

62%

62% of families go hungry once a month or more because they can not afford food.

"I actually haven't used a food bank for close to 20 years, I was affording food and not struggling to keep my family fed. But I have just signed up for one again today".

- Harvest Voices Respondent

RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

Our survey reveals that most food bank clients in Manitoba are female (68%), with an average age of 41 years. Just under half (44%) of respondents are single, and the average household size is three people. Most clients (92%) rely on rental housing. Less than one in 10 (8%) owns their home.

Most clients are Canadian Citizens (70%) as compared to permanent residents (11%) or those with temporary status (14%). There is equal representation of clients who are of white European descent (35%), compared to clients identifying as First Nation, Inuit or Métis (35%). Other ethnicities reported include, for example, clients who identify as Black (13%), Latinx (6%), Southeast Asian (5%), or South Asian (3%).

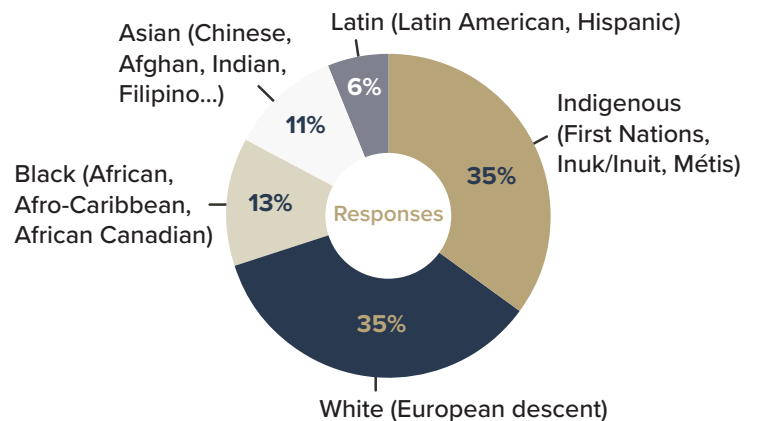
Many clients have graduated with post-secondary education (35%). One fifth of clients (21%) have university degrees, and 14% have college diplomas. Only 3% of clients have trade certifications. Most clients (38%) have a high school education or less.

Nearly half of clients (47%) have accessed food banks for less than a year, doing so only as a safety net, most often because they do not have enough money to make ends meet (60% of clients report that reason). Following that, the next most common reasons were the effects of a disability or medical condition (27%) or job loss (19%).

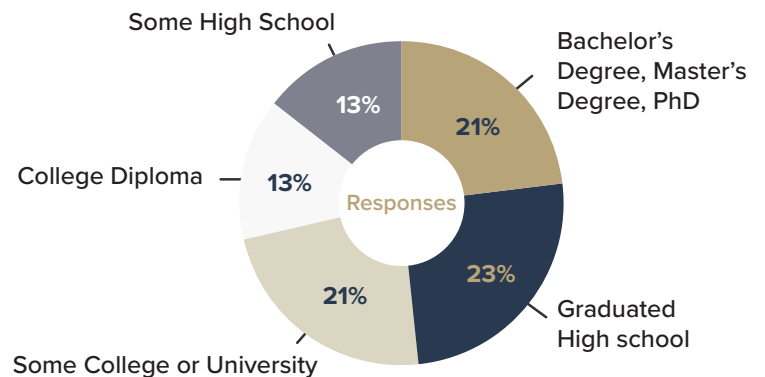
Two-thirds of clients are currently unemployed (69%). The most common issues that prevent clients from working are illness and disability (46%), being in a caregiving role to family (23%), or a lack of transportation (15%). Over half of respondents are living with a disability or health condition (55%), the most common of which are mental health, chronic pain, or mobility issues. Most clients who live with a disability say it impacts their daily life (80%). Almost all clients take the bus for transportation (62%) and/or walk (40%)

Most households earn less than \$20,000 per year (65%) and 80% make less than \$30,000 per year. Despite having low-income levels, the living expenses of households averaged over \$1,600 per month; in effect, nine out of ten clients (96%) cannot afford to buy healthy food at home and face the challenges of food insecurity daily.

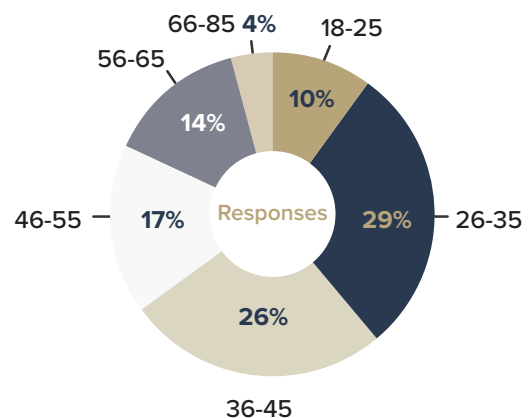
ETHNICITIES OF CLIENTS:



EDUCATION LEVEL:



AGE:





LOOKING BACK ON FIVE YEARS OF RESULTS

This year marks the 40th anniversary of Harvest Manitoba being a leader for food security in our province (1985-2025). Harvest Manitoba has a strong voice in our province and Harvest Voices has been an important report guiding Harvest Manitoba's work from 2021 to 2025.

As we approach these milestones, we can reflect on past findings and compare how far we have come. There is progress yet to be made as the demand for food banks still increases steadily year after year. Listening to our clients, directly through their stories, is the best possible way to understand our impact. Harvest Voices has been successful because it is an outlet for lived experience to be shared and valued. In return, we are better able to serve and advocate for families who are facing food insecurity.

Looking back over the past five years of Harvest Voices, notable world events have affected food bank usage in Manitoba. We all faced uncertain times during the COVID-19 pandemic. Uncertainty during the pandemic was reflected by many unemployed families accessing food banks. Then in 2022, just as the pandemic was fading into the background, millions of families were driven away from their homes by the Russo-Ukrainian war. During the peak of the conflict, until 2025, food banks also saw an influx of white-identifying displaced Ukrainian families.

Income sources also diversified during the past five years. There was an increase in the number of employed clients in 2023. This number has decreased over the last few years, landing at around 30% in 2025. We attribute this to increased overall costs of living, which put pressure on all families, employed or not. The education level of clients has also increased; the number of clients with less than a high school diploma has decreased from 32% (in 2020) to 13% (2025). This suggests that employment and education, though important, are no longer a reliable pathway out of poverty.

Household composition has also shifted. The average household size in 2020 was only two people. Now, the average family accessing food banks is a three-person household. This increase likely reflects the fact that 45% of households have children under the age of 18.

The unique issues affecting food bank clients in 2025 are close to home. Overall, year after year, families do not have enough income to make ends meet. This year, we have seen record numbers from our surveys related to housing costs, with the average amount spent on rent increasing from \$732 in 2020 to \$1,084 in 2025. Total monthly expenses per household have also increased 27% from an average of \$1296 in 2022 to \$1,649 in 2025.

Most clients do not own a car and rely on public transit or walking, which creates barriers to employment. This year, there have been recent changes to Winnipeg transit that have been met with mixed responses. And, as a province, we have faced a difficult wildfire season that drove many families out of their communities and into uncertain, temporary housing.

HOUSING

GROCERIES

TRANSPORTATION

EARNINGS



Throughout the years, some trends have not changed. We revisit issues that continue to affect our clients. Inflation and the cost of living have been driving factors in food bank use. Lack of affordable housing, insufficient social assistance (EIA and MSPD), low employment wages, and lack of support for those living with a disability are as present now as it was in our first Voices report. Each year, despite all the variables, one thing stays the same. The number of clients rises annually as we consistently see more families who need to use food banks. As a province, action is necessary to ensure that no Manitoban goes hungry.



Rob's Story

**See recommendations # 2, 3, 5, 6*

Not long ago, Rob was spending twelve hours a week in the dialysis chair, hooked up to machines that kept him alive but left him completely drained. “It sucked the life out of me,” he admits. “Sometimes I would sleep after and wouldn’t wake up until the next day.” Half of his week was spent hopping from bus to bus across the city, often dealing with an unreliable transit system that made getting to his appointments even more exhausting.

During that difficult period, he found support through his local food bank. “I’m thankful,” he says, “and proud to go to a food bank.” Before long, his food bank became a place of community that helped him stay strong through the tough times.

Then, after a seven-year wait, the transplant came, and everything changed for Rob. He gained a new sense of freedom after not being confined to his appointments three days a week. “I’m able to live now, not just survive,” he says. Before, his life was centred around treatments, rest, and just getting by. Now, his life looks completely different.

With his newfound sense of energy, Rob dedicates much of his time to giving back. He has volunteered with Harvest for over thirteen years, supporting the many programs that help those in need of food. “It’s like the Cheers bar,” he says with a smile, “Everyone knows your name.” Rob knows just how much hope can come from a simple act of kindness. For him, giving back is his way of saying thank-you to the community that helped him through challenging times.

Rob’s Budget:	2022	2025
Rent	\$820	\$870
Phone/Cable	\$120	\$160
Hydro	\$30	\$50
Food	\$120	\$200
Bus Pass	\$106	\$115
Laundry Card	\$10	\$10
Personal Expenses	\$120	\$205
Total	\$1,360	\$1,610

Like all people living on fixed incomes, increased costs of living are putting pressure on Rob.

“I always try to help people. Even if it’s just a smile, it can make a difference.”

- Rob, Harvest Voices Respondent

THE VALUE OF LIVED EXPERIENCE

At Harvest Manitoba, we value lived experience and the crucial role it holds in change and policymaking. There is no better way to put oneself in the shoes of another. Client stories must be valued and included in meaningful, equitable ways.

Lived experience refers to the sharing of social issues that have an impact on one’s life. In addition to food insecurity, lived experience stories can include other types of hardships such as racial discrimination, poverty, sexual orientation, gender, and lack of housing. These stories are valuable because they strengthen advocacy for policy change. They highlight how social issues affect not just one, but multiple aspects of life, and provide in-depth knowledge about gaps contributing to these systemic issues.



Lived experience also promotes collaboration between different organizations and sectors, comprehensively and holistically addressing these issues. Policies informed by lived experience are more likely to be truly representative of communities' true needs.

The meaningful inclusion of lived experiences embraces the value of human wisdom and knowledge. Those with lived experience are seen as experts and leaders. This shifts power imbalances and lifts them up into a guiding role alongside policymakers. This empowers and uplifts their voices, which have often been silenced by the oppression and injustices they have faced. Ideally, their voices provide a framework for new legislation.

Lived experience is a daily practice for us at Harvest Manitoba. Every page of Harvest Voices is influenced by lived experience. Each year, we also partner with students at the University of Manitoba's Max Rady College of Medicine. Every doctor who graduates in Manitoba has learned firsthand, from our clients, about the challenges and scope of food insecurity. This partnership with medical students is something we are proud of at Harvest Manitoba. The practice was shared in a peer-reviewed journal in 2021, so that other organizations can be inspired to understand their clients' perspectives as well.¹

Jay's Story

**See recommendations # 4, 5, 8*

When Jay first used a food bank, he wasn't sure he belonged there.

"I grew up being taught you didn't ask for help," he says. "So, for me, using a food bank felt like something only people who really needed it did. Then I realized, I really did need it."

During that difficult period, he found support through his local food bank. "I'm thankful," he says, "and proud to go to a food bank." Before long, his food bank became a place of community that helped him stay strong through the tough times.

"My goal is stability. I will never be the person that I used to be, but that doesn't mean I can't be who I want to be going forward."

- Jay, Harvest Voices Respondent

Before COVID-19, Jay was on the other side of non-profits, working in education and employment programs. Then, due to rising costs, job loss, and personal hardship, he was left with almost nothing. But despite this, Jay found ways to carry on. "You don't have a choice," he said candidly, "We're all just surviving because we have to." His first visit to a food bank three years ago was intimidating, but what he found was warmth, community, and kindness. "What they gave was more than enough; it was just me and my cat."



As his knowledge of community services grew, he realized that he wanted to give back. He started volunteering with the West End Resource Centre, where he now works part-time as an Outreach and Resource Counselor, helping people in the same community that helped him rebuild his life. "After being homeless for five months," he says, "It really makes you see what people go through." Jay is thankful for the connections he made throughout his journey and to the community that still helps him to this day.



Kenny's Story

**See recommendations # 4, 7*

Kenny has been rebuilding her life in Winnipeg since 2023, and it hasn't been easy. She works full-time as an overnight support worker, then spends her days caring for her kids while her husband remains in Nigeria. And still, even while working full-time, money is tight. Her last grocery trip cost more than \$120 for a single small bag. That's the reality many Manitobans are dealing with as prices keep climbing.

"The future is bright, we will keep pushing until we get there."

Over the past year, Kenny has made significant strides in her professional life. She has successfully graduated from a business management program at Red River College, something that she is incredibly proud of. "It was one of the happiest days of my life," she says, "You should always keep trying and learning." She is now focused on finding a job that better aligns with her studies to help secure permanent residency.

"When I came here, I saw people with two or three jobs. Now I realize, one job cannot sustain someone, especially if you have a family."

- Kenny, Harvest Voices Respondent

In spite of her recent success, the financial pressures facing her family remain, and she's turned to her local food bank for help. "It's a lifesaver," she says, "It always comes in the nick of time." Kenny wants more people to see how much food banks matter when life gets hard, and she's determined to push against the stigma that still surrounds asking for help. "There's nothing to be ashamed of if you need it," she adds.

In the future, Kenny hopes to give back to the community that helped her so much. "Receiving food has taught me how to give," she says warmly. Looking forward, she remains grounded in her faith and knows that things will get better for her and her family. "The future is bright," she says, "We will keep pushing until we get there."

CHALLENGES WITH RISING PRICES

A quick flip through the news and one will be bombarded by rising costs: tariffs affecting trade and job security, a weak Canadian dollar, climate disasters, grocery and housing prices. It can be overwhelming, especially for families accessing food banks. Food prices change the way almost all clients shop for groceries (96%). Over one-third of families (38%) go hungry at least once a week because they cannot afford food. A further 78% of families must reduce their portion sizes or skip meals.



PERCENTAGE INCREASE IN CANADIAN GROCERY PRICES OVER THE PAST FIVE YEARS

YEARS	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024	2024-2025	Total % Change
Grocery Item						
Meat	11.6	6.8	1.9	3.2	7.8	35.2
Dairy products	3.9	8.5	5.0	4.9	0.0	24.1
Cereal Products	1.5	16.9	6.5	1.3	-2.6	24.7
Fresh Fruit	0.9	13.5	-0.4	4.0	1.9	20.8
Fresh Vegetables	-6.2	13.6	6.9	8.0	0.3	23.4
Coffee and Tea	-6.1	21.9	2.2	6.5	28.7	60.4

Source: Consumer Price Index, monthly, percentage change, not seasonally adjusted, Canada, provinces, Whitehorse and Yellowknife — Food

Overall, one quarter of all Manitobans are living in some form of food insecurity (26%), one in ten are living in what would be considered severe food insecurity (7%).² In a recent Statistics Canada Survey, almost half (45%) of Canadians expressed that rising prices affected their ability to make ends meet.³

Foodbank clients are uniquely vulnerable to increased costs of living because of their low incomes. Two-thirds of families (65%) earn less than \$20,000 annually, and over one-third of families (34%) earn less than \$10,000. Canada’s Food Price Report estimates that one of our key demographics, single women aged 31-50 years, spends an average of \$3,865.60 each year on food.⁴ This means that many of our clients (those earning \$10,000 or less per year) would spend nearly half of their total income on food costs

The Consumer Price Index reveals that pantry staples, including bread and fresh fruits, have gone up in price over the past year. For example, the cost of ground beef has increased by 17.4% in the last year. ⁵ Ground beef is most often sourced within Canada and so is not directly affected by tariffs and changes to the Canada-US-Mexico

Agreement (CUSMA). However, the effects of tariffs on grocery prices are not direct and take time to be seen by families.⁶

Almost all families (91%) cannot afford to consistently make healthy choices when shopping, which is not surprising, given that healthy options such as frozen fruit saw a price increase of 8.9%, and even ‘cheaper’ healthy options such as canned vegetables went up 4.1% and canned tuna 7.6%. ⁵

One of the most significant contributors to rising costs is the ‘Buy Canadian’ movement. Some food banks have even experienced increased volumes of United States produce donated as a result.⁷ Despite this, while attractive on paper, buying only Canadian is difficult for many food bank clients to participate in. Choosing local often means paying a premium. Although a research study found out that 53% of Canadians were willing to pay \$5 additionally for a Canadian product, this is sometimes pressured upon buyers who have already stretched their budget thin.⁸ CBC’s Marketplace has discovered that the price of hundreds of products has increased since the ‘Buy Canadian’ movement, including some popular Canadian brands.⁹



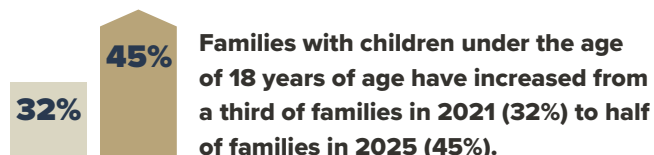
HIDDEN COSTS OF FAMILY LIFE: CHILDCARE

Families with children under the age of 18 years of age have increased from 32% to 45%. This is an expensive chapter of life. At no fault of their own, families are finding it difficult to meet the needs of their children and are led into poverty—specifically food insecurity—by rising costs.

This is very troubling, as research has shown that the proportion of time spent in poverty during childhood directly connects to time spent in poverty as an adult.¹⁰ By failing to support families early on, hardships draw out over a lifetime, when they could be addressed promptly and support could be given before it impacts a child's future.

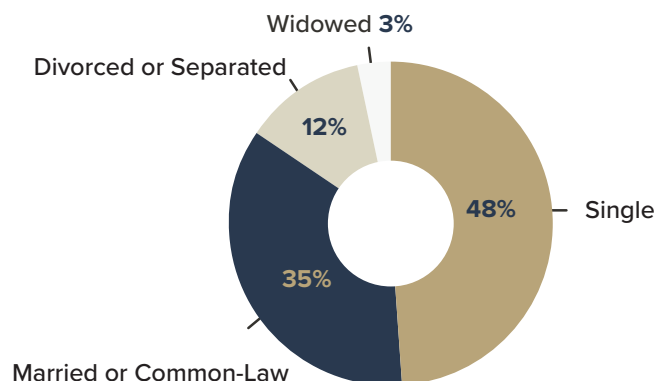
Many clients access food banks specifically because they are struggling as single parents (16%). In 2023, Statistics Canada revealed that nearly half of single-parent families were living in food insecurity.¹¹ Single parents have disproportionately high rates of poverty, regardless of the number of children they have. Since the year 2000, children with single parents have had the second-highest rate of child poverty in Canada.¹²

Support must be put in place for families, with an emphasis on single parents. While Harvest Manitoba offers programs such as First Steps to combat infant food insecurity and Meals2Go, which offers weekend food solutions for school-aged children. With the implementation of last year's Universal School Nutrition Program, the Manitoba Government has acknowledged child poverty as a serious issue and made a commitment to fighting it. However, further supports for children outside of school hours should be encouraged.



Families with children under the age of 18 years of age have increased from a third of families in 2021 (32%) to half of families in 2025 (45%).

MARITAL STATUS:



Manitoba currently has the highest child poverty rate of any province at 27% of the population (one in four children). Winnipeg Centre has an above average child poverty rate of 41%.¹³ Additionally, 76% of children live in childcare deserts, leaving parents without options for childcare.¹⁴ Thus, parents are faced with a difficult choice of either working during the day or caring for their children. One in four foodbank clients (23%) cannot find work due to caregiving responsibilities, and two-thirds of clients are female (68%). This suggests that many of our clients are mothers with limited options for childcare.

The Manitoba government is making efforts to alleviate some of this strain. Our province did achieve a goal, three years early, of reducing parent fees for childcare to an average of \$10 per day. They are also dedicating \$215.9 million to childcare projects, including eleven childcare center capital projects to help shrink the childcare deserts.¹⁵ There is also a Manitoba Child

Benefit, though its assistance is negligible. Low-income families may be eligible for \$420 tax-free each year for each child. However, families receiving welfare, Employment and Income Assistance (EIA) or Manitoba Supports for Persons with Disabilities (MSPD), are not eligible for this benefit (41% of our clients).¹⁶

The Canada Child Benefit (CCB), the predominant childcare benefit, is losing its effectiveness. Between 2017 and 2022, the CCB reduced the child poverty rate by 8.8% annually. However, in 2022, it saw the lowest reduction at only 7.8%.¹² This benefit is also not as accessible as it should be. For the first 18 months, the CCB is available only to Canadian citizens and permanent residents. This puts newcomer families at a disadvantage; one in ten food bank clients have temporary status (14%), and 11% are landed immigrants. Though helpful, the CCB is not adequate for all families.

Sarah's Story

**See recommendations # 4, 5, 7*

Ever since Sarah left Montreal in 2022, she's been searching for opportunity and a more stable life for her growing family. But the transition hasn't been easy. Her partner struggled to find reliable employment. He is now employed, but the cost of food and rent is climbing faster than they can keep up. "We came here for a better life," she explains, "but everything keeps getting more expensive."

"Our hope is to reach a point where we can give back and can instead buy extra to share with others."

- Sarah, Harvest Voices Respondent

When she found her local food bank, it felt like a weight had been lifted. For the first time in months, there was relief. There was food on the table, and a sense that she wasn't alone.

But still, resources for Sarah and her family are stretched thin, and every day is a balancing act. She has young children to care for, and her days are full. Between early morning drop-offs, sleepless nights, and diaper changes, Sarah gives everything to her children. She finds comfort in her family, and when asked how she gets through the



more challenging times, she doesn't hesitate. "My babies," she says happily. She wants, one day, to stop relying on food banks enough to give back and help families the way others have helped hers.

Her dream of stability is simple, but one she has strived for since she came to Winnipeg in hopes of a better future. Her husband has since found reliable employment, but still, things are hard for them. Sarah's message to others is full of hope. "Ego is powerful," she said openly, "But don't be afraid to ask for help."

LIVING ON LESS WITH A DISABILITY

One-half of our food bank clients are living with a disability or health condition (55%); of those respondents, many have issues with mental health. Almost all clients say that their disability affects their daily life (80%), and one quarter of clients need to attend food banks primarily because of how their disability affects their life (27%).

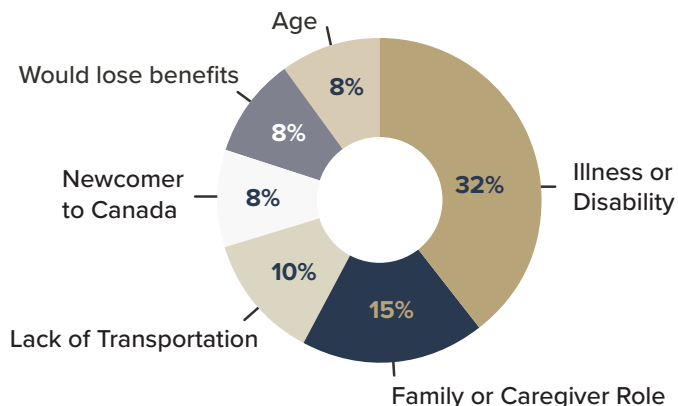
One half (45%) have pain-related disabilities. Almost all clients say that their disability affects their daily life (80%), and one quarter of clients need to attend food banks primarily because of how their disability affects their life (27%). One quarter of our clients (26%) asked that Harvest advocate for better health supports in our province. Along with several partners across Canada, including the Daily Bread Food Bank in Toronto, Harvest Manitoba supported the [Fund the Benefit campaign](#), that successfully advocated for a Canadian Disability Benefit (CDB) which began rolling out in July 2025.



The new CDB benefit provides an additional support amount of \$200 per month (\$6.66/day) for those who are eligible. However helpful, this benefit is still far from perfect.

We are calling for the CDB amount to be \$500 monthly. Out of our total number of unemployed food bank clients (69%), most cannot find work because of their disability (46%). The benefit should also be indexed to inflation to remain adequate. The eligibility criteria should be broadened to recognize that not all people who live with a disability receive the Disability Tax Credit (DTC) and that many disabilities are not included within the narrow requirements of the DTC.^{18 19}

REASON FOR UNEMPLOYMENT:



There is a link between food insecurity and the severity of disabilities. Most of our food bank clients (90%) cannot afford to buy healthy food. Instead, they consume more highly processed food, which can worsen or cause many conditions like diabetes, arthritis or heart disease.²⁰ Poor diets in children increase the risk of those diet-related diseases later in life.²¹ Adults who cannot afford healthy food are also at an increased risk of chronic disease and infectious diseases due to lowered immune systems.²¹ Nutrient deficiencies can also worsen the effects of mental illnesses.²⁰

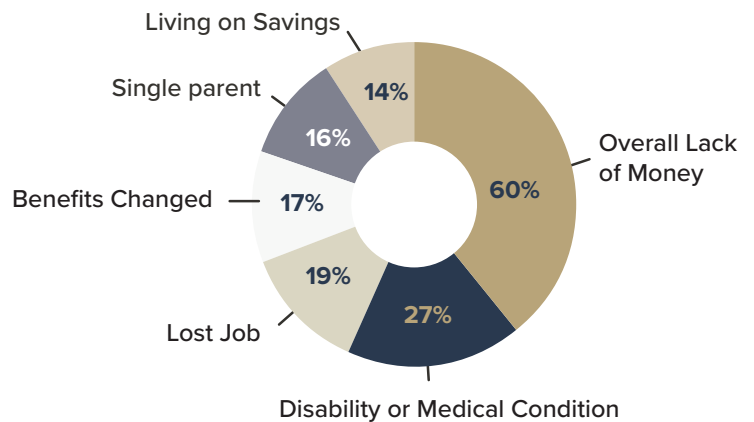
“Social Determinants of Health” are non-medical conditions that affect someone's health and well-being. Food insecurity is so closely linked to negative health outcomes that its influence is above and beyond that of other social determinants of health.²¹

Recently, our advocacy work has helped to influence our provincial government to provide more community-based health-care programs. We appreciate they have initiated a Quit Smoking program, a Seniors Hearing Aid Program, a Diabetes Action Plan, an Access to Menstrual Products initiative, and a Her Heart Her Way program to reduce heart disease in women. These programs provide financial support and offer no-cost healthcare options for those living with disabilities.

Alongside these positive changes in our health system, there must be parallel investment in food security. There is motivation for our government to invest, as food insecurity creates a burden on our healthcare system.

Food-insecure adults have a higher likelihood of cost-related nonadherence to prescription medications, which leads to greater use of health care services. Children and teenagers living in a food-insecure household have greater use of health services for mental or substance use disorders.²⁴ Given that two-thirds (59%) of our clients are living with a disability report on having a mental health issue, we recommend that any new policies targeting poverty include mental health and addiction supports.

REASON FOR ACCESSING A FOOD BANK:



James' Story

**See recommendations # 2, 3, 5*

For more than twenty years, James built his life on the open road. As a long-haul truck driver since 2000, he found purpose in the freedom of travel and joy in the people and places he met along the way. His favourite stretch was U.S. Route 14 in Minnesota, where the rolling hills and open sky reminded him why he loved his job.

In 2023, that life came to an abrupt stop when James was diagnosed with fibromyalgia, a chronic condition that left him in constant pain and unable to work. That year, he started using a food bank to make ends meet. An extrovert who thrived on the road, he now spends his days at home caring for his ailing mother and managing his health. The loss of work and connection has been difficult. Some days bring depression and frustration, but he keeps pushing forward.



“It’s just me and my mom. I take care of her, and I try to take care of myself.”

- James, Harvest Voices Respondent

His poodle, Rose, and two kittens have become his greatest companions. “When I have a lot of pain, my animals are always there to give me a lot of love,” he shares. He’s also been teaching himself gardening and carpentry, determined to make productive use of his time and to become more self-sufficient.

He likes visiting the food bank because it connects him with others, something he’s missed since losing his job. Children playing outside often stop to meet Rose, which always makes him smile. Harvest has also helped him bridge the gap when money is tight. The food he receives lets him cover bills and medications, many of

which aren’t fully covered. If he had extra money, he would spend it on home repairs, fresh ingredients, and his health. And, he says playfully, “probably some ice cream.”

James knows he will never return to the work he loved, which is a hard reality that weighs heavily on him. Still, he holds on to hope for the future. He dreams of travelling across Canada and spending more time in nature, where he feels most at peace. His advice is simple but earned through experience. “Days change a lot day by day. I was arrogant because I thought I’d be working until I’m 70, and it didn’t work that way. So, enjoy and appreciate what you have.”



INCOME SUPPORTS: WHEN WELFARE ISN'T ENOUGH

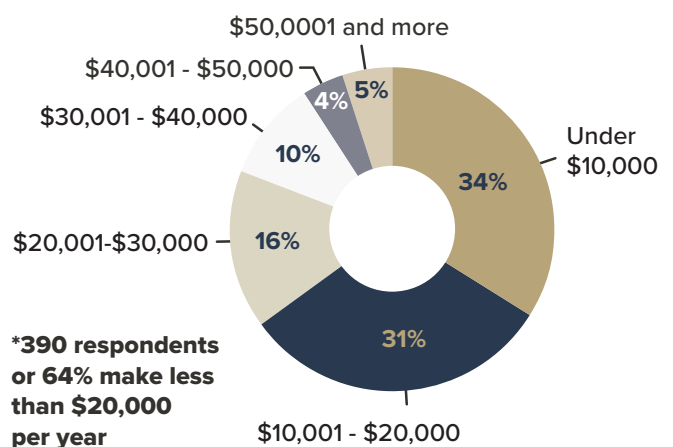
Most food bank clients are unemployed (69%). The reality is that many of them (41%) are left to rely on social assistance (also known as welfare) as their main source of income: either EIA Employment and Income Assistance (22%) or MSPD Manitoba Supports for Persons with Disabilities (19%).²⁵

Half of our clients (50%) have asked Harvest Manitoba to advocate for increased social assistance rates. Social assistance is a provincial responsibility, falling under our provincial government. Together, alongside our advocacy partners, we are asking for improvements to EIA and MSPD. We are also in strong support of a Livable Basic Needs Benefit for all Manitobans.

In Manitoba, a single person who relies on EIA earns approximately \$11,000 per year (\$900/month), while a family with two children earns approximately \$36,000 per year (\$3,000/month). Both these income levels are below the deep poverty threshold and below the official poverty line. Income levels for those relying on EIA peaked during 2020 because of COVID-19 pandemic-related payments but decreased in the years following due to the loss of pandemic benefits and the effects of inflation. Currently, EIA levels have remained the same since 2023.²⁶

A Livable Basic Needs Benefit (LBNB) would be an adjustment to the current EIA system. It would be unconditional, indexed to inflation, and, importantly,

ANNUAL FAMILY INCOME:

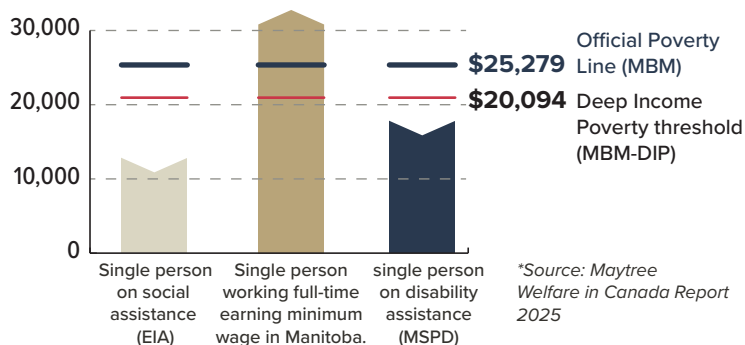


provide an income sufficient for a person's basic needs as defined by the Market Basket Measure poverty line. Currently, EIA provides an income that is 40 percent below the poverty line. Harvest clients have told us that they would like to see that rise to 75 percent of the poverty line and work with the federal government to raise it to 100 percent.²⁷

Canada's most recent basic income pilot was in Ontario between 2017 and 2019. Results of the study revealed that, in addition to improvements to physical and mental well-being, having a livable basic income improved economic prospects for most participants. Overall, their employment rate remained stable. Most participants who became unemployed during the pilot did so to pursue further education or training.²⁸

Although imperfect, the current EIA system provides support for those trying to improve their employment circumstances. Under the Get Ready! Policy, individuals can continue to receive benefits while attending a training or education program. As of August 2025, the amount of employment income a person can earn while on EIA, before benefit deductions, increased from \$200 to \$500 per month.²⁹ Harvest Manitoba encourages

WELFARE AND EMPLOYMENT INCOMES COMPARED TO POVERTY THRESHOLDS IN MANITOBA:



these improvements to the current EIA and MSPD systems and recommends larger changes, such as implementing a Livable Basic Needs Benefit.



Cheyenne's Story

*See recommendations # 2, 5, 7

Cheyenne's local food bank has become a steady source of support through difficult times. As a mother of six, she knows firsthand the challenges of raising a large family.

Cheyenne first started going to Springs Inner City Church with her family and kids in Winnipeg's North End. At first, they were just members of the congregation, contributing where they could and making connections along the way. Cheyenne was focused on supporting others, but before long, she found herself in need of support as well. She then turned to the church's food bank for help, and there she found a deep sense of community and belonging. "We felt so connected," she recalls, "Even the kids would come."

"You don't know what someone is going through. So don't judge – be kind."

- Cheyenne, Harvest Voices Respondent

Cheyenne and her husband now live on social assistance, doing their best to stretch every dollar they have to feed their children and put meals on the table. But the rising cost of food and housing has made it harder, leading them to rely on food banks when money is tight. "Every bit helps," she says gratefully, "It helps get us from month to month."

Now that she lives outside of the North End, Cheyenne misses that feeling of community, but her motivation remains the same: her family. "My kids keep me going," she says. She hopes to return to work as a healthcare aide one day so she can better provide for her family and build a more stable life for them. As she looks ahead to the future, she adds quietly, "Things are going to be okay."



WITH AND WITHOUT: JOBS AND FOOD SECURITY

Although most food bank clients are unemployed (69%), a significant portion (31%) are currently employed. This means that even though employment does improve food security, it is no longer a reliable pathway out of poverty: low wages and the increasing costs of living create ongoing challenges for employed families trying to make ends meet.

Manitoba's minimum wage has been steadily rising since 2022, but it still falls short of a living wage in our province. The living wage in Manitoba is currently \$18.75 per hour, which shows a decrease from \$19.21 per hour in 2024.³⁰ The gap is narrowing between minimum wage and living wage in Manitoba, due in part to stabilizing prices (in costs other than food or housing) and the increase in government benefits.³⁰

One of our advocacy partners, The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, has revealed in a recent study that one in four workers in Manitoba still earns less than a living wage. Over half of those are women (57.8%), and one-third (36%) have children below the age of 18.³¹ Our results support their findings: a concerning number of working families don't earn enough to overcome poverty.

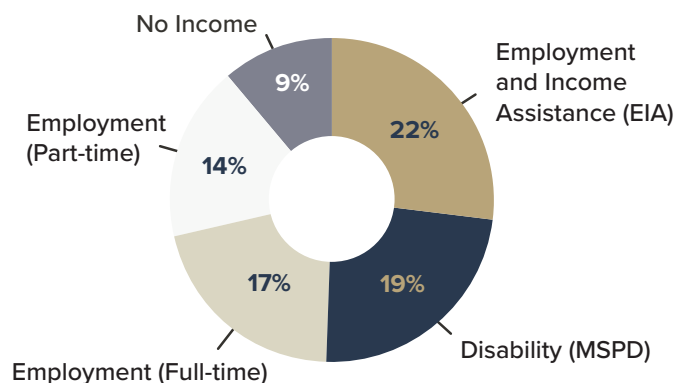
Manitoba has one of the highest poverty rates in Canada; one in ten Manitobans live under the poverty line.³² Most of our clients (81%) earn less than \$30,000 per year, while the poverty line in Winnipeg is \$25,279 for a single person or \$38,338 for a family of three (our average client's family size is three people).³³

In October of 2025, the minimum wage in Manitoba increased to \$16 per hour.³⁴ Our provincial minimum wage has been increasing by small increments annually

to keep up with inflation,³⁵ but we ask for our government to do more to ensure all working Manitobans receive a living wage of at least \$18.75 per hour.

Nearly half of clients (42%) say that Harvest Manitoba can reduce their need for food banks by offering more employment training. We are in the process of expanding our Warehouse Training Program. This year, we proudly celebrated the graduation of our 16th cohort. Approximately 100 participants benefit from this program each year and 80% of graduates find jobs in Manitoba.

MAIN SOURCE OF INCOME:



***Combined FT+PT employment is 186 respondents or 31%.
Combined EIA+MSPD is 41%**

Access to employment makes a difference: 39% of food bank clients stop using the food bank for periods of time, most of whom stop due to finding employment. As of November 2025, the unemployment rate in Manitoba was 6.2%,³⁶ meaning that people without work are still overrepresented at food banks (69% of our clients are unemployed). Our Warehouse Training Program makes an impact where it matters, as most new jobs being created in Manitoba are in trades, including the construction, utilities and healthcare sectors.³⁶

Very few food bank clients (3%) have trade certifications which emphasizes a lack of need for food banks by skilled, working Manitobans. Job security, and in return, food security, is nurtured by investments in employment training.

One fifth of food bank clients are currently post-secondary college or university students (18%), while half of our clients have graduated from a post-secondary school (43%). Another fifth has completed high school (22% meaning 61% of clients have some postsecondary education). One in ten clients (14%) have attended some high school without graduating.

Post-secondary students, especially international students, face unique barriers to employment. Their work hours are limited to 24 hours per week, a small increase from 20 hours per week in 2024. Recognizing the challenges faced by international students, the federal government has taken action to set an intake cap on the number of students coming into Canada, which is meant to reduce pressure on limited housing resources and job availability, therefore reducing financial stress on international students.³⁷

Mohamed's Story

**See recommendations # 2, 3, 5, 7*

Mohamed never imagined needing food assistance, but after coming to Canada, that all changed.

Mohamed and his wife arrived in Winnipeg with their two children, bringing with them his university education in biological sciences and agricultural technology. He also worked with the United Nations for a time in his home country of Guinea, qualifications he believed would open doors for him here. Instead, he found himself starting from scratch.

"It's hard, They want years of experience you don't have because you are new."

Now, Mohamed works part-time as a healthcare aide through two agencies. Some weeks, he's offered shifts. Other weeks, none at all. On top of that, his wife sustained a serious back injury in her workplace years ago, which has since prevented her from returning to work. Much of his time is spent looking after her, which means he also takes on most of the household duties in the process. Between medical costs, rent, and the rising cost of living, his family often struggles to make ends meet.

"If I had a little extra money, I would spend it on my children. That's where my heart is."



That's when their local food bank became a lifeline. The food that they received helped them stretch their budget and put more meals on the table for them and their kids. "It helps a lot," he says thankfully, "Whatever it is, even if it's a little, it's a gift."

He continues to push forward for his family and often repeats a simple yet powerful phrase to himself when things get tough: "Don't give up."

- Mohamed, Harvest Voices Respondent



HUNGRY AT HOME: HOUSING AFFORDABILITY

When asked what issues Harvest Manitoba should advocate for, the number one issue that clients emphasized was affordable housing (50% of clients). Especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, Manitoba is experiencing a housing crisis due to high mortgage and home ownership costs.

This means that more families are left renting their homes, which has led to the demand for rental units to exceed the supply.³⁸ The demand is especially high for social housing (Manitoba Housing) and subsidized rent-geared-to-income housing (usually set to 30% of a family’s income).³⁹

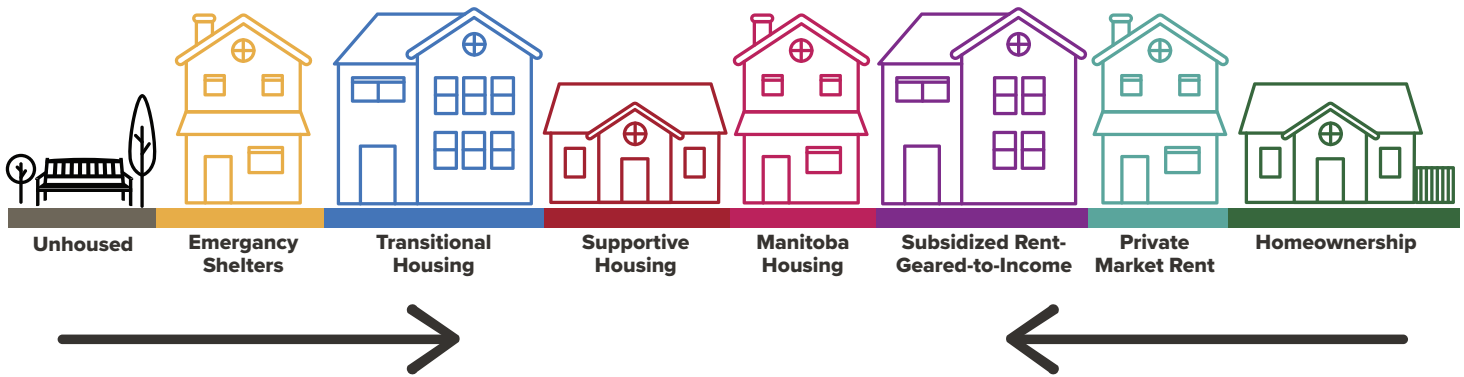
Home ownership is a difficult prospect for our clients who rely on social assistance. Almost half of foodbank clients (41%) rely on social assistance (also known as welfare) as their main source of income: either EIA Employment and Income Assistance (22%) or MSPD Manitoba Supports People with Disabilities (19%). These families struggle with incomes that are well below the poverty line in Manitoba.²⁶ They face barriers when saving for mortgage down payments because their total assets at any point are limited to \$4000 cash for a single person, or \$16,000 for a family of four.²⁶ Not surprisingly, with this context, only 8% of our clients own their home.

Two-thirds of our clients rent an apartment or house (67%), 9% live in Manitoba Housing, and 6% either stay in an emergency shelter or with family. The remainder rely on student housing, rooming houses, band-owned

housing or are unhoused. The average rent for a two-bedroom apartment in Winnipeg is \$1,749,⁴⁰ which, on its own, without other monthly expenses, is much higher than the average monthly income of a family relying on social assistance.²⁶ Due in large part to high rent costs, most of our clients do not have enough money to make ends meet (60%) and struggle to afford necessities on top of rent.

Given that Manitoba Housing offers subsidized rent, we should expect more than 9% of our clients to make use of that support, but there are long wait times. Nearly 6,000 families are on the waitlist for social housing,⁴¹ and the wait times for vacant rental suites range from six months to two years, depending on the size and location of the suite.⁴²

AVERAGE MONTHLY HOUSEHOLD EXPENSES (ALL CLIENTS SURVEYED)	
Rent	\$1,084.80
Hydro	\$147.61
Water	\$129.84
Phone	\$87.03
TV/Internet	\$107.34
Childcare	\$438.75



One in Ten - 9% of clients: Manitoba Housing OR Subsidized Rent-Geared-to-Income
Two Thirds - 67% of clients: Private Market Rent
One in Ten - 8% of clients: Homeownership

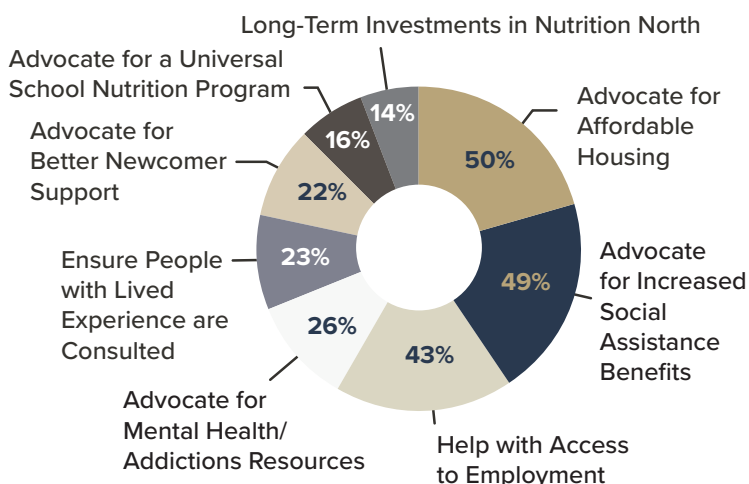
According to a housing needs analysis conducted by the Manitoba Non-Profit Housing Association in 2023, Manitoba requires at least 10,000 additional units of social housing right now to meet the housing needs of the lowest-income Manitobans. At the current pace of development, it will take 50 years to meet the needs of the 23,000 Manitoban households in core housing need.⁴³

Earlier this year, the Manitoba Government released a report titled “Your Way Home”, detailing their plan to end chronic homelessness by 2031.⁴⁴ The federal government also revised its housing plan to include billions in new financing for affordable and market-rent housing.⁴⁵ We are seeing some results: in September 2025, the federal and provincial government contributed a combined \$25.9 million to build an apartment with 72 affordable-housing units on Main Street in Winnipeg.⁴⁶ In October, it was announced they would contribute \$9 million to help repair 738 affordable rental units.⁴⁷

Although these housing projects are encouraging, the Manitoba government admitted in their report that their plan to end homelessness must be a team effort between the government and non-profits.⁴⁴ Housing units need to be built with a community focus. They should offer on-site support, including funding for resource centres, funding to operate transitional housing, and funding for mobile support workers.⁴⁸ Ongoing supports will ensure that low-income families can find stability in their housing once it is obtained.

We understand at Harvest Manitoba that affordable housing is a huge factor in addressing food security, because housing is often the largest expense families are faced with month to month. We appreciate the efforts made by different levels of government to address the housing crisis. There is an immediate need for more available, affordable housing. There is a need for social support and resources alongside those new homes.

WHAT MORE CAN HARVEST DO TO HELP?





TRANSPORTATION AND DAILY LIFE

Two out of three families accessing foodbanks rely on Winnipeg Transit as their main mode of transportation (62%).

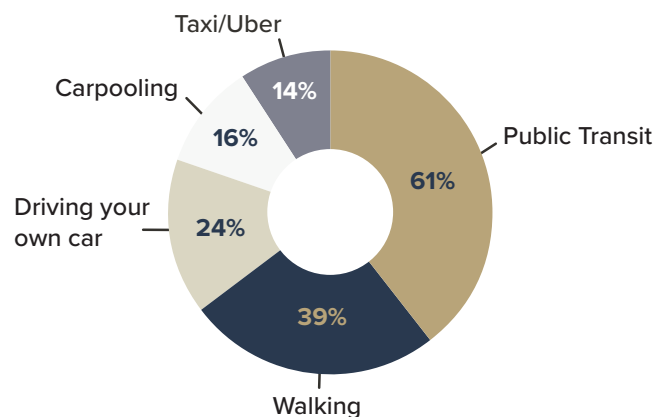
Harvest Manitoba has been a long-time advocate for affordable bus fares, and we saw success when our momentum contributed to the creation of the WINNpass. The WINNpass program provides low-income families with up to 50% discounted fare. Cost remains a barrier for many food bank clients, and we continue to advocate for reductions.

For those on fixed or low incomes, it is not feasible to pay for a taxi or Uber when a bus is late. Transit on its own is already a significant cost to riders, even with student pricing and the WINNpass. Free fares, as advocated for by one of our advocacy partners Make Poverty History Manitoba, would ease some of the hardship forced upon riders.

With the new transit model, some feeder routes end their service as early as 10:30 pm, which poses safety concerns for those working night shifts who rely on evening buses. One in five food bank clients (15%) says they cannot find work due to a lack of transportation options. A lack of evening buses also affects the one in ten clients (10%) who can have some money leftover at the end of the month for recreation. There is a lack of safe transportation from establishments offering late-night entertainment, let alone other post-work activities such as recreational sports.

Additionally, buses are a means of connection to friends and family. Many foodbank clients (54%) rely on borrowing money from friends or family to pay bills, and 5% stay off the streets by staying with loved ones.

MODE OF TRANSPORTATION:



As early reviews of the new model roll in, Winnipeggers are seeing that transit has not improved for those living in poverty. In fact, the removal of bus stops and lack of reliable late-night transit has made it more inconvenient. The Winnipeg Free Press put it best, arguing that “transit is supposed to be a public service, not a mathematical formula. The goal is to move people, reliably and conveniently, from where they are to where they need to be.”⁴⁹

Transit users are raising concerns online and amongst each other about being faced with seemingly random arrival times, inconvenient stop placement, and a lack of space. There is no reliability or convenience. Fares continue to rise as accessibility decreases. Although the city council members welcome feedback and opinions, they assure riders that major adjustments to the new model will need to wait until after next year’s Annual Service Planning Process.⁵⁰

WILDFIRES: BUILDING RESILIENCE BEFORE CRISIS STRIKES

Wildfires increasingly threaten Manitoba's northern communities, with First Nation communities bearing disproportionate impacts due to geographic isolation and limited infrastructure. Harvest Manitoba has evolved from ad-hoc emergency assistance to comprehensive, partnership-based wildfire relief, guided by the principle that access to food should not depend on where you live.



Harvest Manitoba's approach to wildfire relief has been shaped by years of learning and relationship-building with Indigenous organizations and communities. We recognized early-on that effective emergency response required more than shipping food supplies north but rather a genuine collaboration with community leaders who understood the cultural, logistical, and emotional needs of evacuees.

Through sustained partnerships with Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakinak (MKO), Anishininew Okimawin, and individual First Nation communities, a model was developed that centers Indigenous leadership and cultural knowledge in emergency planning and response. These partnerships ensure that relief efforts are not imposed from outside but rather are co-created with the communities they serve, building trust and effectiveness over time.

Working with Indigenous leadership and communities across the north, Harvest Manitoba has established ongoing relationships with eighteen communities

including Bloodvein First Nation, Brochet, Garden Hill, God's Lake, God's River, Hollow Water, Lake St. Martin, Little Grand Rapids, Lynn Lake, Mathias Colomb Cree Nation, Nelson House, Norway House, Oxford House, Peguis, Red Sucker Lake, Shamattawa, St. Theresa Point, Thompson, and Wasagamack. This network of trusted partnerships proves invaluable during wildfire crises, as existing relationships enable rapid mobilization and culturally responsive support when communities face displacement.

Over the past year, Harvest Manitoba completed over 100 trips delivering 454,022 pounds of nutritious staples (flour, cooking oil, pasta, vegetables, fruits, protein) via air freight, truck, and seasonal ice roads. The already established infrastructure, transportation networks, community coordinators, and warehousing systems have become the foundation for emergency response.

During the 2025 wildfire season, Harvest Manitoba distributed an additional 81,000 pounds of food to 12,000 households (May-July), valued at over \$190,000.

Harvest Manitoba's role as the first food bank in Canada to participate in the Government of Canada's Nutrition North program represents a significant advancement in addressing the high shipping costs that make northern food access challenging. This participation helps offset transportation expenses that can make delivering emergency food relief very expensive, particularly to fly-in communities.

The 2025 wildfire season marked a significant evolution in Harvest Manitoba's local approach in Winnipeg, particularly through the kitchen-sharing initiative with MKO and Food Matters Manitoba. Over the summer, Manitoba Keewatinowí Okimakanak (MKO) used the Harvest Manitoba kitchen to prepare and deliver warm, traditional meals to Elders evacuated from northern Manitoba due to wildfires. MKO staff and volunteers worked daily to provide nourishment that supports not only physical health but also cultural and spiritual well-being. The meals honoured traditional diets and were shared with care and respect. This program represented a shift from viewing food relief purely as a necessity to recognizing it as a source of cultural continuity and emotional healing.

By facilitating the preparation of traditional meals for evacuated Elders in Winnipeg, Harvest Manitoba acknowledged that displacement involves not just physical relocation but cultural dislocation. The familiar tastes, preparation methods, and communal aspects of

traditional food provided comfort during trauma and helped maintain connections to home and identity. This culturally responsive approach reflects years of listening to community feedback and understanding that effective relief addresses the whole person, body, mind, and spirit.



MKO preparing food in Harvest Manitoba's kitchen, summer 2025.



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 the root causes of food insecurity need to be addressed directly.

This year marks the fifth annual edition of Harvest Voices. We are incredibly proud of the effort that has been put into this report over the years and the many valuable conversations that have taken place with people and families who rely upon food banks. Their generous participation allows us to highlight the importance of speaking to those with lived experience. The stories we hear are examples of the resilience that exists in the community and the injustices that urgently need to be addressed.

Key trends have been revealed over the five years: The average household size has increased from two to three people, which coincides with the rising number of families with children who access food banks. The cost of living challenges the ability of all families to make ends meet. We are seeing the effect. Employment, education and marriage – the common ladders a family climbs to rise above poverty - are no longer reliable pathways. We can see those demographics increase among our clients:

more families that have post-secondary education, employment and/or are married.

Each year, despite changes in trends, one thing stays the same: the number of clients rises annually as we consistently see more families who need to use food banks. Lack of affordable housing, insufficient social assistance payments (EIA and MSPD), low employment wages, and lack of support for those living with a disability are challenges that are as present now as they were in 2020

Each month, almost 60,000 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** Employment and Income Assistance (EIA and MSPD) 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 (LBNB)
- 3** Harvest Manitoba appreciates the Canadian Disability Benefit (CDB). 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.
- 4** 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 with an investment in support workers.
- 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. Particularly, employment training in skilled trades and healthcare fields.
- 6** Harvest Manitoba supports fare-free travel for low-income transit users and looks forward to Winnipeg Transit continuing to improve transit access and safety.
- 7** The provincial government must fill in the gaps left by the federal Child Care Benefit and ensure Manitoban children are not falling into poverty. On top of increased benefits, we support the continued effort to eradicate childcare deserts and make childcare both procurable and affordable for all families.
- 8** The Province of Manitoba should establish a dedicated emergency food security fund specifically for wildfire and climate-related displacement events. Current emergency response funding often focuses on evacuation logistics and temporary shelter but inadequately addresses the sustained nutritional needs of displaced populations.
- 9** 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.
- 10** 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.

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 Harvest Voices survey.

The survey consisted of 62 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 18 separate food banks across the province for in-person surveys.

Information about the survey was communicated on flyers that were inserted into food bank hampers, promotional posters were displayed at food banks, and in social media posts on Harvest Manitoba platforms. Cold calling was also done for current 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 2025, resulting in 597 surveys successfully completed and included in the analysis. Given that 50,000 people attend food banks monthly, this means that we have 95% confidence in our results with a 4% margin of error.

The results represent a snapshot in time of food bank usage during those months, and some results pertain to 2024. 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 (91%), with a lower amount being completed rurally (8%) or by Northern Communities (1%). Results and analysis were generated using an online tool called Survey Sparrow. The data was cleaned to remove any invalid responses. Incomplete surveys were included.

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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