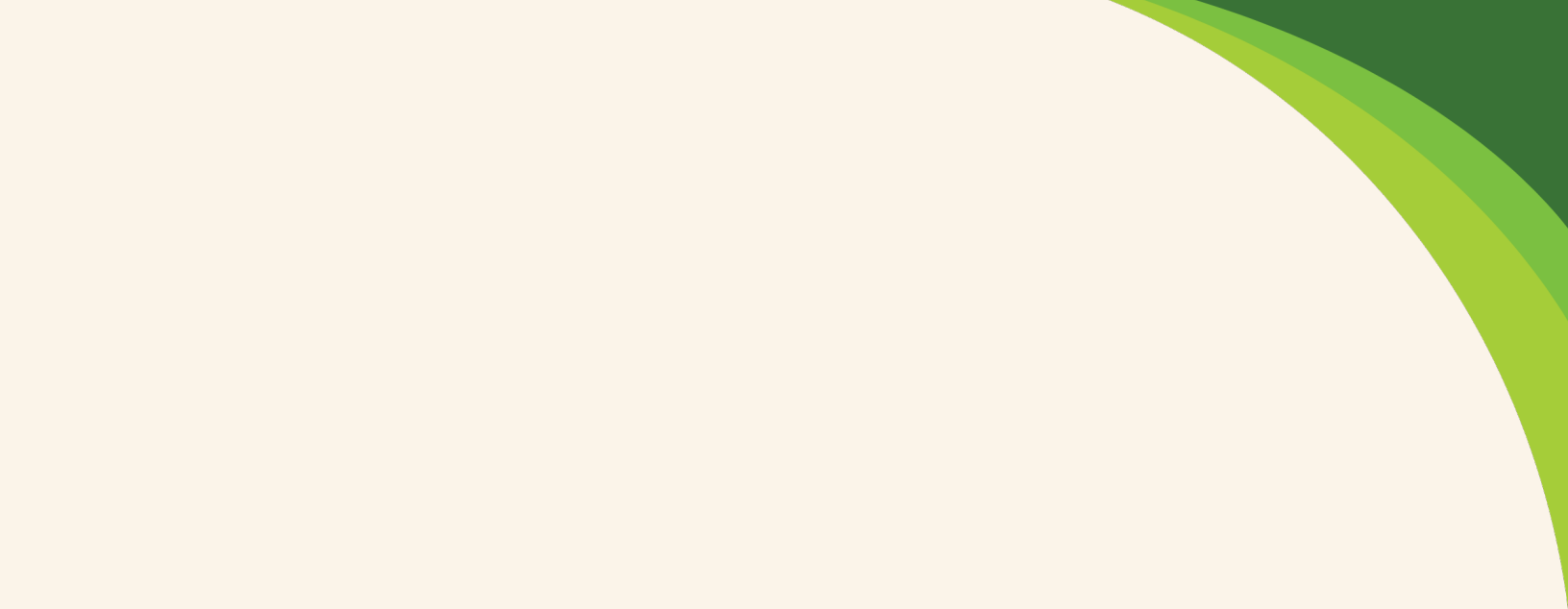


CALGARY FOOD BANK

WORK THAT ISN'T WORKING: FOOD INSECURITY AMONG EMPLOYED CALGARIANS

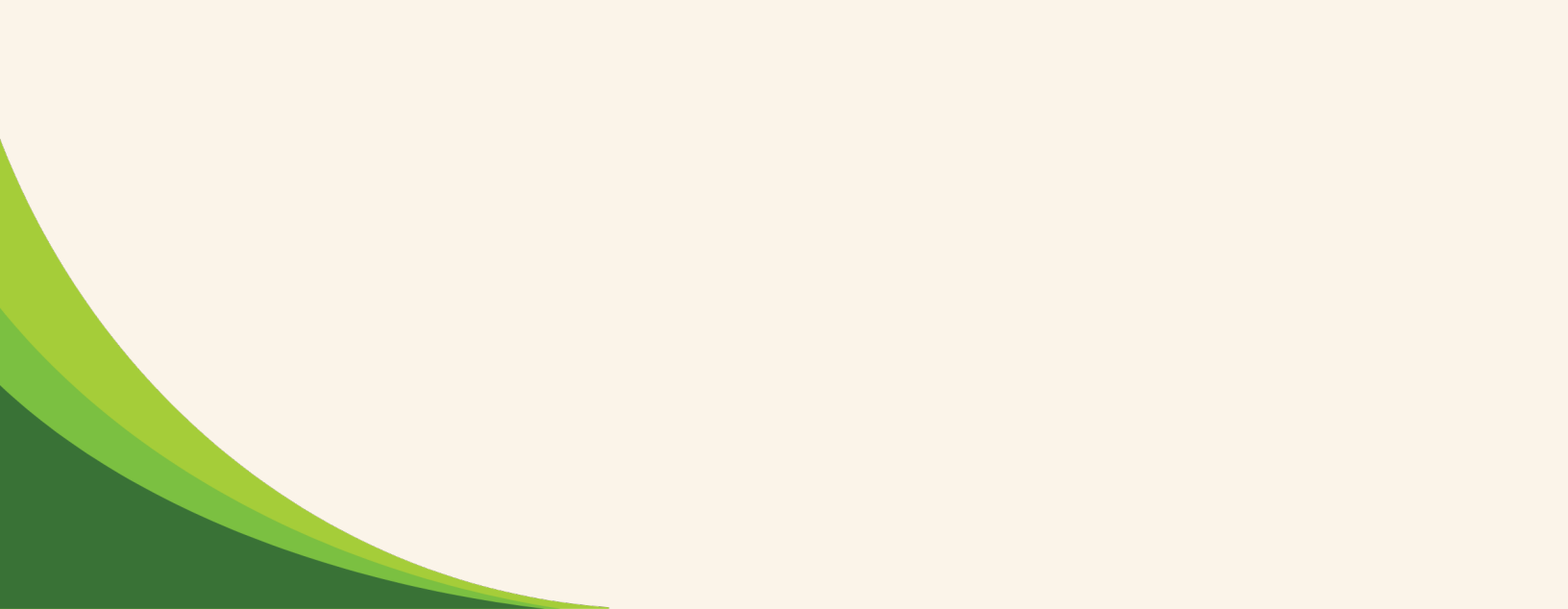
By Dr. Lucy Harry and Gorana Jetic
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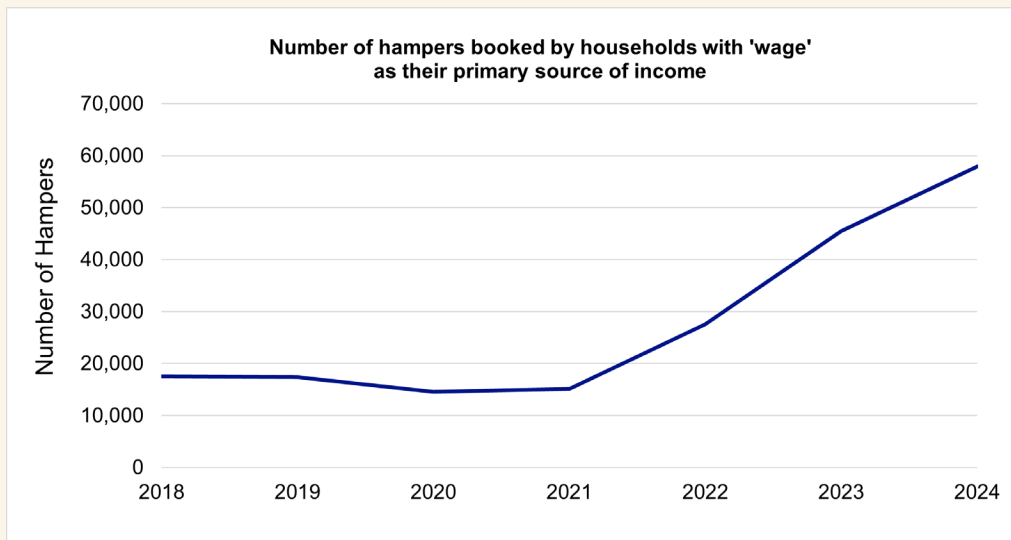


OVERVIEW

In 2024, employment was the main source of income for 37% of Calgary Food Bank clients. Over time, the number of clients who are working and accessing the Calgary Food Bank has been increasing (see graph below). This study aimed to answer the following research questions:

- What is the relationship between employment and food insecurity?
- What are some of the key challenges faced by those who are working and food insecure?
- What is it about the nature of their employment that means they are unable to make ends meet?

The researchers first conducted 30 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with employed clients to discuss the nature of their work and how it impacted their food security. The themes derived from the interviews were used to develop a survey which was distributed to 1525 Calgary Food Bank clients.



KEY FINDINGS

64% of survey respondents indicated that at least one adult in their household was employed in the past 12 months. The most selected main source of income reported by participants was full-time employment (27%), followed by part-time employment (19%), which includes seasonal work, “gig work”, and contract/temporary work.

Alarming, of the working population in the sample, 65% reported experiencing severe food insecurity, compared to 73% of those who are not working (see table below). Severe food insecurity is marked by skipping meals, reducing food intake and, at the most extreme, going day(s) without food.

	WORKING VS. NOT WORKING		
Food security status	Working	Not working	Overall
Severely insecure	65%	73%	68%
Moderately insecure	32%	24%	30%
Marginally insecure	1%	1%	1%
Food secure	1%	1%	1%



INSUFFICIENT WAGES

Employment alone is not enough to ensure food security. Interview participants expressed that their wages are low and have failed to increase with inflation—sitting at an average \$19.30, based on survey findings. Due to the rising cost of living—including rent and utilities—families live pay cheque to pay cheque, as illustrated by the quotes below:

“If my income was higher that would solve an immense amount of issues.”

“I make around \$2500 per month as an office clerk, but my rent and utilities are \$2200 per month so I can’t make ends meet.”

“My cheque comes in and it doesn’t cover my rent... For this month, I had to get a payday loan from Money Mart... my biggest hurdle right now is my rent being so high.”



LIMITED AND INCONSISTENT HOURS

Underemployment and inconsistent schedules were consistently reported by interview participants:

"I am a driver. It's casual, on-call, part-time. So, they don't have to guarantee me any hours at all... That's how they get away with not paying any benefits."

"I get help from the food bank because my husband's job has been changed due to the winter. It's no longer full-time; sometimes it's part-time, so I don't receive a good income to buy food... The hours are variable."

Indeed, 81% of employed people wished that they could have worked additional hours per week, while two thirds of workers reported less than ideal working conditions, including unpredictable hours and variable schedule, further increasing their susceptibility to cost increases.



LACK OF JOB SECURITY

Work which lacks stability, security, or offers minimal benefits and protections, may lead to frequent periods of unemployment and income loss. 79% of survey respondents reported that they would have liked to have worked additional weeks, as the average amount of time worked was roughly seven months of the past year.

"This is his fourth or fifth job in the last two years. It's not issues of his own, he has just been let go because the company is shrinking, or two of the companies shut down after hiring him for a couple of months."

The issue of worker protection is particularly salient for those employed in the "gig economy," such as app-based rideshare and food delivery jobs. Gig economy workers are considered contractual and are not guaranteed an income. As stated by one interviewee:

"You're just fighting for scraps."



DEMOGRAPHIC FEATURES

Particular demographic groups are at a higher risk of in-work food insecurity. Survey results showed that employed, female-led single parent households (73%), Indigenous workers (77%), and individuals living with a disability and working (81%) have higher rates of severe food insecurity than the general working sample (65%).

Interview participants discussed the challenges of supporting dependents, such as children and family members with disabilities, on a single income. Single mothers interviewed frequently addressed the issue of lack of child support, while Indigenous participants stated a barrier to full-time and well-paid work is employment discrimination.

Many newcomers described their challenges finding suitable employment that corresponds to their credentials and previous experience in their countries of origin—indeed, in this study 62% of non-Canadian citizens utilizing the Calgary Food Bank hold a diploma or university degree, compared to 38% of Canadian citizens. The research shows that newcomer families frequently depend on a single income, as the other adult upskills to acquire Canadian credentials or to improve their English-language skills.

“I always feel like [my credentials] sort of is sub-standard to some extent. Because people always ask you, ‘where did you get your degree?’ Those kinds of questions. So, I kind of feel like maybe my degree is not up to Canadian standards.”

“For women it is harder to find work if you don’t have enough English, because men can usually do physical work.”



JOB INDUSTRY

Survey results show that 29% of employees work in sales and service occupations (e.g., cleaning, retail, food service) and an additional 29% work in trades, transport, and equipment operation (e.g., construction, warehouse jobs, delivery). These occupations tend to assume non-standard and precarious work features, and low wages.

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