

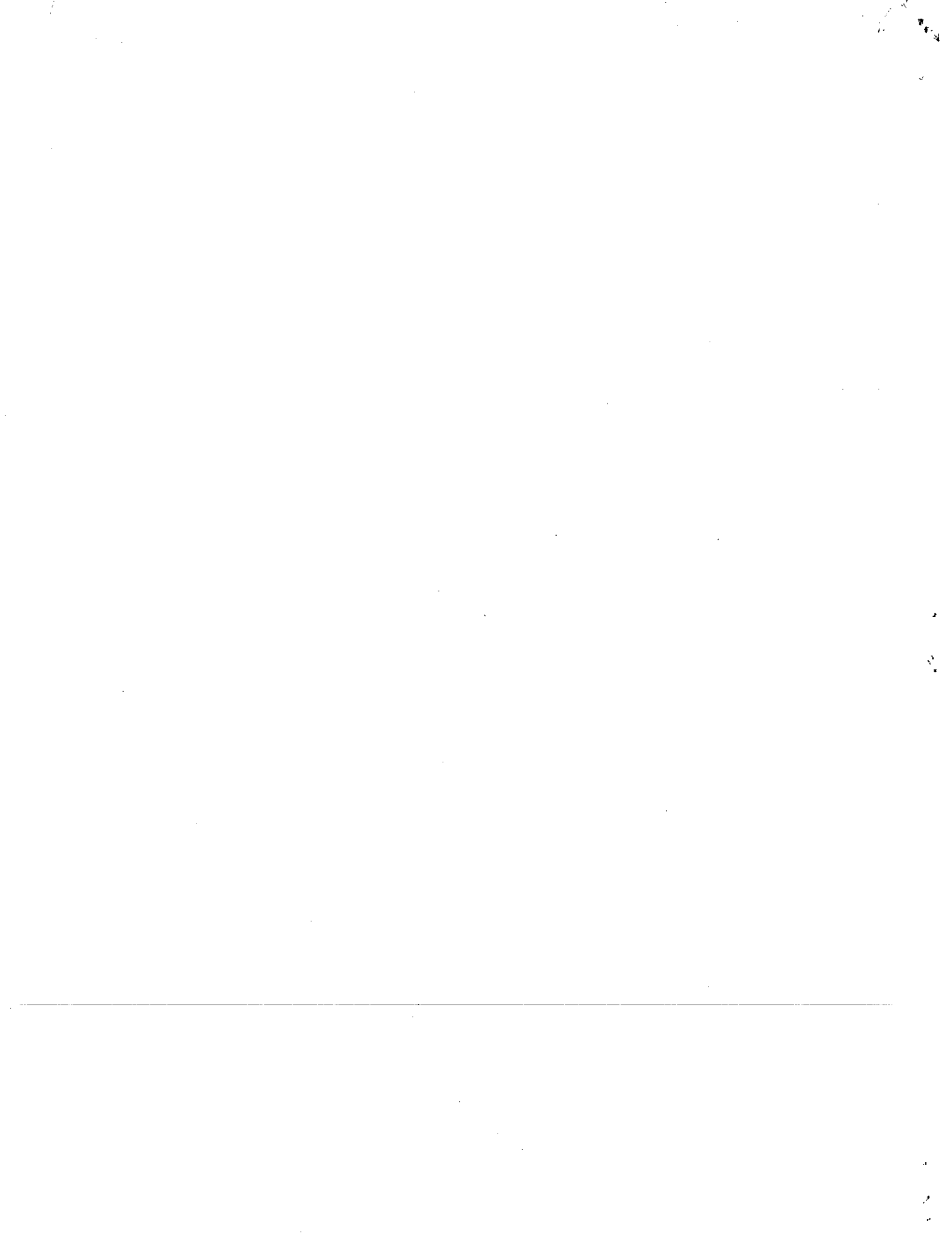
A Return Look at
Two Paycheques Away:
Social Policy and Hunger in Edmonton
Update '97

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COUNCIL



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Introduction

In December, 1996 the Edmonton Social Planning Council and the Edmonton Gleaners Association (Edmonton's Food Bank) released the results from a comprehensive study of Food Bank use in the City of Edmonton—Two Paycheques Away: Social Policy and Hunger in Edmonton. The study, one of the largest of its kind undertaken in Canada, involved interviews with over 800 Food Bank recipients as well as focus group sessions. Results from the study revealed that one in 20 Edmontonians use the services of the Food Bank during the year—a rapidly growing group comprised mainly of Edmonton's most vulnerable citizens: single mothers, single men, children and the working poor.

As an update to this landmark study, the Council and the Edmonton Gleaners Association replicated a portion of research in the summer of 1997, with a smaller sample of families who use the Food Bank. Interviews were completed with 207 family heads, using the same research method employed in the original study, with the addition of further specific questions in the areas of family and child nutrition.

Heading out from the fanfare of the Alberta Growth Summit, the results of this updated research shed additional light on the continuing challenges faced by Edmontonians in need. As the provincial government meets both to consider just what 'people development' means, as well as the accompanying policy implications that inevitably come with 'reinvesting' in Albertans, the findings of the current study should prove powerful 'food for thought.'

Who are the Families Receiving Help Through the Food Bank?

Demographics

Families receiving help through the Food Bank are mainly single-parent families, headed by women, which include young children under 12 years of age. Two out of three families (66 per cent) are single parent families, with one-third two parent families. Families live in households that range in size from two to nine people, with an average household size of just under four. The households within the current sample include 448 children 15 years of age and under. Nine out of 10 households include children 12 years of age and under.

The women who head families receiving assistance through the Food Bank are young—31.5 years of age on average—with high school education or less. Within the sample, women make up close to 90 per cent of the household heads interviewed, with the age of household heads ranging from 19 to 50. Close to 60 per cent of household heads have less than 12 years of schooling, with only three per cent having completed 16 years of formal education (equivalent to a university degree).

Living Arrangements

Families live predominantly in the northeast (40 per cent), northwest (29 per cent) and central (15 per cent) regions of the city. Most live in either house/townhouse (57 per cent) or apartment (35 per cent) accommodations: almost all (95 per cent) rent their current accommodation.

Moving is a common occurrence for these families, with 72 per cent of sample families reporting a move within the previous 12 months. The major reasons families move include the search for more affordable rent or in response to work, school or training needs.

Getting By on Very Little

Families who use the Food Bank live on very low incomes that relegate them to the very margins of society. Simply 'getting by' becomes the goal with all the little 'extras' that contribute to the quality of life lost in the constant struggle just to make ends meet.

Sources of Income

Supports for Independence (SFI) represents the most common source of income for families. Over half (56 per cent) of family heads rely on SFI as their primary source of income, while another seven per cent rely on SFI as a secondary income source. Less than one in six (16 per cent) family heads have employment income, while 12 per cent have no source of income at all. Six per cent of family heads identify the Student Finance Board as their major source of income and four per cent identify Employment Insurance.

Given their primary reliance on government support programs, families live on very low incomes. The average household income for families is \$897, which represents the income from all members of the household. The majority of families (80 per cent) have income from only one household member, with the average income for family heads of \$760.

One year prior to the survey, more family heads had some form of employment income than at the time of interview (31 per cent as compared to 16 per cent); although, again government support programs formed the major sources of income: 41 per cent received SFI and 29 per cent received monies through the Student Finance Board. Twelve per cent of family heads had no source of income one year prior to the survey.

One in three (36 per cent) of the family heads interviewed face-to-face live in households without a telephone. All but one of the families without a telephone reported their preference for one.

Household Expenses

Despite their very low incomes, families still face the everyday costs of meeting their basic needs and for many this means regular monthly budget deficits. Average monthly expenses for families total \$1,127 per family. This compares to their average income of \$897 and results in an average monthly deficit of \$230. Nine out of 10 families find that their monthly income consistently fails

Table One: Family Average Monthly Income and Expenses

	Single Parent	Two-Parent	All Families
Total Income	\$831	\$1,022	\$897
Expenses:			
Rent/mortgage	\$413	\$439	\$423
Food	251	315	272
Personal care	43	54	47
Damage deposit	66	56	61
Health related	20	31	24
Recreation	31	24	29
Utilities	122	154	134
Clothing	35	23	31
Transportation	86	144	106
Total Expenses	<u>\$1,067</u>	<u>\$1,240</u>	<u>\$1,127</u>
Monthly Deficit	(\$236)	(\$218)	(\$230)

to cover all of their monthly expenses, with budget deficits a common occurrence. Single parent families have average monthly incomes of \$831 and expenses of \$1,067 leaving a deficit of \$236, while two-parent families have an income of \$1,022, expenses of \$1,240, leaving a deficit of \$218.

The major expenses for sample families are basic necessities of life—shelter, food and clothing—which together eat up all of the household income. (Table One) Families pay average monthly rental costs of \$423—close to 50 per cent of the total household income. For many families their rent costs include the charges for power, gas and water. This is not the case for families who rent houses or the smaller number who own homes. Families within the sample face average utility bills of \$134 per month.

Food represents the second largest budget item and families spend an average of \$272 on this basic necessity. This, for an average family of four people, is significantly below the average monthly budget laid out in the Nutritious Food Basket guidelines put out by Alberta Agriculture of around \$425. Families spend an additional \$47 per month on personal care items, \$24 on health related expenses and \$106 on transportation.

In combination, shelter, food and basic personal care costs (including health) account for over 90 per cent of family monthly incomes.

Faced with a monthly deficit budget, families have made numerous attempts to reduce their household costs to bring them more in line with their low incomes. Thus 88 per cent of families have reduced their housing and accommodation costs; 93 per cent cut back in the area of health; 96 per cent in the area of school costs and 76 per cent in the area of transportation. Despite making all these cuts, however, families still struggle to make ends meet with their very low levels of monthly income failing even to cover their basic household costs.

Turning to the Food Bank for Assistance

Families who receive assistance through the Food Bank require food support for either an extended period of time or on an intermittent basis. Visiting the Food Bank is not a one time occurrence for many families. They continue to need help and support as they confront the daily challenges of making ends meet.

Families come to need the assistance of the Food Bank for a number of reasons. The major reason families access the Food Bank, however, is because they simply do not have enough income to meet their very basic needs. With family incomes unable to cover even the basic household costs, the support of the Food Bank becomes an essential service.

Almost two-thirds of families (63 per cent) relate their current money and food shortages to a basic lack of income which includes concerns for inadequate levels of social assistance as well as underemployment.

In addition to this larger group of families who face an almost constant struggle to make ends meet, a smaller group, around 25 per cent, find unexpected expenses (10 per cent) or moving expenses (15 per cent) as the major factors which contribute to their shortage of income and food. These families have no financial cushion or other supports to draw on when unexpected or large one-time expenses confront them. As a result they often turn to the Food Bank for temporary help or relief.

Over half the families (54 per cent) within the current sample visited the Food Bank in the month prior to the interview, while nine out of ten families visited the Food Bank in the previous year.

Sample families on average used the Food Bank 4.8 times during the previous year. In addition to visits to the Food Bank, 18 per cent of families also report seeking further assistance through other centres providing food support including soup kitchens and other meal programs.

The majority of families (55 per cent) are able to access the Food Bank when they need help with food. Although, a minority encounter some problems accessing service. The most common challenges families face in accessing the Food Bank include problems getting through on the telephone (34 per cent), inconvenient opening times (31 per cent) and problems with transportation to Food Bank locations (19 per cent).

Getting Enough to Eat...Good Food and Good Nutrition

The overall diets and nutrition of families who use the Food Bank are poor. With families living on very low incomes they face almost constant food shortages. While the Food Bank can address some of these diet and nutrition needs, the kinds of food available through the Food Bank cannot meet all daily nutritional requirements—especially in regard to perishable food items such as fresh fruits and vegetables, as well as some dairy products.

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While most families (59 per cent) find that the hampers they receive meet their needs, 41 per cent of families do not. For these families, Food Bank hampers are not able to address their household’s food needs in two major ways: first, in the amount of food available (28 per cent), and second in terms of requirements for a healthy diet (20 per cent).

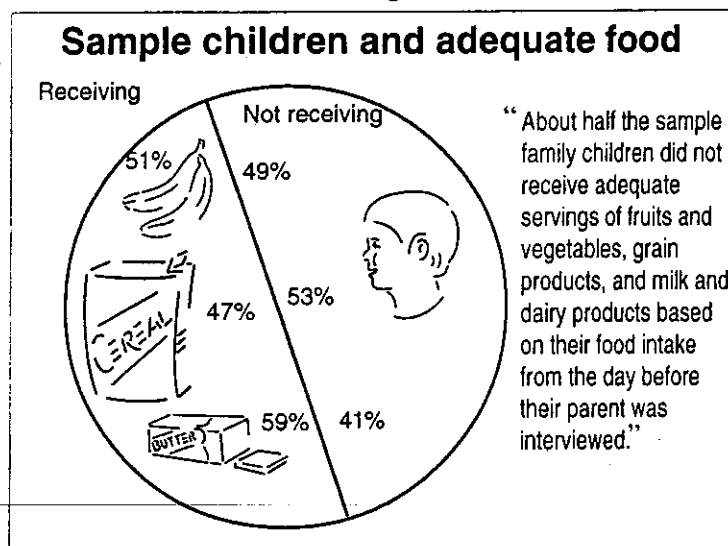
Overall, the diets of families who use the Food Bank are *not* well-balanced and nutritious. Family heads of households, who completed the survey, describe diets from the day before the interview which fail to meet basic daily food requirements as outlined in the Canada Food Guide. Only one in six (16 per cent) family heads report eating the recommended servings of fruits and vegetables, grain products and milk products, while one in four ate the recommended servings of meat or its alternates.

Family heads are conscious of the poor quality of their diets (61 per cent), and express a desire for more fruits and vegetables (56 per cent) and more meats or its alternates (64 per cent).

Unfortunately, their very low household incomes makes it impossible for them to afford these food items. Three out of four family heads (77 per cent) acknowledge that their nutritional needs were not met in the month prior to the interview, with 85 per cent meeting their nutritional needs, at best, only every second day or less.

Children in families who use the Food Bank fare marginally better in their diets—largely the result of parents choosing to feed their children before they eat themselves. Children, nevertheless, also have diets that fail to meet the recommended nutritional requirements (Figure One).

Figure One



Among children 15 years of age and younger in sample families, 49 per cent did not receive the recommended servings of fruits and vegetables the day before the interview, 53 per cent did not receive the recommended serving of grains, 41 per cent did not receive the recommended serving of milk and dairy products and 45 per cent did not receive the recommended serving of meat or its alternates.

Family heads recognize these deficits in their children’s diets and would like, if they could afford to, to provide more fruits and vegetables (79 per cent), more milk and dairy products and more meat or its alternates (40 per cent). Over half (52 per cent) of family heads indicate that, despite all their efforts, in the month prior to the interview their children’s nutritional needs were not met on a daily basis. Just under half (48 per cent) estimate that their children’s nutritional needs were met, at best, every other day.

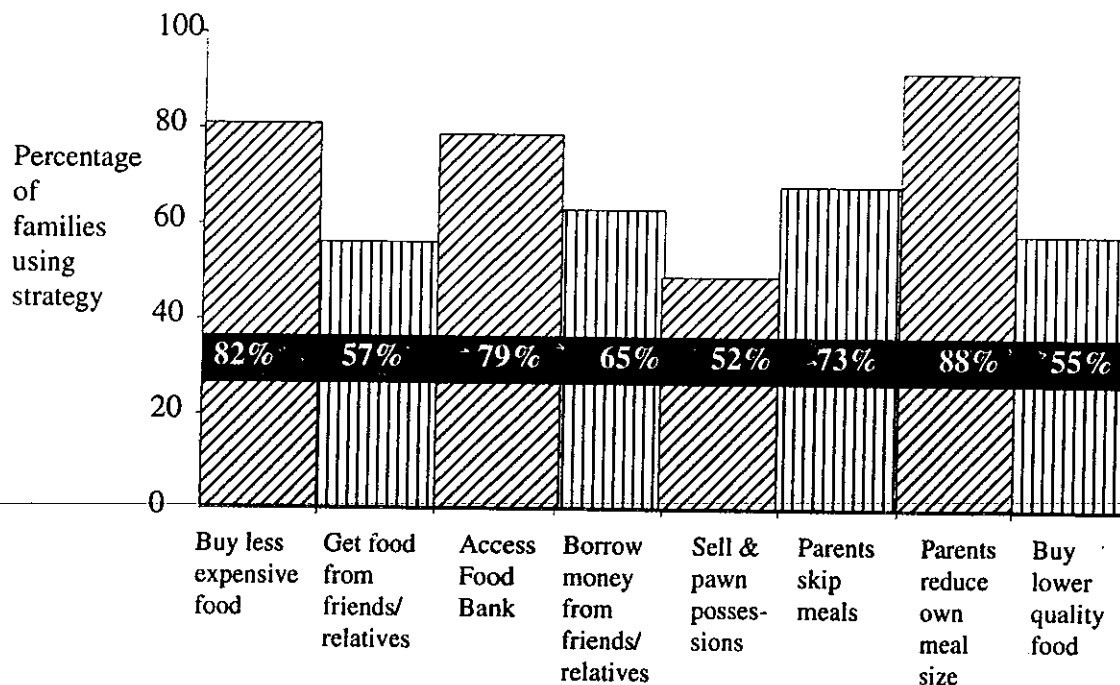
Sixty-one per cent of family heads report going without any food for a whole day given chronic food shortages in the family, with 111 family heads missing meals because of food shortages in the month prior to the interview. More than one in four surveyed parents (26 per cent) reported that their **children had missed meals an average of six times in the**

“More than one in four surveyed parents (26 per cent) reported their children had missed meals an average of six times in the previous month due to a lack of food. This compares to 17 per cent of surveyed parents who reported missed meals for their kids in the 1996 survey—an increase of more than 50 per cent.”

previous month due to a lack of food. This compares to 17 per cent of surveyed parents who reported missed meals for kids in the 1996 survey—an increase of more than 50 per cent.

Parents have tried numerous strategies to address these food shortages (Figure Two): bought less expensive food (82 per cent), got food from friends or relatives (57 per cent), visited the Food Bank for assistance (79 per cent), borrowed money from friends or family to buy food (65 per cent), sold or pawned possessions (52 per cent), either skipped meals themselves (73 per cent) or cut down the size of their own meals (88 per cent) so that their children can eat, or bought lower quality foods (55 per cent) to stretch their low family incomes further.

Figure Two: Family Strategies to Address Food Shortages



Despite all these different attempts, however, families who access services through the Food Bank continue to go hungry. Families face food shortages on a regular basis and are unable to afford the fresh fruits, vegetables, dairy products and meat or its alternates they need for a healthy, nutritious diet.

Government Support Programs...Not a lot of Help

The majority of families who receive help from the Food Bank rely on government support programs for their major source of income. The support families receive through these programs is not sufficient to meet their basic family needs. As a result families turn to the Food Bank for assistance. Families receiving help and support through government programs do not have a good understanding of the benefits to which they are entitled, nor are they familiar with the benefit appeal processes.

SFI Involvement

SFI plays a significant role in the lives of most of the families within the survey sample. Nine out of ten (92 per cent) family heads report some involvement with SFI in the four years prior to the survey. During this time, family heads have made on average just over two (2.1) applications for SFI, with just less than 2 (1.8) acceptances for benefit. Families wait an average of two weeks to receive benefits once they have made an application.

Among families who have received SFI over the last four years, 30 per cent have been cut-off benefits during this time, while 56 per cent have been transferred from SFI to another program. The most common transfer has been to the Student Finance Board and Job Creation programs. This suggests some turmoil in family lives as parents are required to readjust the requirements of different programs and services often with little understanding of why changes are taking place and just what they can expect in the way of support.

Family Experiences with Government Support Programs

Generally, family heads find their experiences with different benefit and support programs to be negative. Looking at the four main programs through which families receive support —SFI, job creation programs, UIC/EI and Student Finance Board—it is only with the latter program that families feel a good sense of what benefits they are entitled to, and feel secure with the level of benefits they receive.

Close to nine out of ten (88 per cent) of the family heads who have received SFI benefits found that the monies they received were not adequate to meet their basic needs. Only one in three (31 per cent) know to which benefits they are entitled, while 60 per cent do not know how the SFI appeal process works. Only 10 per cent of family heads feel well served by the program.

As a result of the very low benefit levels families receive through SFI, 44 per cent of family household heads have requested a food voucher through SFI, with 36 per cent receiving this support. Ironically, half of family heads (48 per cent) have been referred to the Food Bank by a social worker with the SFI program suggesting at least front-line workers realize that SFI benefit levels are not sufficient to meet basic household needs.

Health and Well-being

Forty-four per cent of family heads report their health as good, while one in five (18 per cent) describe their health as poor. Compared to one year ago, one in three (34 per cent) family heads consider themselves less healthy.

Close to two out of three (62 per cent) family heads report high stress levels, with 59 per cent reporting that their stress level has increased since the previous year. Finances represent the major stress for half the family heads.

The low household incomes families struggle to get by on, frequently mean that children are not able to take part in recreational and leisure activities. Eight out of 10 (79 per cent) family heads identify activities that they would like their children to take part in, but are not able to afford to access them. The major activities include sports 49 per cent, swimming 21 per cent and general recreation activities 10 per cent.

Conclusions

The 'Alberta Advantage' aside, a growing number of parents and their children in Alberta's capital city continue to go hungry, receiving insufficient food to meet their basic nutritional requirements. The majority of these families are single parent families headed by women who struggle to make ends meet with SFI their major, and often only, source of income.

The continued low rates of social assistance mean that these families are simply not able to cover their monthly expenses. The result for many is hard choices which compromise the basic necessities of life. The impacts of this 'lack of income' extend not only to sacrifices made on the part of parents, but also to significant losses for their children particularly in the area of nutrition. The continued crunch in making financial ends meet for families who rely on the Food Bank for assistance impacts on the diets of parents and their children. Parents and their children regularly miss meals and live on diets that fail to meet their nutritional needs.

The Alberta Government made a commitment to focus on people development as a result of the Alberta Growth Summit. A good place to start would be ensuring that all Albertans have enough to eat. The Alberta Advantage should not mean that while some get to have their cake and eat it too, others are left with nothing.

