

VOICES

2023

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, Meaghan Erbus, Jen Gair, John Heim, Allison Kolynchuk, Kera McInnes, Stephanie Mikos, and Jazlyne Saromo. 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. We support food security programs through 389 agency partners in 46 communities across the province. These programs help over 100,000 people every month through food banks, soup kitchens, school nutrition programs, daycares, resource centres and other organizations.

The need for food banks in Manitoba has never been greater. Currently, over 50,000 people attend a food bank somewhere in the province of Manitoba every month, with nearly half being children.

Across Canada, a record number of Canadians are turning to food banks from all walks of life to help make ends meet. Almost 2 million visits to food banks across Canada occurred in March 2023.¹ Since 2019, Harvest Manitoba has seen a 150% increase in clients accessing our food banks, with a 30% increase just this past year.

Each year, Harvest Manitoba surveys communities to better understand why people access food banks. In this year's Harvest Voices Report, the survey took place from May to September 2023. This year was a unique time for Harvest Manitoba due to a substantial influx of new to Canada food bank clients, particularly Ukrainians displaced by war. The influx of new to Canada clients coincided with soaring grocery prices and inflation, creating challenging times for all low-income Manitobans.

At the time of surveying, more than one in four food bank clients in Manitoba were newcomers to Canada. At times, displaced Ukrainians alone represented over half of all first-time food bank clients in Winnipeg.

Food bank use is influenced by many factors, and people turn to food banks for various reasons.

Job loss and underemployment lead to financial stress. In this year's Harvest Voices report, 40% of people are currently employed. Insufficient funds and restricted budgets make it challenging for individuals to keep up with costs and provide for themselves and their families. Nearly half of Harvest Manitoba respondents (49%) have children under the age of 18 years.

In Manitoba, one in six people live with a disability.² People with disabilities are disproportionately represented at food banks, with nearly half (43%) of survey respondents having a disability. Many of our respondents convey that their disability prevents them from working and/or causes additional expenses for health and nutritional needs.

Increased inflation and rising costs have continued to hurt Manitobans, especially low-income households, as they have less money and spend much of it on necessities such as food, gas, and rent - the items most likely to increase in price. Inflation leaves people with fewer ways to stretch their dollars, causing them to rely on food banks more than ever.

Food bank clients, the voices of this report, have shared the challenges and the difficult choices they made this past year. What we have come to know is that people are struggling. Food prices are high and Manitobans do not have enough money to keep up with rising costs, resulting in them using their savings, borrowing money from friends or family, and racking up credit card debt.

Key Findings:

Food bank usage in Manitoba has increased **150%** since 2019, with a **30%** increase in the past year.

Over 50%

of first-time food bank clients in Winnipeg are displaced Ukrainians.

40%

of Harvest Manitoba's clients are employed, a 66% increase from last year.

68%

of respondents are female.

43%

of respondents have a disability.

Harvest Manitoba has a crucial role in addressing the immediate food needs of those facing these challenges. Harvest supports food bank recipients with monthly food support. We have additional opportunities through our education and employment training programs, and we build community through volunteerism.

We know food banks are only a short-term solution to addressing the underlying issues of poverty and food insecurity. To address the root causes and reliance on food banks, we will continue to build partnerships and dialogue with First Nations leadership, with all levels of provincial and federal government, and with communities across Manitoba to find innovative and realistic solutions. We must be informed, collaborate, and establish systems and policies that alleviate poverty and improve access to essential resources.

Together, we will work toward a healthier future for all where no Manitoban goes hungry.

Respondent Demographics

Respondents were predominantly female (68%) with an average age of 47 years. There was an influx of new-to-Canada clients, and over half of first-time food bank clients in Winnipeg were displaced Ukrainians.

The average household size is three people, which most often represents two parents with one child or one parent with two children. Almost two-thirds (62%) of our respondents have children, and nearly half of our respondents (49%) have children under the age of 18 years.

Women work more part-time, lower-paying jobs compared to men. They are more likely to face food insecurity due to factors such as lack of accessible childcare and due to a lack of flexible work opportunities that can accommodate caregiving responsibilities.³

“I would feed my kids and go without. I didn't realize I would qualify for help from a food bank.”

- Harvest Voices Respondent

Almost three out of four (70%) of respondents indicated they had an annual income between \$10,000- \$20,000 a year, which is well below the poverty line in Manitoba of \$24,571 per year for a single person.⁴ Less than one half (40%) of respondents are currently employed, the majority of which receive income from full-time employment. Most respondents rely on government benefits as their main source of income. Over half of respondents (52%) access food banks because of an overall lack of income, from all sources, which makes it difficult to afford necessities.

Nearly half (43%) of respondents have a disability or health condition. Of those respondents, the majority (77%) reported that their disability or health condition limits their abilities to perform daily activities, including maintaining employment. For respondents who do not have an income or are unemployed, their reasons include disability or illness (36%), being a newcomer to Canada (31%), family or caregiver responsibilities (19%), age barriers (13%) or attending school (12%).



Ludmila, Harvest Manitoba client and Ukrainian newcomer

“I did my best to stretch every dollar, I hit a point where it didn't stretch enough anymore. Before my current situation, I made enough money through work. Working is no longer an option as I did not expect to find myself in the city and not able to find daycare for my daughter. It's a very long wait for childcare and in the meantime, I have no support.”

- Harvest Voices Respondent



Newcomers and Food Bank use

This past year, Harvest Manitoba saw a large influx of new-to-Canada clients. One in four (27%) respondents use a food bank because they are new to the province. Over one in four of total respondents (55%) are of European descent, over half of first-time food bank clients in Winnipeg are displaced Ukrainians.

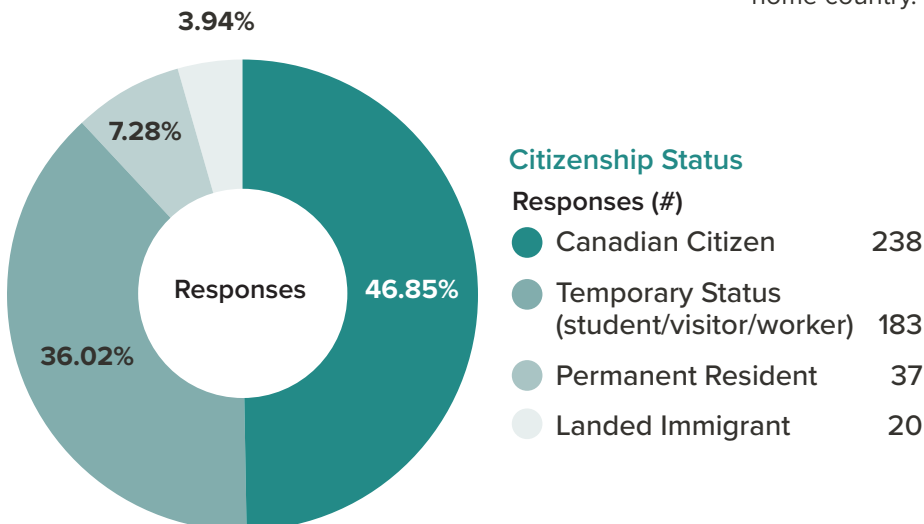
Harvest Manitoba clients and Ukrainian newcomers pictured at St. Mark Church Food Bank

One-third (32%) of Ukrainian newcomer clients are current students or have post-secondary education, which has caused an increase in the number of respondents who have higher education in comparison to previous years. Many respondents have either post-secondary education (32%), have finished some level of college/university (19%), or have a high school diploma (19%).

Newcomers to Canada struggle with accessing education and connecting their previously obtained education to employment. Language barriers exist, and degrees and certifications from other countries are often not equivalent in Canada. Due to immigration being a major life change in all aspects of life, respondents largely admitted to having significant changes to their income over the past year, which was the reason why they were directed to food banks.

Newcomers are attracted to Manitoba for the initial supports provided by the provincial government. The settlement supports include an initial review of needs, temporary housing, meals for up to thirty days, access to healthcare services, and referral services to organizations that provide continued assistance such as language training or documentation. There is a one-time federal benefit for newcomers of \$3,000 per adult and \$1,500 per child, but following that, newcomers are instructed to apply for Employment and Income Assistance (EIA) for income support until they find employment.

Current EIA rates in Manitoba are well below the poverty line. Reliance on EIA for support during the settlement process adds financial stress onto newcomers, who are already at a risk of experiencing high levels of mental and emotional stress due their experience of fleeing conflict in their home country.^{5,6}



“I don't seek help unless it's desperate times as I feel shame and embarrassment, as well as I don't want to take food away from someone else who may need it more.”

- Harvest Voices Respondent

The lack of adequate, continued financial supports for newcomers settling in Manitoba contributes to their food insecurity. Many online resources for newcomers underestimate the actual cost of living in Manitoba, which creates false expectations.^{7,8} Food insecurity can come as a surprise to newcomers who come to our province searching for a safety and a better quality of life.

The influx of Ukrainian newcomers at Harvest Manitoba has a trend of increasing or decreasing based on need. When surveyed, respondents admit to relying on food banks during times of need and stopping when their situation improves. Newcomers transition off from food bank use when they reach a point of financial stability in their settlement process.

Harvest Manitoba did its best to make the transition for our new-to-Canada clients into Manitoba easier. We worked with local hotels and the Manitoba Association of Newcomer Serving Organizations (MANSO) to ensure the information we provided was correct and helpful. We utilized translation tools to better communicate with people, as we were seeing up to 25 displaced Ukrainians a day. To simplify our intake process, we had our new client form translated to Ukrainian and it is

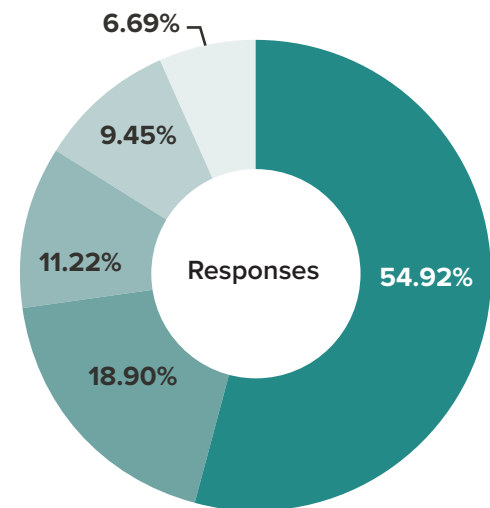


Harvest Manitoba clients pictured at St. Mark Church Food Bank

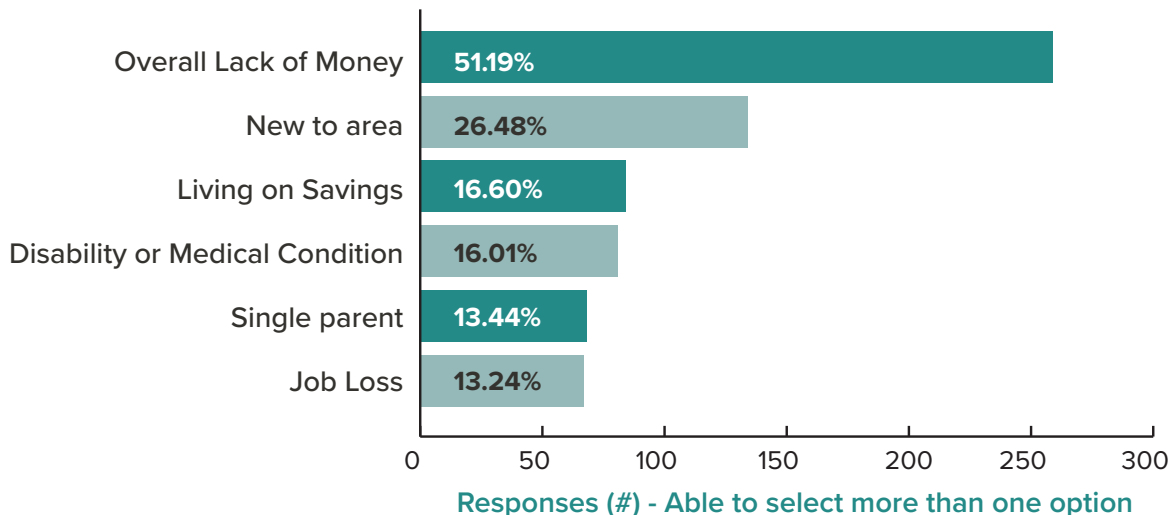
accessible on our website. Additionally, one of our partner organizations created a food bank for Ukrainians that provided food and wrap-around services to better help with the transition.

Ethnicity

● White (European descent)	279
● Indigenous (First Nations, Inuk/Inuit, Métis)	96
● Asian (Chinese, Afghan, Indian, Filipino...)	57
● Latin (Latin American, Hispanic)	48
● Black (African, Afro-Caribbean, African Canadian)	34



Reason for Accessing a Food Bank (multiple answers per respondent)



Experiences with Poverty, Income and Employment

Over one half (53%) of respondents either rely on social assistance as a source of income or have no income. Reasons for using social assistance vary, but the most common reasons are because of health conditions. Out of total respondents, 43% self-identify as living with a disability. Out of the unemployed respondents, 36% shared they are unemployed because of an illness or disability.

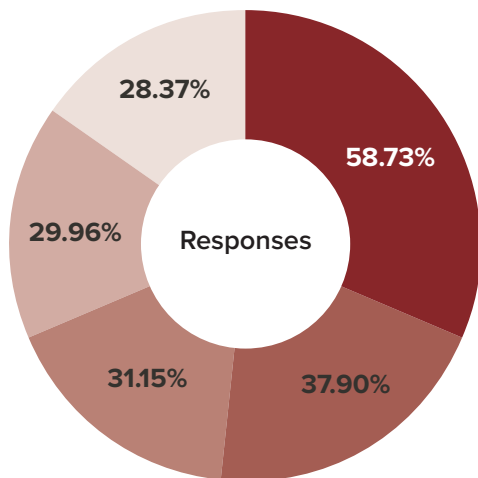
“I had to start using a food bank again because prices used to be lower before. I had extra income due to not paying as much for bills, and I had family support.”

- Harvest Voices Respondent

There have been recent improvements to social assistance rates in Manitoba. As of January 2023, Manitobans enrolled in the disability income support program can earn up to \$12,000 of personal income per year and add phone and laundry allowances to their budget. Those enrolled also received an increase of \$100 to their monthly EIA Disability benefits. For people relying on EIA or EIA Disability, the basic needs portion of the benefit is now indexed annually to inflation.



Harvest Manitoba client, Huda, pictured with her two children



How to Eliminate Food Bank Dependence (multiple answers per respondent)

● Lower food prices	296
● Better pay at current job	191
● Increase to social assistance benefits	157
● More affordable housing	151
● More hours at current job/an additional job	143

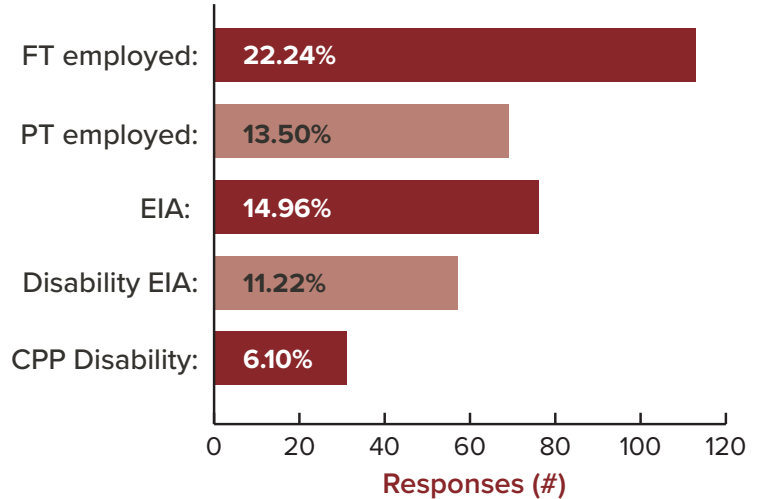
Although changes to EIA are positive, current social assistance rates remain too low to allow for reasonable standards of living. In Manitoba, EIA and EIA Disability provide incomes of only \$9,484 to \$16,398 per year, depending on family size, which is less than half of the current poverty line (\$25,471 per year). Families on social assistance worry about quality of life. Without a livable income, people face indignities such as improper living conditions and food insecurity.^{6,9} One-third of respondents (31%) need an increase in social assistance benefits to reduce their food bank use.

Many respondents (38%) also indicated that they would need higher pay at their current job to reduce their food bank use. The calculated living wage in Manitoba is \$18.34/hour. This means that even those who work full-time at minimum wage still earn less than the poverty line.¹⁰

“I didn't need a food bank once I caught up on all my bills or when my income was sufficient to cover my costs of living. Sadly, that changed this past year.”

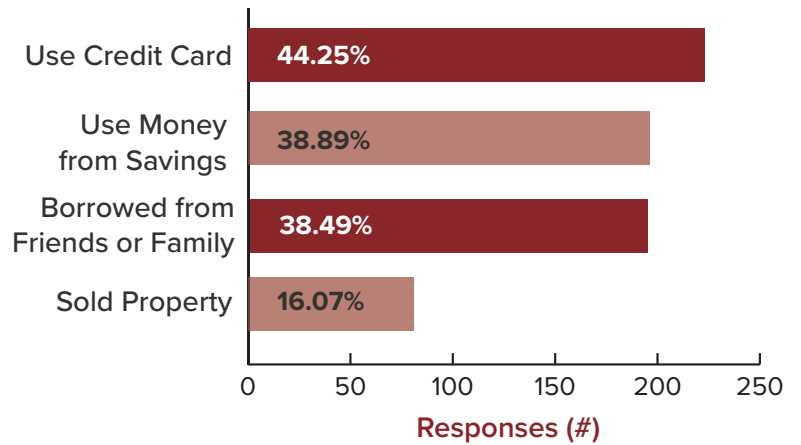
- Harvest Voices Respondent

Different Sources of Income



Actions Made to Pay Bills

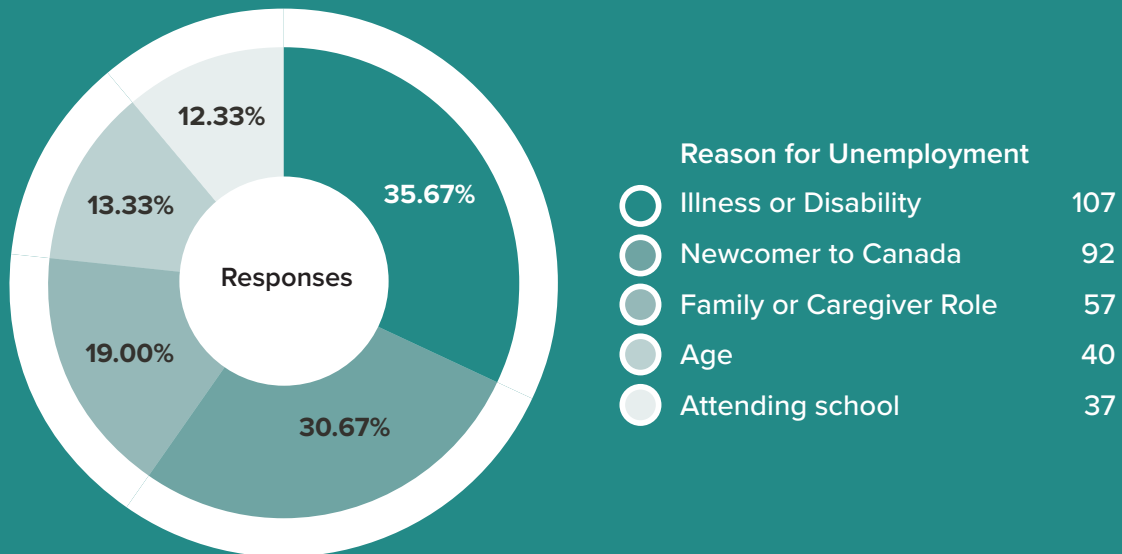
(multiple answers per respondent)



*Explanation of MBM Poverty Line

Market Basket Measure (MBM) is a standard method used to measure poverty. The MBM calculates the cost of a basket of goods and services that would be necessary to maintain a basic standard of living. The basket includes items like food, clothing, shelter, and other services such as health care and recreation.





“I am on maternity leave and could not find daycare in the area (some waitlists are up to 4 years), if I can’t work, I need other options, like using a food bank.” - Harvest Voices Respondent

People who live in working households and experience food insecurity are more likely to take on the responsibility of working multiple jobs. Higher levels of work stress combined with less personal time causes an increased risk of illness, which in turn results in a decreased ability to work and more of a reliance on social assistance.¹¹ To improve conditions for low-income Manitobans, there needs to be improved wages from all sources of income, combined with a lower cost of living.



Frank, Harvest Manitoba client

EIA & MBM	Single Person Employable	Single Person Disability	Single Parent, One Child	Couple, Two Children
EIA Income - Manitoba	\$9,484	12,007	\$16,398	\$19,811
MBM Threshold (Winnipeg)	\$25,471	\$25,471	\$36,016	\$50,942
Variance	– \$15,987	– \$13,464	– \$19,618	– \$31,131
EIA Income % of MBM	37%	47%	46%	39%

Source: Welfare in Canada, 2022 (maytree.com)

*EIA Income in this table includes Rent Assist benefits

Iryna's Voice

*"We are proud to be a part of the friendly, close-knit team of **Harvest's** food bank volunteers who put their heart and soul into caring for and helping those who need it most today."*

Iryna, Sofia, and Anatolii have enjoyed volunteering at Table of Grace Food Bank since December 2022.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine forced over 7 million residents, roughly 1 in 5 people, to flee the country. Given Canada's status as one of the largest Ukrainian diaspora communities in the world and its distance from Russia, it comes as no shock that Canada has seen an overwhelming response to the Canada-Ukraine Authorization for Emergency Travel (CUAET), receiving over 1 million applications and approving more than 920,000.

The influx of displaced Ukrainians has increased food bank users at Harvest Manitoba this past year, making up 79% of newcomer clients. Many of these newcomers are families struggling to put food on the table, especially for their children. One such family is Iryna and her loved ones.

Iryna's travel to Canada began with a heart-wrenching departure from her home in eastern Ukraine's Luhansk Oblast, a region plagued by conflict. Iryna, her husband Anatolii, son Mykola, daughter-in-law Marharyta, and young granddaughter Sofia (who was only 2.5 years old) left their home to seek refuge in Winnipeg, arriving on August 13th, 2022. While Iryna and Anatolii lived in a different city in Ukraine apart from Mykola, Marharyta, and Sofia, they decided to all live together in a 2 bedroom apartment in Winnipeg.

Even with their combined incomes, the family still struggles with food insecurity. As Iryna puts it, "Our standard of living is negatively affected by inflation and, consequently, the rising prices of food. However, the help of Harvest's food banks allows us to compensate for this and make our lives more comfortable."

Another significant challenge the family faces revolves around their professional experience, with Mykola and Marharyta coming from medical backgrounds in Ukraine. Sadly, the complexities and costs associated with accreditation to practice their professions in Canada have made it almost impossible for them to continue their careers in Manitoba. Rather than elevating their socioeconomic status, the education and professional experience of the young couple led them to underemployment, forcing them to turn to our food banks for help.

Thankfully, adjusting to difficult "new conditions and peculiarities of life in Canada" and leaving home behind has not dimmed Iryna's optimism. "Our family lives by the principle, paraphrasing the ancient philosopher Socrates, that not the one who has a lot is happy, but the one who has enough. Our family has enough of everything."

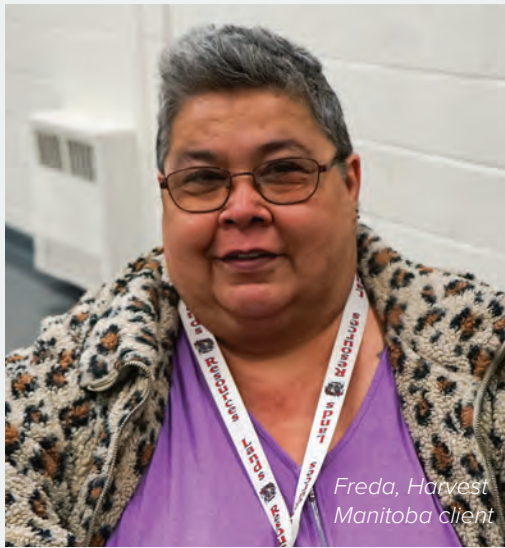
In their new life in Canada, their main sources of income include:

- Mykola's salary working full-time as a Visiting Scholar
- Marharyta's part-time instructor position with a 4-month contract
- Iryna and Anatolii's Ukrainian pensions
- The monthly EIA payments Iryna and Anatolii began receiving in July 2023

*"Our standard of living is negatively affected by inflation and, consequently, the rising prices of food. However, the help of **Harvest's** food banks allows us to compensate for this and make our lives more comfortable."*

- Iryna, Harvest Manitoba client





Freda, Harvest Manitoba client

Freda's Voice

"Don't be ashamed. If you need it, you need it. You can always pay it forward later."

Twenty-six years ago, Freda turned to a food bank for the first time while caring for her four children. Today, her family has grown to include five children, aged 40, 38, 36, 30, and 26, with various health challenges including deafness, autism, diabetes, or a combination of these conditions. Her household includes nine people, with her father, grandson, and boyfriend also sharing the home.

Freda and her family rely on Employment and Income Assistance (EIA) to make ends meet. After she pays her \$260 hydro bill, she's left with just \$105 for groceries per month. The dietary restrictions for her children, who require whole wheat options because of their diabetes, make her grocery budget even more restricting. She can no longer opt for the cost-effective generic brand as it does not meet their dietary needs.

Fortunately, getting food from Harvest Manitoba's food banks has made a significant impact in helping Freda stretch her grocery budget. Additionally, our volunteers have taught her food preservation techniques, recipes, and cooking tips to make the most of the food she receives.

Freda shares an encouraging message for those who may feel ashamed to seek help from food banks: "Don't be ashamed. If you need it, you need it. You can always pay it forward later."

To make sure her children get enough to eat, Freda even started taking hunger suppressants to curb her own appetite and save money on food.



Agrim's Voice

"It's great that anyone struggling can get the help they need from Harvest."

Agrim and Camila, Harvest Manitoba clients

Agrim, an international student from India, arrived in Winnipeg on January 31st, 2021, with aspirations of pursuing higher education at the University of Manitoba. As an international student, he was only allowed to work 20 hours/week maximum, which made it tough to keep up with rising inflation and soaring grocery costs.

Agrim's introduction to Harvest Manitoba came through his girlfriend, Camila. She was also navigating the financial struggles of international student life and the burden of expenses, while working a part-time minimum-wage job. He shares, "Before I heard about Harvest Manitoba, I thought food banks were only for homeless people. I soon realized that most people had a permanent address. And that's awesome! It's great that anyone struggling can get the help they need from Harvest."

Having graduated from university last month and applying to 200+ jobs, he's found it difficult to secure full-time employment. He often receives

feedback about being overqualified or lacking experience for an entry-level position. Currently, he is working with two security companies casually to make ends meet while he looks for a career related to his university degree.

The challenges experienced by international students may be intensified by misinformation. The Government of Canada's website indicates that the monthly funds required for an international student (excluding tuition) are \$833. However, this does not account for expenses like rent, phone bills, and transportation, potentially contributing to unrealistic expectations for international students seeking education in Canada.

Veronika's Voice

"I can't sustain my family by myself. My salary doesn't cover all of my expenses."

Veronika arrived in Winnipeg to escape the war-torn realities of Ukraine in August 2022. Coming with her two children, aged 17 and 7, she faced the challenge of being a single mom while her husband continued his service in the military back home. Settling into a new city and life without her spouse, she found community and support from other Ukrainian newcomers who introduced her to Harvest Manitoba.

Struggling to make ends meet in a foreign country, Veronika turned to Harvest Manitoba for help, where she learned about our 6-week Warehouse Training Program. Determined to learn new skills and find new employment prospects, Veronika completed the program successfully, earning certifications in WHMIS, Safe Food Handling, and First Aid. Our training program proved to be a fruitful opportunity for Veronika, as it opened doors to a full-time job, which has provided some financial relief for her family.

Veronika was an accountant in Ukraine with a Bachelor of Economics degree. Unfortunately, her dream of continuing her career in Canada faced hurdles due to the absence of a CPA

Veronika at work during Harvest Manitoba's 6-week warehouse training program.



accreditation and the associated financial and time constraints. Undeterred, she found employment as a forklift operator at a distribution centre, thanks to Harvest Manitoba's support.

Veronika explains that lowering food costs and having a higher wage would end her reliance on food banks. She shares, "I can't sustain my family by myself. My salary doesn't cover all of my expenses. I have to spend money on rent, transportation, and clothes for my children. So, I turned to Harvest to get some help with food."

Warehouse Training Program graduates Veronika, Yuliia, and Anna at work at a distribution centre in Winnipeg



Brad's Voice

Beginning as a volunteer with Harvest Manitoba, Brad found himself at our doors through a recommendation from Regional Social Services, looking to rebuild his socialization skills after surviving two major heart attacks. His journey to using a food bank began in 2015 when he had more money going out on bills than he had coming in.

Brad is reliant on EIA for Persons with Disabilities and copes with various health challenges, including heart issues, diabetes, and arthritis. He mentions that the disability assistance cheque increase of \$25/month implemented last year is negligible given the high cost of living and his already low income.

Due to dietary restrictions linked to his health, Brad's food choices are limited and come with a higher price tag. The cheaper options, like many frozen food options, are unsuitable for him. "I can't buy any frozen meals or processed food. Everything has to be fresh and unbreaded, which is way too expensive for me," says Brad.



Brad, Harvest Manitoba client and volunteer

After two years of waiting, Brad recently purchased a winter coat, a basic need for his trips on public transit and medical appointments during the harsh Winnipeg winters. This necessary investment has caused his bills to pile up, forcing him to max out his credit cards on food. This has resulted in the bank hitting him with monthly overdraft fees, making it even harder to get ahead while he's already falling behind.

Brad's belief in reducing reliance on food banks centers on significant increases in EIA rates, sharing that he only receives \$550/month. He explains, "That's like getting paid \$3.50/hour, which just doesn't cut it with today's prices."



Sharon, Harvest Manitoba client

Sharon's Voice

"I'm able to save \$100/month on things like bread, potatoes, and canned goods through Harvest and spend that money on other necessities for my children."

Sharon, a long-time resident of Selkirk, Manitoba, has been using Harvest Manitoba's food banks for 15 years. She lives with her husband and foster children aged 18, 11, and 9.

Before retiring, Sharon worked as a housekeeper to support her family. The rising cost of fresh vegetables pushed her to seek help from a food bank. On top of that, some family members face dietary restrictions and diabetes, which has led to a higher grocery bill.

Now in retirement, her pension falls short of making ends meet. Harvest Manitoba has been an ongoing source of support by providing food and other essentials. She explains, "I'm able to save \$100/month on things like bread, potatoes, and canned goods through Harvest and spend that money on other necessities for my children."

An avid baker, Sharon creatively uses staples from our food banks to create delicious treats, occasionally supplementing her child's lunch with her homemade baking when there isn't enough food to go around.

When asked what she would spend her money on if she had a little extra, Sharon explains: "I'd spend it on more food and recreational activities for my boys. I have limited options for what they can do, and I hardly get to take them out anywhere."

Sharon expresses that Harvest Manitoba is a lifeline for her and her family. She shares, "I used to be embarrassed to use a food bank, but I'm not anymore. It's a way of survival nowadays."

Taylor's Voice

"Now I spend most of my days pushing myself until I can't stand it anymore, and I have to eat. It's a luxury to eat more than one meal a day."

Among the 43% of respondents struggling with a disability or health condition is Taylor, a 26-year-old woman facing her challenges head-on. She has used Harvest's food banks for several years due to her physical disabilities and PTSD, which have left her unable to work. Living with her furry friend, Bella, Taylor's main source of income is EIA for Persons with Disabilities.



Taylor, Harvest Manitoba client

Before COVID-19, Taylor had an easier time getting healthy ingredients for well-rounded meals, creating a healthier lifestyle and improving her self-image. Unfortunately, the impact of the pandemic significantly increased consumer prices and economic uncertainty. "Now I spend most of my days pushing myself until I can't stand it anymore, and I have to eat. It's a luxury to eat more than one meal a day," she shares.

Inflation and high grocery prices have caused Taylor to abstain from purchasing healthy food. A lack of a nutritious diet has negatively impacted her mental health, leading to brain fog and irritability. Her diagnoses include Long-term COVID,

fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue, and heart issues, which have pushed her to her limit to take care of herself and her cat while maintaining her apartment. "When you're not eating healthy, it really does impact your brain's ability to function," states Taylor.

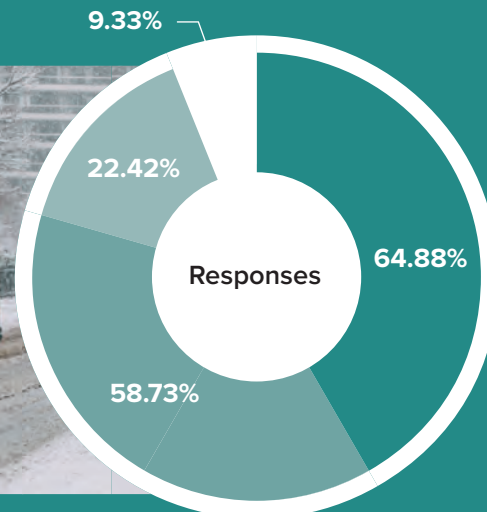
Taylor stresses that accessing Harvest Manitoba's services does not signify hitting rock bottom. The savings from using a food bank take a bit of pressure off her daily struggles and allow her to use that money for necessities she otherwise could not afford. She explains, "It's something that can help you out and supplement your ability to live a better life."

Health and Daily Life

Transportation options are limited for most of our respondents. Public transit (65%) and walking (59%) are the main modes of travel that were reported. The high cost of owning a car and driving creates a barrier for clients. Grocery stores, food banks, and medical appointments become more difficult to access.

Most respondents who have a disability admit that their disability limits their ability to perform daily activities in some way (77%). Their personal capabilities further restrict their ability to travel by transit or by walking. Many respondents do not have a family

doctor for themselves (37%) or for their children (37%). Over half have not seen a dentist in the past year (56%). Especially for clients who live with a disability, cost of living has a large impact on their quality of health and daily life.



Mode of Transportation

Responses (#)
(multiple answers per respondent)

- Public Transit 327
- Walking 296
- Driving 113
- Cycling 47

Experiences with Food Insecurity and Inflation

Inflation has increased since the pandemic, with food bank use alongside it. We are seeing an increase in clients month after month, with almost half of the respondents being employed (41%). Among employed respondents, the majority have full-time work, followed by part-time work and casual or contract work. Current costs of living are putting pressure on everyone regardless of employment.






Nearly all respondents rent their homes (84%). The current rental market is becoming increasingly unaffordable and unstable. The average market-priced rental cost for a two-bedroom apartment in Winnipeg is \$1,645.^{12,13} The average monthly cost that Harvest Voices respondents report for their rent is much lower (\$1,044), which suggests that respondents are seeking out lower-cost housing, living in less desirable neighborhoods or rely on social assistance for subsidized rent.

Housing affects all aspects of well-being, so it is necessary that steps are taken to ease the pressure of rental costs. Many respondents (40%) requested that Harvest Manitoba advocate for more affordable housing. Alongside other community groups, Harvest Manitoba is speaking up for an expanded social housing supply, support for tenants, protection for rental security, and the creation of jobs through housing programs. We recognize that the cost of living is a significant challenge for all food bank clients.

As with housing, utilities and groceries are monthly costs that affect all respondents. In the past year, Manitobans experienced a jump of 15% in grocery costs.¹³ The average annual cost of groceries for a single person in our province is \$3,984, nearly \$350 per month.¹⁴ When facing food insecurity and financial stress, households adjust spending patterns to prioritize essential needs above all else. Important utility bills such as hydro, water, or phone are the first to be left behind.¹⁵

Grocery price increases this year alone:

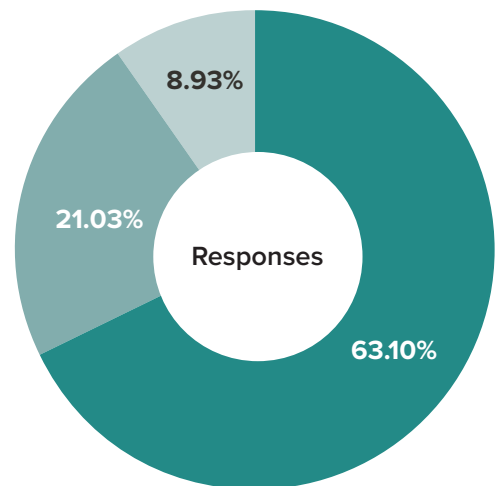
-  **Dairy** +7.4%
-  **Meat** +6.9%
-  **Bakery** +12.9%

50%

50% of respondents go hungry at least once a month because they can no longer afford to buy enough food for their family to eat.

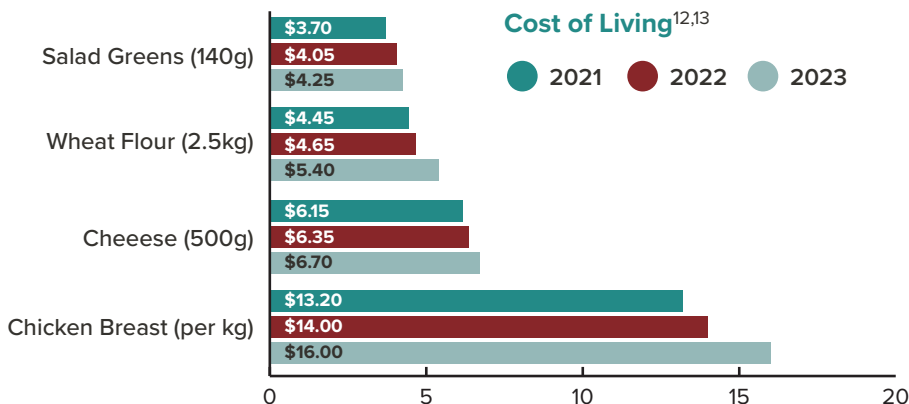
Type of Housing

Type of Housing	Responses (#)
Rent	318
Subsidized Rent (geared to income)	106
Own	45



Cost of Living^{12,13}

● 2021 ● 2022 ● 2023



Respondent's Average Monthly Household Expenses

Rent	\$1044
Hydro	\$137
Water	\$102
Phone Bills	\$95
TV/Internet	\$91
Childcare	\$460

Impacts on Family and Children

Half of respondents experience hunger at least once a month because they cannot afford food. Almost all respondents (96%) report that current food prices affect how they shop. Two-thirds can no longer afford to buy enough food, and 73% can no longer purchase healthy food. Almost three out of four respondents (69%) are satisfied that the food provided by Harvest meets their household needs.

Those who felt like Harvest Manitoba was lacking requested that we provide more culturally appropriate foods such as Halal, gluten-free or sugar-free options. These items add extra costs to grocery bills, so, understandably, there would be a demand for them at food banks.

Lower-income households are generally linked to lower-quality diets: lower in protein, higher in salt and higher in processed foods.¹⁶ The hunger that these households experience is linked to an increased risk of disease and stress.¹⁷ While women are pregnant, the inability to afford healthy food is proven to slow the development of their children throughout the first five years of their life.^{18,19} In young children especially, healthy growth is very much linked to diet. Nutritious fats, fresh milk, and the avoidance of salts or sugars are necessary. Healthy eating habits when children are young lead to academic success and higher income later in life.²⁰

Food banks provide relief to households unable to afford enough nutritious food for their families. Harvest Manitoba has initiated a First Steps Program that provides milk and other necessities such as diapers, baby formula, and baby food to mothers who attend food banks. We also offer gluten-free hampers to people who have celiac disease. Our Meals2Go program provides school-age children with a healthy take-home bag of snacks for the weekend to sustain them while they are not in class.



Kaylee, Harvest Manitoba client, pictured with her two children



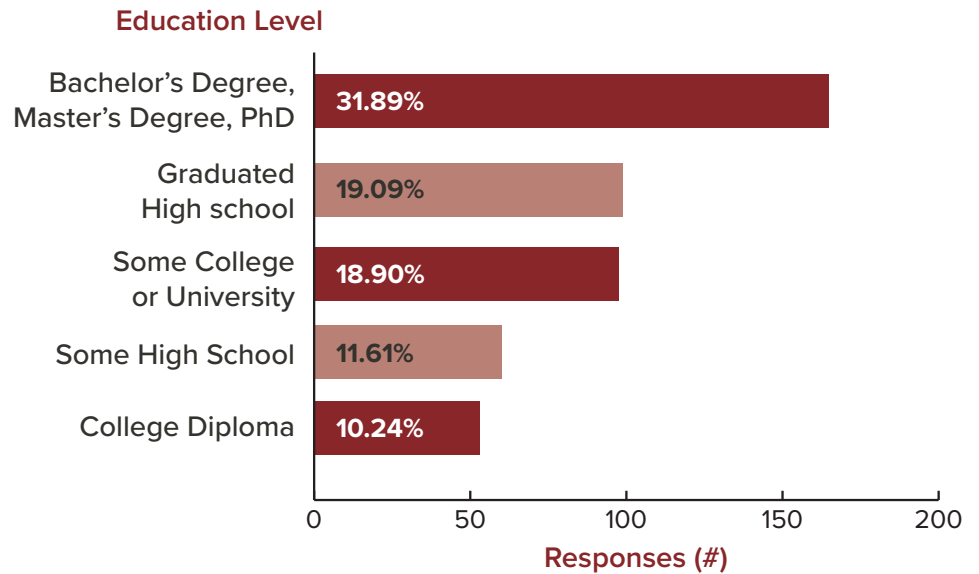
Harvest Manitoba's Warehouse Training Program Graduation

Training and Education

Education is a core element of a healthy life. Obtaining a higher education allows for numerous health and work advantages. Students who are food secure tend to have better mental and physical well-being, which helps them succeed in their studies.²¹ In contrast, food insecurity has been shown to reduce graduation rates among post-secondary students, especially among students who are the first of their families to pursue higher education.²² Well-paying jobs are more difficult to find without having a university or college education.²³ A cycle exists where poverty is difficult to overcome.

Over one in ten (12%) respondents are currently unable to work because they are attending school. Rising living costs, including tuition fees, have contributed to education barriers. International students have often been seen as part of a financially privileged group; however, many international students are not fully capable of supporting themselves and are at high risk of food insecurity.

Costs such as textbooks, supplies, and tuition add significantly to the costs that students face.²⁴ Students who are already under financial stress, for example, those of lower socioeconomic



"I use a food bank because my work is in theatre and live events, and it is still recovering from the pandemic. Budgets are lower and there are fewer shows. Theatres aren't getting the audiences and funding they need to continue a sustainable industry." - Harvest Voices Respondent

status, students with disabilities, and recent immigrants are pushed to take on "survival jobs" to supplement their income.

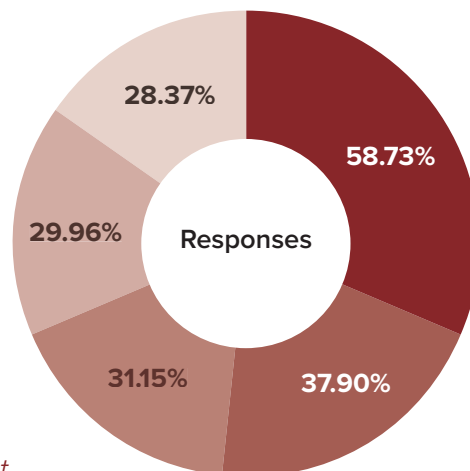
Many students who take on survival jobs are at risk of being overworked, which can harm their health and academic performance.

The opposite effect is true for international students: their ability to achieve financial stability is hindered by student permit conditions that only allow work for a maximum of 20 hours per week.²⁵ International students also face much higher tuition costs than Canadian students.

Harvest Manitoba offers a no-cost Warehouse Training Program that offers an alternative for students who are unable to attend conventional school. This training program teaches industry-standard warehouse employment skills and introduces students to workplace culture. The program lasts six weeks and offers support, such as help with job-searching and resume-writing. Participants earn certificates such as WHMIS (Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System), in-house Safe Food Handling courses, and First Aid. The Warehouse Training Program's success rate, which includes finding employment after graduation, is above 80%.

"COVID-19 lockdowns killed the income of the facility I worked at, and it couldn't recover, which forced it to close and let go of its staff permanently. Now I need to use a food bank."

- Harvest Voices Respondent



What needs to change to end the need for food bank
(multiple answers per respondent)

Responses (#)	Count
Lower food prices	296
Better pay at current job	191
Increase to social assistance benefits	157
More affordable housing	151
More hours at current job / an additional job	143



Growing Food and Urban Agriculture

Gardening is a viable way for clients to increase their food security at home. Most respondents (85%) do not have the money set aside each month to participate in recreational activities. Community gardens provide a place to gather with others and keep active during the summer. Over forty percent of all respondents who have a disability (43%) admit to having a mental illness. Gardening is known to improve mental health and well-being, as well as help people grow a sense of belonging and fulfilment.²⁶

What can Harvest Manitoba do to reduce your need for a food bank?	Responses (#)	Responses (%)
Advocate for increased amounts of social assistance benefits	205	21.93
Advocate for more affordable housing	203	21.71
Help with employment services - resume writing, interview skills, job skills, etc.	187	20.00
Food security workshops - how to cook, garden, or preserve food	137	14.65
Help with budgeting/financial advice	122	13.05
None of the above	81	8.66

We have expanded our urban agriculture initiatives at Harvest Manitoba to promote community gardening. Our on-site community garden has twelve raised planters and produces more than two dozen types of vegetables, which are picked freely by the public. We also provide growing supplies, seeds, and seedlings to community groups and food bank clients throughout the province to enable at-home gardening. Our Grow-a-Row program encourages at-home gardeners to set aside a portion of their garden with the goal of giving back to Harvest Manitoba. In 2022, 56,469 pounds of produce (in other words the weight of 35 adult moose) was donated through Grow-a-Row.

The creation of our community garden is one of several environment-friendly initiatives at Harvest Manitoba. To

reduce food waste, a compost program is in place for staff and volunteers. Food preservation workshops (canning, dehydrating, indoor growing and hydroponics) are offered to community members.

The Harvest Manitoba Lunch program uses excess food and fresh garden produce to provide healthy lunches to staff and volunteers. Students and adult learners come to Harvest Manitoba to be taught safe food handling and cooking skills in our on-site kitchen, which they can apply to resumes and job searches. The lunch program directly benefits food bank clients, as many respondents suggested that Harvest Manitoba can help reduce their need for a food bank by offering food security workshops (27%) or helping with employment skills (37%).



Scan to watch
Harvest Manitoba
deliver food to
Garden Hill!

Building

Partnerships in the North

Indigenous peoples in Manitoba experience disproportionate economic and social disadvantages compared to non-Indigenous people. Our province has the highest prevalence of poverty among Indigenous peoples (30%) in Canada.²⁷ Historical systemic oppression, removal of traditional ways of life and discrimination all contribute to the high rates of poverty amongst Indigenous peoples.

In this year's Harvest Voices, Indigenous respondents are underrepresented. Last year, 44% of respondents identified as First Nations, Inuk/Inuit or Métis. However, this year 19% identified as Indigenous. We suspect this is influenced by an overrepresentation of Ukrainian newcomers becoming clients during our surveying timeframe.

This year, Harvest Manitoba was the first food bank in Canada to be approved as a recipient of the Nutrition North Subsidy program. This program allows food banks to receive the same transport subsidies for northern remote First Nations as retail outlets. Harvest Manitoba shares food with 27 Indigenous-led organizations across Manitoba, such as food banks, schools, and daycares. Currently, we ship food monthly to MKO in Thompson and all four First Nations in the Island Lakes communities: St. Theresa Point, Garden Hill, Red Sucker, and Wasagamack. In this past year, Harvest Manitoba has sent over 150,000 pounds of food to the Island Lake region, reaching over 1,600 households.

A total of 17 First Nations in Manitoba are not accessible by all-weather roads, meaning that certain times of the year limit transportation. Harvest Manitoba continues to look at opportunities to expand food support to these nations and build support for more sustainable food systems.

Harvest Manitoba is vital in supporting food security needs in Manitoba and its growing Indigenous population. Manitoba has 63 First Nations, with 57% of Indigenous people living on reserves.²⁸ Various Indigenous-led organizations in Manitoba have found innovative solutions to meet the needs of their community. Harvest Manitoba continues to work with organizations to find ways to support these innovations, including creating opportunities that support Indigenous employment and training.



Harvest Manitoba clients pictured at food bank in Garden Hill



Conclusion

Food insecurity affects one in five households in Manitoba. In times of high inflation, it is those who have the least who hurt the most. We have seen that again these past two years with reduced purchasing power for those with low incomes, resulting in them being unable to buy essential goods. Today, more Manitobans than ever can barely make ends meet.

For those employed, wages cannot keep up with rising prices. For those living on benefits, including disability benefits and social assistance, individuals and families are forced to make impossible decisions between paying the bills or putting food on the table. For seniors on fixed incomes, the erosion of buying power is causing many to have a greatly diminished quality of life.

This past year, many newcomers to Manitoba have made the journey to a local food bank. For people hoping to start a new life in our province, there needs to be sustained financial support and better pathways to lead them to gainful employment and education. For many fleeing war in their homeland, including displaced Ukrainians but people from other war-torn regions as well, the stress of leaving family behind to an uncertain future is to be borne alongside the difficulties of settlement in a new country where barriers of language and limited job opportunities are still a challenge.

All children deserve to be able to focus on school and not feel hungry. The high inflation of recent years is driving up the price of everything from school supplies to lunch kit snacks. Supports for families raising children so often fail to keep pace with costs, leaving the most vulnerable behind.

This year's Harvest Voices report is a snapshot of hunger and poverty in Manitoba. The surveys and conversations with food bank clients from around the province are meant to create understanding for the public and policymakers alike about the real challenges people face to make ends meet. Today, Harvest Manitoba serves 50,000 people every month who use a food

bank in our province. With these kinds of numbers, it is easy to get lost in the statistics and fail to remember that each of those numbers is a person, a life, and a story. No two stories are exactly alike, and that is why the voices in this report are more important than ever.

Manitoba is not alone in the issues we face. All across Canada, more people than ever before are using food banks to get through the month – nearly 2 million people a month in 2023. It does not need to be this way. Although the numbers we see now have never been higher, there are solutions for change that can make people's lives better and improve income support and access to opportunity. The following recommendations summarize the key findings we heard from those who participated in the Harvest Voices report this year. These solutions are not the only ones that we heard, but they reflect key themes from people during the development of this report and from those who have lived experience with poverty.

Our country and province must do better. Policy initiatives, social programs and economic strategies exist that can lift people from poverty and get them on the road to a better and healthier life. To succeed, we need to work together. Government, First Nations, Metis, Inuit, Indigenous-led organizations, the private sector, and not-for-profit organizations all have a role to play in working together to solve these important challenges. In the year ahead, Harvest Manitoba will continue to look for more opportunities to win victories over hunger and poverty in our province and, with your help, find new ways to ensure that we build 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, people have shared the financial strain these increased costs have caused them. This is a nationwide issue. It is essential that all levels of government implement policies that build people up and improve the economic and social structures to ensure a healthier future for all, where no one goes hungry.

- 1** All Levels of Government must consult people with lived experience in poverty to find long-term policy solutions.
- 2** Harvest asks that governments work to improve settlement programs for newcomers to Canada including improvements to the certification of foreign credentials, increased settlement support along with access to training and employment services.
- 3** Harvest Manitoba asks for a swift implementation of the new Canada Disability Benefit with benefit amounts that will raise people above the Market Basket Measure (MBM) poverty rate, will not be subject to provincial or private insurance claw-backs, and will be accessible to all who need it.
- 4** Harvest Manitoba seeks long-term investments in Nutrition North Canada's expanded commitment to northern food security in collaboration with Indigenous communities to improve food access and food sovereignty initiatives.
- 5** All children deserve to be able to focus on school and not feel hungry. We call for our province to set children up for success: to implement a universal school nutrition program that includes support for after school food programs.
- 6** All Manitobans are impacted by the increased cost of living. The provincial government must increase social assistance rates to a livable level and continue to make increases to minimum wage to ensure that working people are able to cover their expenses.
- 7** Improved access to lower-barrier employment, training and education opportunities for groups over-represented in poverty along with improved access to childcare.
- 8** All levels of government need to work together to fund more social and affordable housing to ensure that individuals and families have access to secure suitable accommodations at a cost that leaves enough income for other basic needs.

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.

The survey consisted of 68 questions collecting information on demographics, education, income, health and wellness, and food insecurity. Food bank clients were invited to participate in the survey by phone, in-person during food bank visits or online. Information about the survey was communicated on flyers that were inserted into food bank hampers, promotional posters were displayed at member food banks, and social media posts on Harvest Manitoba platforms.

The survey was conducted through May to September 2023, resulting in 507 surveys successfully completed and included in the analysis. The results represent a snapshot in time of food bank usage during those months and are not representative of all food bank usage throughout 2022 or other years.

While surveying was being completed, Harvest Manitoba was experiencing a large influx of Ukrainian newcomers. There was

also a lack of surveying of northern Manitoba, out of respect to the autonomy of Indigenous communities. The majority of survey responses are from within Winnipeg (82.2%), with lesser amounts being from rural Manitoba (9.7%) or northern Manitoba (0.8%).

The results are influenced by an overrepresentation of Ukrainian newcomers. In comparison to last year, trends show a higher proportion of respondents who are able-bodied, have post-secondary education or who are European in ethnicity. There is an underrepresentation of Indigenous food bank clients.

Results and analysis were generated using an online tool called Survey Sparrow. The data was cleaned to remove any invalid responses. 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 due to allowance for individuals to select multiple answers on a single question, if not otherwise specified.

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Food. Time. Funds.

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.

Thank You!



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