CALGARY FOOD BANK

Work That Isn't Working:

Food Insecurity Among Employed Calgarians

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Table of Contents

Introduction

Work is no longer an antidote to food insecurity. In 2024, 37% of the Calgary Food Bank's clients cited employment as their main source of household income. In the present study, 27% of participants cited full-time work as their main source of household income, while 19% cited part-time employment as their primary household income (including seasonal work, contract/temporary work, and "gig work"). This issue can largely be attributed to the combined impact of the pandemic, inflation, and increased cost of living, which has left many working Canadians unable to make ends meet. The Calgary Food Bank's longitudinal data suggests that the number of clients who are working and accessing the food bank has been increasing over time (see Figure 1), and this is the case nationwide too (see Table 1). This report goes beyond the numbers to examine the human stories behind the statistics. The research began with 30 in-depth qualitative interviews with clients who are working and food insecure, in order to establish the key issues and themes, before surveying 1,525 clients to paint a broader picture of *work that simply isn't working*.

Figure 1.

Number of Calgary Food Bank clients with "wage" as their primary income source, 2018 - 2024

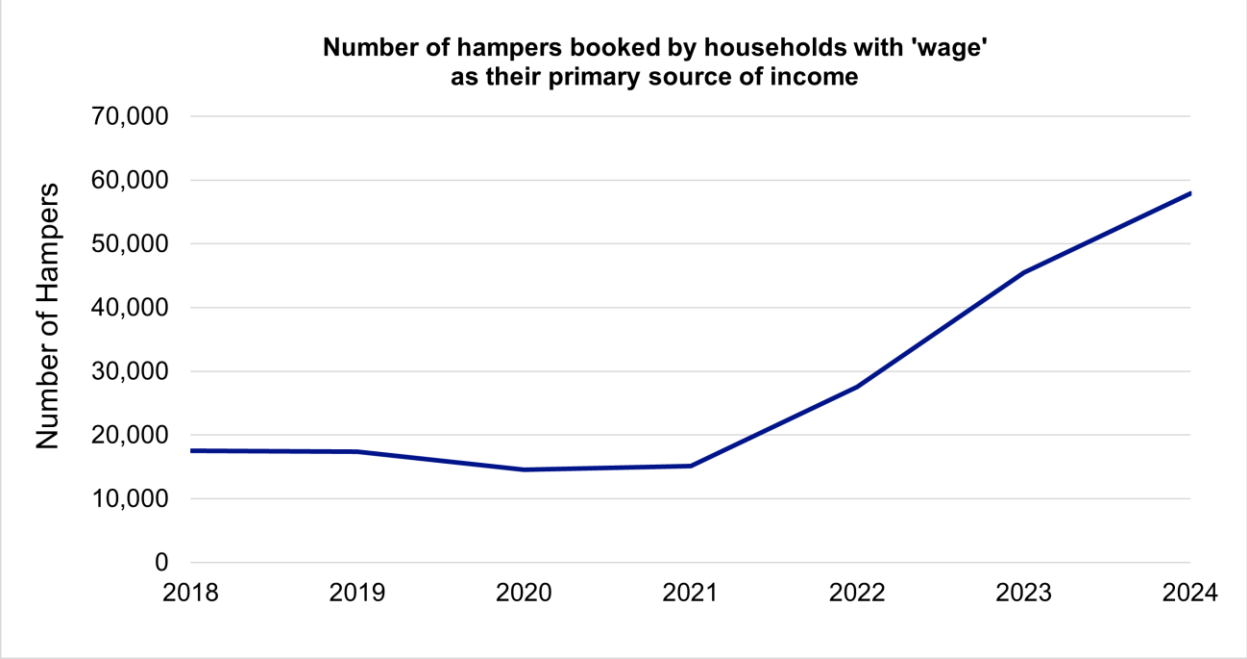


Table 1.

Percentage of food bank clients nation-wide whose primary source of income is employment income

Year	Percentage
2019*	12.1%
2021	12.5%
2022	14.1%
2023	16.7%
2024	18.1%

*N.B. There was no Hungercount report in 2020 owing to the Covid-19 pandemic. *(Sources: Food Banks Canada, 2019, 2021, 2022, 2023 & 2024).*

Canadian Data on Food Insecurity and Working People

What data already exists about food insecurity among working Canadians? This next section provides a snapshot of existing food insecurity data on working Canadians. National level data from the Canadian Income Survey finds that:

- **Food insecurity status, employment and demographic factors intersect**:
    - Female-lone parent families are more likely to be food insecure compared to male-lone parent families (41% versus 24%);
    - Households with a racialized major income earner reported higher rates of food insecurity (23%) as compared to households with a non-racialized, non-Indigenous major income earner (16%). This was especially acute for households where the major income earner is Black Canadian (38%);
    - Households with an Indigenous major income earner living off-reserve reported higher rates of food insecurity (34%) compared to households with a non-Indigenous major income earner (18%);
    - One in four families in which the major income earner is a recent immigrant (immigrated between 2013 and 2022) reported being food insecure;

- **Type of employment has an impact on household food insecurity status**:
    - Stable employment – which means being employed all year around – was associated with a lower likelihood of food insecurity (15%);
    - Those who are self-employed are less likely to report food insecurity (13%) as compared to those who are paid employees (18%);
    - For those living with a disability, employment served as a protective factor against food insecurity, with their rate of food insecurity (24%) being almost one-third that of those who are unemployed all year around (Uppal, 2023).

By way of comparison, latest data from the Daily Bread Food Bank's (2024) Who's Hungry Report provides an overview of the situation for working food bank clients in Toronto, with key findings including:

- 49% of households accessing the food bank have at least one employed person in their household;
- 33% of households are relying on employment income as their main source of income.

Of those survey respondents who are employed:

- The median number of hours worked per week was 35 hours;
- The median hourly wage was $18;
- 79% reported a desire to work additional hours;
- 45% have permanent employment, whereas 55% are employed in precarious employment (i.e. temporary, contract, casual, seasonal or on-call work);
- 56% are not in receipt of employer benefits.

Literature Review

This issue has long been of research interest. In 2005, research was conducted at the Daily Bread Food Bank in Toronto, comparing two groups of food bank users: those who were unemployed and those who were employed but still faced deprivation (Lightman et al., 2008). This study found that the experiences of the two groups were strikingly similar. Food banks continued to be a regular part of the household budgets of working households, who made only one fewer trip to the food bank within a three-month period than their unemployed counterparts, and their income only provided $2.28 more per household member per day than those who were unemployed and reliant on government benefits (Lightman et al., 2008:23-24). Consequently, without an investment in skills-based training or education, those who progress from government assistance to paid employment, find that a low-paid job "does little to change their lives and provides little stability for future progression" (Lightman et al., 2008:24).

What type of employment leaves workers vulnerable to food insecurity? Research from the US, utilizing data from the Food Security Supplement to the Population Survey (2003-2005), found that households with the primary earner employed in "non-standard" work were more likely to experience food insecurity, even when controlling for income and other socio-demographic features (Coleman-Jensen, 2011). "Non-standard work" includes working multiple jobs, having varied hours and working part-time. The researchers concluded that the "instability" of non-standard work is what fosters food insecurity, by producing an instable income and work schedule which disrupts a household's food purchasing and consumption patterns (Coleman-Jensen, 2011:85). Other research has found that unpredictable schedules – this time among 37,263 hourly retail and food service workers in the US – are associated with their "hunger hardship" – particularly in situations where shifts are allocated or cancelled with little advanced notice, and work hours are volatile (Schneider and Harknett, 2021).

Moreover, an ethnographic study of a food bank in the UK found that those who were using the food bank while employed were struggling financially due to low-paid, insecure work that was part-time, temporary or unstable (Garthwaite, 2017). As described by the researcher: "I met people who told me of the physically and mentally demanding nature of 'poor work' that was available to them, often described as 'awful, dirty work', 'totally knackering' and 'back breaking'" (Garthwaite, 2017:99). Another UK study found that employed food bank users struggled with cash-flow issues as a result of delays in their government benefits, insecure work and frequent employment changes associated with insecure work (Beatty et al., 2020:992).

When considering in-work food insecurity, it is necessary to think about how this issue is particularly acute for certain demographic groups. Studies have shown that the feminization of poverty (Pearce, 1978) and the feminization of precarious work (Standing, 1989) has led to female workers being adversely impacted by in-work food insecurity (Sheely, 2024; Gracia-Arnaiz et al, 2021). By way of example, US research examined the Survey of Income and Program Participation (1996, 2001, 2004 and 2008) and found that lone-mother households were at high risk of food insecurity and this was particularly due to the prevalence of employment in "low quality jobs" characterized by inadequate income and uncertainty in terms of permanency, wages and schedule (Sheely, 2024). Elsewhere, a study from Spain has found that food insecurity "is more acute in women because economic precaritization affects them more intensely" which is an indictment of feminized labour: "[t]hose working in the most precarious sectors (domestic service, home care) have poorer working conditions in terms of hours and wages, which places them in a situation of greater socioeconomic uncertainty and, hence, insecurity when it comes to covering basic needs" (Gracia-Arnaiz, 2021:15).

Canadian researcher Lynn McIntyre and her colleagues (2012) offer a comprehensive – albeit somewhat outdated – overview of the relationship between food insecurity, employment and demography. Their findings on the interaction between food insecurity, employment and socioeconomic status in the 2007-08 cycle of the Canadian Community Health Survey are summarized as follows:

> "4% of working households reported food insecurity. Canadian households reliant on primary earners with less education and lower incomes were significantly more likely to experience food insecurity; these differences were accentuated across some industry sectors [accommodation/food service and administration sectors]. Residence in Quebec was protective. Working households experiencing food insecurity were more likely to include earners reporting multiple jobs and higher job stress. Visible minority workers with comparable education levels experienced higher rates of food insecurity than European-origin workers." (McIntyre et al., 2012:49)."

Other research from Canada focuses on another vulnerable group – temporary migrant agricultural workers (Weiler et al., 2017; Al-Bazz et al., 2022). Temporary worker programs have been running in Canada since the 1970s, with the number of temporary foreign workers increasing in recent years to as many as 845,000 in 2021 (Statistics Canada, 2024). Research finds that some of the "micro-level factors" that affect foreign temporary workers' food security include,

"low income, long working hours, living in rural areas with limited access to transportation, inadequate food preparation and storage space" leading to the reliance on lower-cost and less healthy food options, which is associated with a higher prevalence of chronic diseases such as obesity and diabetes (Weiler et al., 2017:51). Furthermore, a scoping review of articles relating to the food insecurity of temporary farm workers in Canada and the United States (US) found that self-reported prevalence of food insecurity amongst these workers ranged from 28% to 87% (Al-Bazz et al., 2022:1612). In addition to those aforementioned risk factors, this research found that their food insecurity was exacerbated by their precarious immigration status and consequent ineligibility for healthcare and other public services (Al-Bazz et al., 2022). Indeed, in Canada, those workers, "do not have equitable access to unemployment insurance, parental benefits, or full pensions that Canadian citizens benefit from… These intersecting factors contribute to the discrimination, exploitation, and poverty that newcomers face, driving them to the doors of our food banks" (Daily Bread Food Bank, 2024:20).

Overall, the extant research makes clear that "food-insecure workers are attempting to make ends meet through work but have inadequate income to meet their budgetary needs" (McIntyre et al., 2012:52-53). A sentiment that is echoed by the Daily Bread Food Bank in Toronto (2024) who write that the increasing number of employed people utilizing food banks is "an indication of one of the root causes of systemic poverty: lack of adequate income" (Daily Bread Food Bank, 2024:37). Yet there is little up to date research on this situation, particularly in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, escalating living costs and resultant increases in food insecurity and food bank usage.

Methods

This project seeks 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 first step of the project was to conduct in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Calgary Food Bank clients who are employed. To recruit participants, an email was sent to a mailing list of clients who had agreed to be contacted for research purposes. Those clients were invited to partake in an in-person (and occasionally by Zoom where accessibility was a challenge) research interview at the Calgary Food Bank or at a public location that was most convenient for them. Interviews lasted approximately one hour. To compensate participants for their time and travel, they were given a $25 gift card. Participants were given an information sheet with details about the research purpose, the use of their data, their guaranteed anonymity and right to skip a question, or end the interview at any point without repercussions. Prior to commencing, participants provided their consent to be interviewed. Questions were asked about the nature of

participants' work and how that impacted their food security. In total, **30 participants were interviewed.**

Next, in order to gain a larger and statistically significant sample of clients, an optional anonymous online survey was sent to clients through their hamper-booking email. The survey questions were, in part, modelled off questions included in the Canadian Income Survey and the Labour Force Survey, also informed by the key themes that emerged from the client interviews. To ascertain participants' levels of food insecurity, they were asked the 18-question Household Food Security Survey Module, which is a verified instrument used in national surveys in Canada and the United States, to determine whether someone is food secure, or experiencing marginal, moderate or severe food insecurity[1].

Then, based on the key themes from the interviews, questions were asked to ascertain whether clients' work met the following criteria: unpredictable hours; variable schedule or shift work; anti-social hours (e.g. over-night shifts, weekend work); few opportunities for promotion; wage not increasing with inflation; and involuntarily part-time time work. These questions also tested the hypothesis that the precarious nature of certain employment renders workers food insecure—a matter that was not investigated in previous studies. Nevertheless, McIntyre and colleagues hypothesized that, "[p]ossible employment characteristics that could increase food insecurity among workers include seasonal work, shift work, irregular hours, lack of union protection from lay-offs during cyclical slowdowns and lack of job mobility" (p. 53). **The survey had 1525 responses;** based on 105,000 unique clients served in the previous fiscal year, and with a confidence interval of 95% and 5% margin of error, 383 responses or more is a statistically significant sample size. The findings are summarized below. For the demographic breakdown of the survey respondents, see Appendix.

Findings

Of the 1525 people surveyed, 65% live in a household that receives employment income, including non-standard employment income (such as part-time, temporary/contract, seasonal, "gig work") (see Figure 2 for breakdown of income sources). Notably, 99% of survey respondents reported experiencing some level of food insecurity, regardless of employment status. The largest disparity between working households and non-working households is the level of food insecurity, with 73% of those who are *not* working experiencing *severe* food insecurity, compared to 65% of those who are working (see Table 2). While there is a nearly 10% difference between these two groups, it is still staggering.

[1] According to Statistics Canada (2024) those facing marginal food insecurity 'worry about running out of food and/or limited food selection due to a lack of money for food'. For those experiencing moderate food insecurity they 'compromise in quality and/or quantity of food due to a lack of money for food'. And those who are severely food insecure 'miss meals, reduce food intake and, at the most extreme, go day(s) without food'.

65% of those who are working are facing acute food insecurity, which includes having to skip meals and potentially go day(s) without eating.

This is particularly alarming considering that, when asked what their household's largest source of income has been over the past 12 months, the most selected survey option was full-time employment (27%), followed by part-time employment (19%). The causes of in-work food insecurity are analyzed in what follows.

Table 2.

Proportion of food insecure survey respondents by employment status

	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%

Wages

When asked during interviews, "what would make you more food secure?" many participants talked about how they would not need to use the food bank if they had **higher wages—** this theme was particularly prominent among participants who are earning the **minimum wage**:

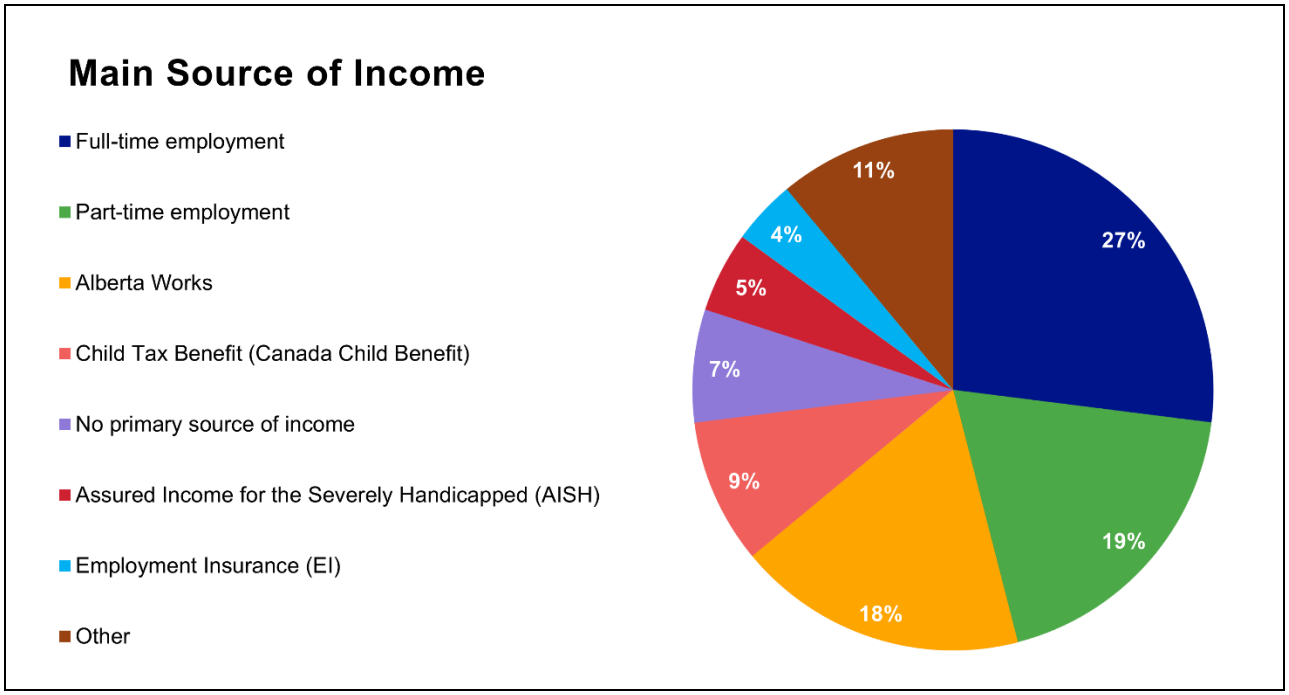
> *"If my income was higher that would solve an immense amount of issues."*
>
> *"I'm looking for another job that earns more, because the wage is not enough."*
>
> *"If I had a salary increase at my job."*
>
> *"I don't make a whole lot, I probably make just over minimum wage… maybe if I made more per hour… because I can't increase my hours."*
>
> *"I think more financial stability as I don't make enough at my current job."*
>
> *"Aside from a break in the prices going up, a salary raise at my job would be great."*
>
> *"Just increasing my salary, honestly."*

Alberta (along with Saskatchewan) has the lowest minimum wage in the country at $15, which has not increased since 2018. In contrast, Vibrant Communities Calgary (VCC) has calculated that the "living wage" required to cover basic expenses and be able to participate in the community in Calgary was $24.45 in 2024—a figure that is 63% and almost $10 higher than the province's minimum wage (Vibrant Communities Calgary, 2024a).

It is not surprising, therefore, that 87% of full-time workers surveyed for this study reported earning less than the VCC living wage. Indeed, the average hourly wage reported by all working people was $19.30 (with a median of $19.00). That is over $5 less than the living wage.

Figure 2.

Top sources of income based on survey responses



More than one third of survey respondents indicated that their **wage does not increase with inflation**. This was corroborated by the interview participants who talked about their wages remaining stagnant despite the rising cost of living:

"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."

"Everything has gone up, but my income has remained relatively the same. I am a renter, so my rent has gone up considerably, I am paying about 300 dollars a month more than a year ago, and to add to that the skyrocketing price of food… it has been really challenging."

"Our salaries don't match the rate of inflation unfortunately."

"Basically the housing takes up my whole income right now."

"The thing is you are pretty much living pay cheque to pay cheque. It is coming in and going out."

"I would say definitely the price of food, because minimum wage hasn't really changed."

Other research has shown that food banks are used as a means to pay rent, and by extension, retain housing. Kneebone and Wilkins (2024) find that households at risk of homelessness will attempt to minimize their other expenditures by turning to charities such as food banks. In the present study, 79% of survey respondents are renters, raising concerns about their susceptibility to rent increases. This was elaborated upon in the interviews, with one young couple in their 20s stating: "rent has gone through the roof and we're really, really struggling with that right now." In another instance, a 50-year-old woman who is receiving workers' compensation after a workplace injury explained:

"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."

Alarmingly, 64% of workers surveyed for this research do not receive benefits from their employer.

For our other participants, it was not just the impact of the rising cost of rent and food, but also the increasing cost of other essentials like medicine—a concern that is particularly salient for those who are **not entitled to benefits** through their work.

Many participants talked about "**living pay cheque to pay cheque**", for example, one young father told us: "I work in oil and gas, but I am trying to get out of there and find something better because I am living pay cheque to pay cheque as I only get $19 per hour right now". Several participants could not see an end to their food bank usage, as there is **no possibility of their wage increasing**. One factory worker told us: "some guys asked the boss for a raise and he said, 'if you don't like it, you can just leave.' They are not giving any raises. My coworker has been there for 10 years and he is only at $22 per hour". A mother of three children, who used to work for a fast-food chain, explained her predicament: "I was full-time there, I was the manager. I made $1.25 over minimum wage. And they sold businesses, so I moved hands, so they were able to keep me at such a low

rate." These examples illustrate how some of the workers interviewed have limited opportunities for promotion—a sentiment that was echoed by 19% of working survey respondents in the present study. Others discussed their fear of never finding a better-paid job to improve their circumstances, due to their **lack of qualifications.**: "I need a better job, that's all. But with my level of education [high school], it's a little bit hard to come by. Getting a proper job with more than minimum wage payments".

Hours

For others, it was not their wage that was the issue, so much as the **number of hours** that were available to them to work. Survey respondents who reported full-time employment as their main source of income worked an average of 38 hours per week, while part-time workers put in an average of 26 hours per week.

> The survey found that 81% of all employed people, regardless of full-time status, wished that they could have worked additional hours per week.

Two-thirds of all employed respondents reported less than ideal conditions of employment, such as unpredictable hours and variable schedule—conditions which further increase their risk of food insecurity due to income volatility. This was echoed in the interviews:

> *"Increasing hours, that would help a lot."*
>
> *"The biggest problem for us right now is not having full-time jobs."*
>
> *"I usually find myself under-employed."*
>
> *"My job is 30 hours – minimum full-time."*
>
> *"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."*

Moreover, **income volatility** is another theme that emerged from the interviews, with one interviewee stating that they aim to stop using the food bank in the months to come: "I am hoping that by the fall I will have some stable or reliable income". Another illustration of this comes from an interview with a man in his 20s working in the oil and gas sector who explained that he was struggling due to regular closures of his workplace, which impact his salary:

> *"I work five days a week, but there's a lot of closing— like every month there will be a couple of days where they close down the factory. They claim it is for maintenance, but I think it is just to save money. Because you go back on Monday and nothing has changed."*

Additionally, another man in his 40s, who works in retail and has been using the Calgary Food Bank since his hours were cut-back explains:

> *"When I was working and getting the hours and being able to afford it, I was able to buy myself whatever I wanted, when I needed it. Now my hours are being cut-back, so lately, it's been a little bit of an issue… It's been like between six and seven [hours per week]. It's been really bottom-of-the-barrel amount of hours. At least it's something at the moment. It's better than nothing… I'd be buying food if my hours were more substantial, and I would not have to use [the food bank]. That's the only reason I'm here."*

This was attested to by a single mother who also works in retail at a grocery store:

"At first I was part-time and then they shifted me to full-time, but they cut my hours so I really do 28 hours, that's the most hours that I do. And I live as a single mom, and I pay all the bills and I don't have child support… it has been hard for me because rent is very high right now." Income and work volatility was also a feature of other studies on people working and food insecure (McIntyre et al., 2012; Sheely, 2024; Schneider and Harknett, 2021). Conversely, comparable research shows that a guaranteed income is a protective factor against food insecurity. Data from Statistics Canada shows that pensioned seniors in the 65 to 69 age bracket, who have stable income through Old Age Security (OAS) and Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS) (if they are low income), have half the rate of food insecurity than those aged 60 to 64, who do not qualify for these stable incomes (Emery et al., 2013).

Another participant, a single man in his 40s who works in hospitality, explained this situation has been exacerbated since the **Covid-19 pandemic**:

> *"In this industry you used to work five nights a week, but now full-time is like two shifts, so it is difficult… I have been in this industry since I was 14 years old, it was always, 'you quit tomorrow and you get another job the next day', but it is not like this anymore, particularly since the pandemic."*

This mirrors research that has shown that involuntary part-time work leaves workers at risk of food insecurity (Beatty et al., 2020). Covid-19 and its economic aftermath was a theme that emerged from the interviews, with for example, one woman in her 60s who worked as a hair stylist, discussed how her industry and income has not fully recovered since closures during the pandemic.

It was not just the number of hours per week that impacted participants, but also the time of year, with many reporting that **seasonal work** exacerbated their food insecurity:

> *"During the warm season I work with grass and trees, and during the winter cold season I remove snow. But it has an influence on salary… During the cold season I have fixed hours, 40hrs/week and its fixed wage at like $20/hour. And during the warm season, the wage last year was $21/hour and also during warm season I can take more hours… [the food bank] is helpful during the cold season because the salary becomes low, so it is really helpful. It gives me a chance to save some money for some different needs I have."*

> *"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."*

The issue of seasonal work extends beyond just manual work and impacts, for example, those working in the tourism industry. One couple interviewed discussed their experience of working at a key attraction site in Calgary, stating that during the "off-season" they receive limited hours; one partner stated: *"it's not busy, it's slow. This week I worked only one day only. So, it's not good"*. Existing research has shown that foreign national temporary labourers who come to Canada to participate in Seasonal Agricultural Worker programs are at risk of food insecurity (Al-Bazz et al., 2022; Weiler et al., 2017).

Job Security

Others explained that their food insecurity stemmed from having **no job security**.

> Findings from the present study found that 79% of workers would have liked to have worked additional weeks, as the average number of weeks worked was 30, or roughly seven months of the past year.

Similarly, one woman interviewed described her husband's work situation as follows: *"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"*. Another participant described his job by stating: "I wouldn't call it stable". Yet another said they would continue to use the Calgary Food Bank until "my job is stable". One woman interviewed works as a residential cleaner and said that in her industry there is a "high turnover rate" which was part of her issue. As we see in the literature, it is the instability of income and instability of schedule that compounds a workers' food insecurity (Coleman-Jensen, 2011).

Many research participants cited **working multiple jobs** in an attempt to make ends meet, yet they continued to experience food insecurity.

> Indeed, 32% of working people surveyed reported working multiple jobs over the past year, most of whom worked two jobs simultaneously.

Several interview participants mentioned doing "odd jobs," as exemplified by the following quotes: "I pick up the odd temporary contract jobs" and "I find myself doing a lot of odd jobs". However, despite working multiple jobs, they were still needing to use the food bank because "everything is $15 an hour" (i.e., minimum wage). Many participants described the ways they supplement their income, such as working for ridesharing or food delivery apps—particularly during their off-hours, during evenings, and on weekends. However, these strategies were not

seen as an antidote to their financial issues, as one participant stated: "you're just fighting for scraps", referring to the increased price of gas and low tip earnings. The survey results corroborate the interview findings, with 29% of employed respondents classifying their work industry in trades, transport, and equipment operations, many of whom specify their occupations as app-based (i.e., Uber, Skip-The-Dishes, Lyft). The issues associated with app-based work is likely to persist in Calgary, given that 5% of workers in Alberta cite "gig work" as their main employment – the highest rate of all the provinces – and yet there is no legislation or job action to protect gig workers in the province (Vibrant Communities Calgary, 2024b).

Demographics

Particular demographic groups are at higher risk of in-work food insecurity.

> Based on the survey results, 73% of those in employed, female-led single parent households were severely food insecure.

This is the case at the national level too, with food insecurity disproportionately high among female lone parent families (41%) (Uppal, 2023). This was also the case for many of the interview participants who are single parents and do not receive child support payments, and therefore struggle to support their children on one salary. In other instances, there were two adults in the households (and sometimes children too) but **only one adult is employed—**indeed, survey results show that nearly half of the households with an employment income relied on the earnings of one adult. This might be because the adult who is not working has caring responsibilities, is living with a disability and is a recipient of Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH), is studying, or, in the case of newcomer families, might not know enough English to work.

Tragically, some of the older adults interviewed spoke about how they are **unable to retire due to insufficient funds**: *"I feel like I'll have to work until the day I die."* Another issue that came up in the survey was older newcomers not being able to access a state pension and therefore having to rely on other funds (i.e., foreign pension) and/or continue working.

A few of the racialized and Indigenous participants interviewed said that their main barriers to full-time and well-paid employment were related to **discrimination** they face from employers. Unfortunately, these findings reflect the population-level data, which finds that some marginalized groups are at higher risk of food insecurity, including: Indigenous Canadians living in the provinces and off-reserve (48%), and Black Canadians (38%) (Uppal, 2023). In the present study, 13% of respondents identified as First Nation, Métis, or Inuit (Inuk), a figure 8% higher than the Indigenous population in Canada. This study corroborates federal-level data showing that Indigenous Canadians experience disproportionately high rates of food insecurity:

77% of Indigenous people who are working continue to face severe food insecurity compared to 64% for their non-Indigenous counterparts—a 13-point difference.

Research shows that many Indigenous communities grapple with the effects of historical and on-going colonization (Malli et al., 2023). For instance, the unavailability of traditional foods, particularly in urban centers, results in a decline of food sharing practices, a factor associated with food security among Indigenous people (Skinner et al., 2016).

It was found that **newcomers** face unique barriers to meaningful employment.

In particular, language barriers were found to significantly impact employment opportunities for 21% of survey respondents.

By way of illustration, one Ukrainian family described their household's working arrangement, given their limited English-speaking proficiency: *"for women it is harder to find work if you don't have enough English, because men can usually do physical work."* The man explains that he is the only working adult in his family, by doing manual labour as a snow-clearer in the winter and a landscaper in the summer—work options that are not ideal for his wife. External research shows that newcomers with lower English-speaking proficiency, typically those who arrived in their host country within the last three years, experience higher rates of food insecurity than those with higher speaking proficiency (Mansour et al, 2020).

Many newcomers described the nuanced barriers to employment that they experience due their **lack of "Canadian work experience".** Specifically, interviewees discussed the difficulties they face finding work because their **foreign qualifications are not recognized** in Canada: "I always feel like it 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". One man interviewed, who immigrated with his young family from India, explained that his wife was a dentist back home, but her qualifications were not recognized in Canada, and so she was taking a course to re-train as a dental assistant.

Alarmingly, the survey found that 62% of non-Canadian citizens utilizing the Calgary Food Bank hold a diploma or university degree, compared to 38% of Canadian citizens.

While higher education is thought to be protective against food insecurity, this is clearly not the case for those who hold foreign degrees.

Many participants found that their **foreign work experience was not recognized** and so they were working lower-rank jobs than they had in their countries of origin: "in Ukraine I was a top manager, now I am a delivery driver" and "here I am an equipment operator, but in Ukraine I was a supervisor, so it is a different level". Research on immigration and economic integration highlights the devaluation of foreign credentials and work experience as a key issue, pointing to Canada's lack of a systematic approach in helping skilled immigrants find suitable employment (Raihan, et al.,

2023). In the present study, 12% of survey respondents have faced barriers finding employment in the past year due to the disregard of their foreign experience and credentials. Some also described how, as a newcomer, they **do not have the social capital** to navigate the Canadian job market:

> As a new immigrant you don't really understand some of the salary scales, so with your first job most likely you will ask for lower because you don't understand even the cost of living and then as time goes on that is when you start to realize, "oh, I am probably not making enough!"
>
> Some people get jobs based on networking, whereas we don't really know a lot of people.

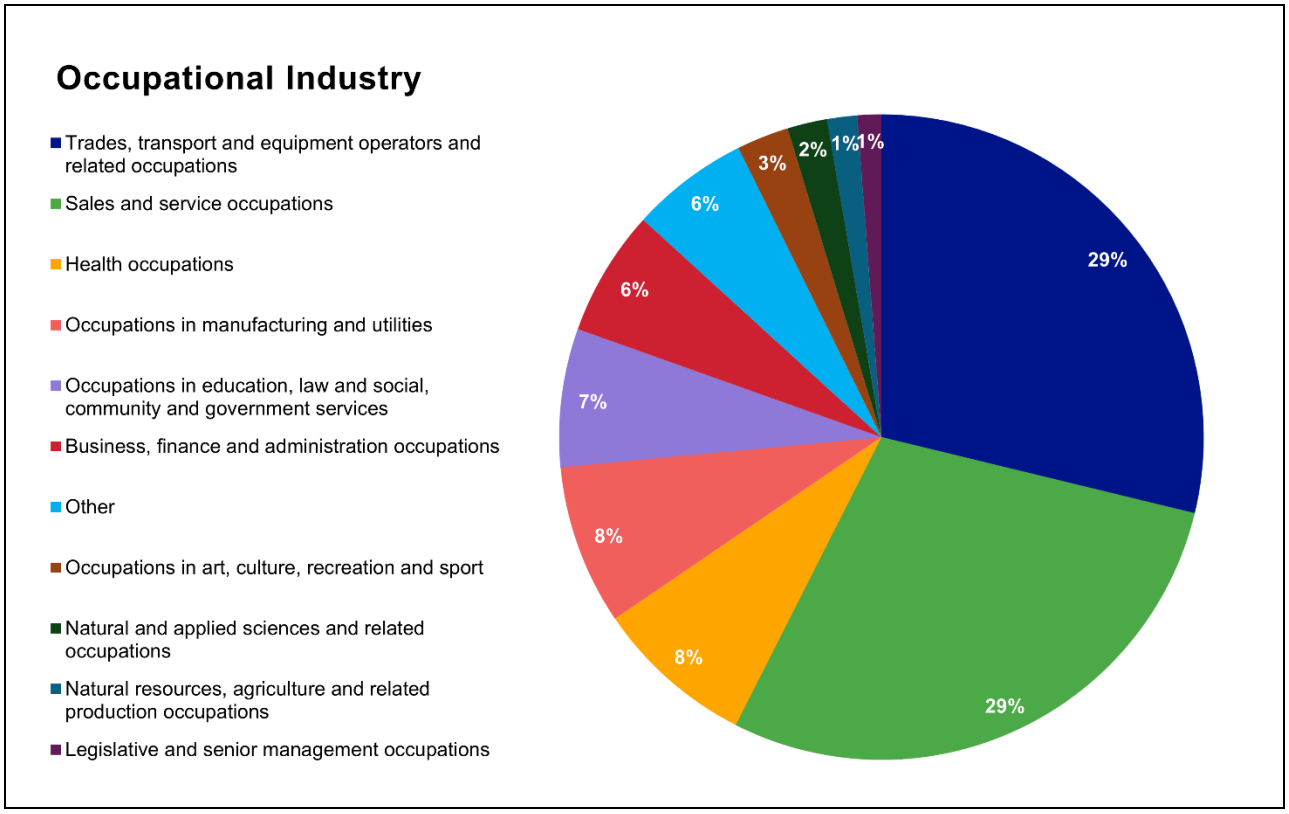
Food insecurity amongst newcomers in Canada is well-documented elsewhere. Twenty-six percent of families that have immigrated to Canada within the last 10 years experienced food insecurity, compared to 17% of Canadian-born families (Uppal, 2023). Once a family becomes established in Canada, their household's food insecurity drops slightly to 20% (Uppal, 2023). A devaluation of foreign credentials, work experience, and training often leads to low-wage labour exploitation, or necessitates unexpected accreditation processes, including obtaining license and registration, passing prerequisite exams, or conducting further study, all of which are time-consuming and expensive, and taken together, contribute towards a newcomer's increased risk of food insecurity (Raihain et al., 2023).

Another prominent theme that emerged from the survey responses was **living with a disability—** of the 539 respondents without work for the past 12 months, 24% cited disability as a barrier to employment, while 25% cited **living with health conditions**.

Of those who are working while living with a disability, 81% experience severe food insecurity, as compared to only 61% of those who are working and are not living with a

The interviews shed light on this issue too. One participant a man in his 60s, who had worked in Fort McMurray during his entire career, had to leave his job after being diagnosed with cancer later in life. Unfortunately, he describes his present work life as a struggle of picking up odd jobs to make ends meet. Another participant, a woman in her 50s, explained how she got into a serious vehicle collision that left her with a disability, after which: "I struggled. I had to use the food bank while I was working… Those jobs didn't pay me what I was making before [the accident]". Indeed, research shows that workers with disabilities earn less than their non-disabled peers and are less likely to experience wage growth over the course of their careers (Maroto & Pettinicchio, 2020). People with disabilities also have employment rates 40% lower than the general population, leading to reliance on social supports (Maroto & Pettinicchio, 2020).

Industry



Finally, when considering occupational **industry** and the propensity for certain workers to face food insecurity, based on the survey responses: 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). Similarly, those interviewed work in industrial jobs (e.g., factory, warehouse jobs), retail, hospitality, landscaping/snow clearance, and transportation. The survey results align with these findings, with previous research on food insecurity in the Canadian labour force conducted by McIntyre and colleagues (2012), finding that the most severe food insecurity outcomes were associated with the accommodation/food service and administration sectors, and the least severe with the public administration and educational sectors.

Conclusion

In 2024, 37% of Calgary Food Bank clients cited employment as their main source of income. When examining the issue in further detail, 27% of participants in the present study reported full-time work as their primary source of income, while 19% cited part-time work as their main source

of income (including seasonal work, contract/temporary work, "gig work"). Of all working households, 65% experienced severe food insecurity, which is defined by skipping meals, reducing food intake, and going day(s) without food (Statistics Canada, n.d.).

The findings of this study support previous research which shows that employment alone is not a protective factor against food insecurity. Upon examining *work that simply isn't working*, five themes emerged, which predispose individuals to food insecurity, including: insufficient wages, limited and inconsistent hours, lack of job security, certain demographic features (i.e., female gender, recent immigration, disability, racialization, older age), and type of job/industry. The implications of these themes are discussed below.

What is the relationship between working and food insecurity?

Although having an employment income mitigates some of the negative effects of food insecurity, these benefits are often offset by various demographic factors. For instance, 73% of employed, female-led single parent households experienced severe food insecurity, compared to 65% for the general working sample. Similarly, being an Indigenous worker (77%) was associated with higher rates of severe food insecurity compared with non-Indigenous workers (64%). The results also revealed a stark imbalance for individuals living with a disability—81% of whom still experience severe food insecurity despite earning an employment income—a figure 20 points higher than for those who are not disabled and working (61%).

What are some of the key challenges faced by those who are working and food insecure?

When examining the challenges impacting disadvantaged workers from achieving food security, it is evident that precarious work—or work that lacks stability, security, or offers minimal benefits and protections—leads to frequent periods of unemployment and income loss. For instance, shrinking or closing corporations leads to layoffs and a reduction in full-time positions, forcing workers to take on multiple uninsured part-time jobs or pick up temporary/contact work to quickly fill the income gap. Furthermore, a lack of legislative protection leads to the exploitation of temporary foreign workers, who are ineligible for many of the public services and perks that citizens have access to (i.e., healthcare coverage, employment insurance), as well as workers employed in app-based work, which comes with additional risks and a lesser guarantee of income.

Newcomers face a specific set of challenges relating to their foreign qualifications and work experience. Many described their difficulties finding suitable employment that corresponds to their credentials and previous experience in their countries of origin, often necessitating additional schooling and accreditation processes— indeed, 62% of non-Canadian citizens utilizing the Calgary Food Bank hold a diploma or university degree, compared to 38% of Canadian citizens. Moreover, the research shows that often newcomer families receive only one source of employment income, as the other adult upskills to acquire Canadian credentials or to improve their English-language skills, that will allow them to find suitable work. Many newcomers are

resigned to accepting unsuitable work for unsuitable wages—the difficult reality of entering regulated professions that many did not foresee before moving to Canada (Raihan et al., 2023).

What is it about the nature of their employment that means they are unable to make ends meet?

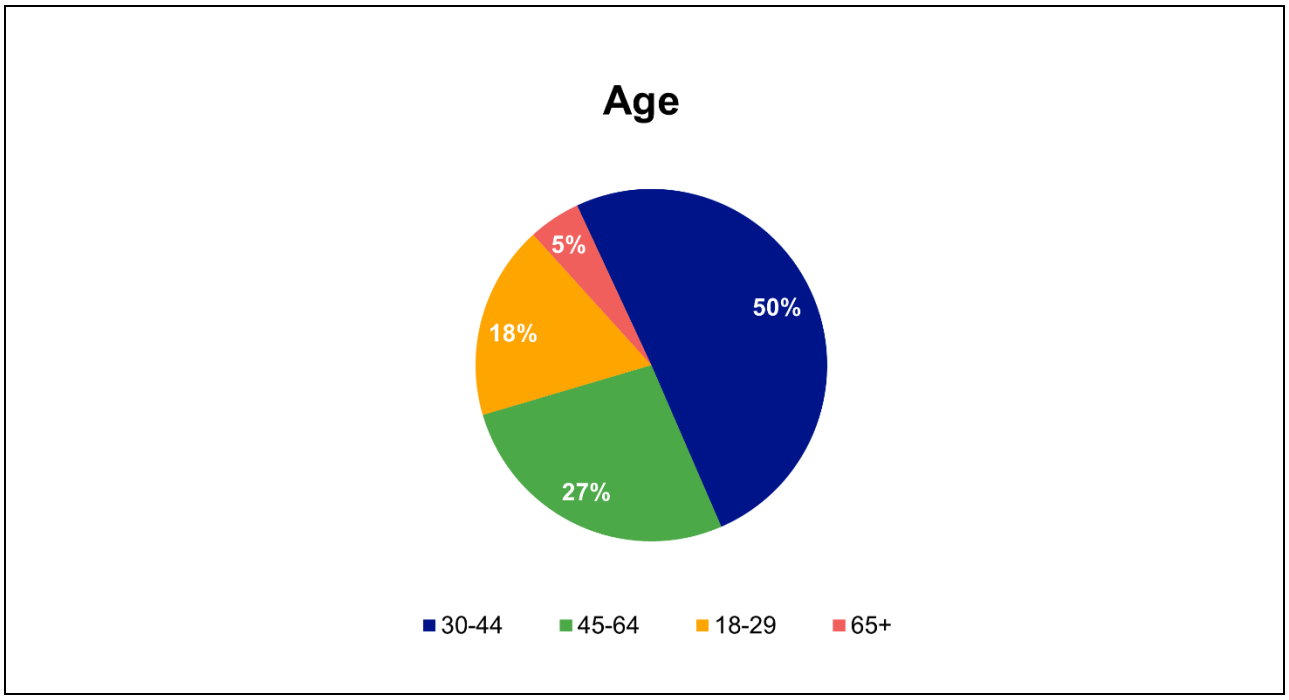
Employment alone is not enough to ensure an adequate income. It is evident that, for many of the clients of the Calgary Food Bank, wages are low and have failed to increase with inflation—at $19.30, the average hourly wage in the present study is over $5 less than the living wage for Calgary, calculated at $24.45 (Vibrant Communities Calgary, 2024a).

In other cases, workers attribute their hardship to insufficient hours at work, which often accompany non-standard work (i.e., multiple jobs, part-time, variable hours, shift work, anti-social hours, temporary/contract, seasonal work). The weekly average worked was 30 hours; while the average number of weeks worked was 30, or around seven months of the past year. These low figures prompted 81% and 79% of workers to desire both more hours and more weeks at work, respectively. It is apparent that underemployment and inconsistent schedules in the case of non-standard work—lead to instable income and disruptions in purchasing patterns. These employment arrangements are also often associated with a lack of employer benefits, such as medical and dental care, further depleting resources.

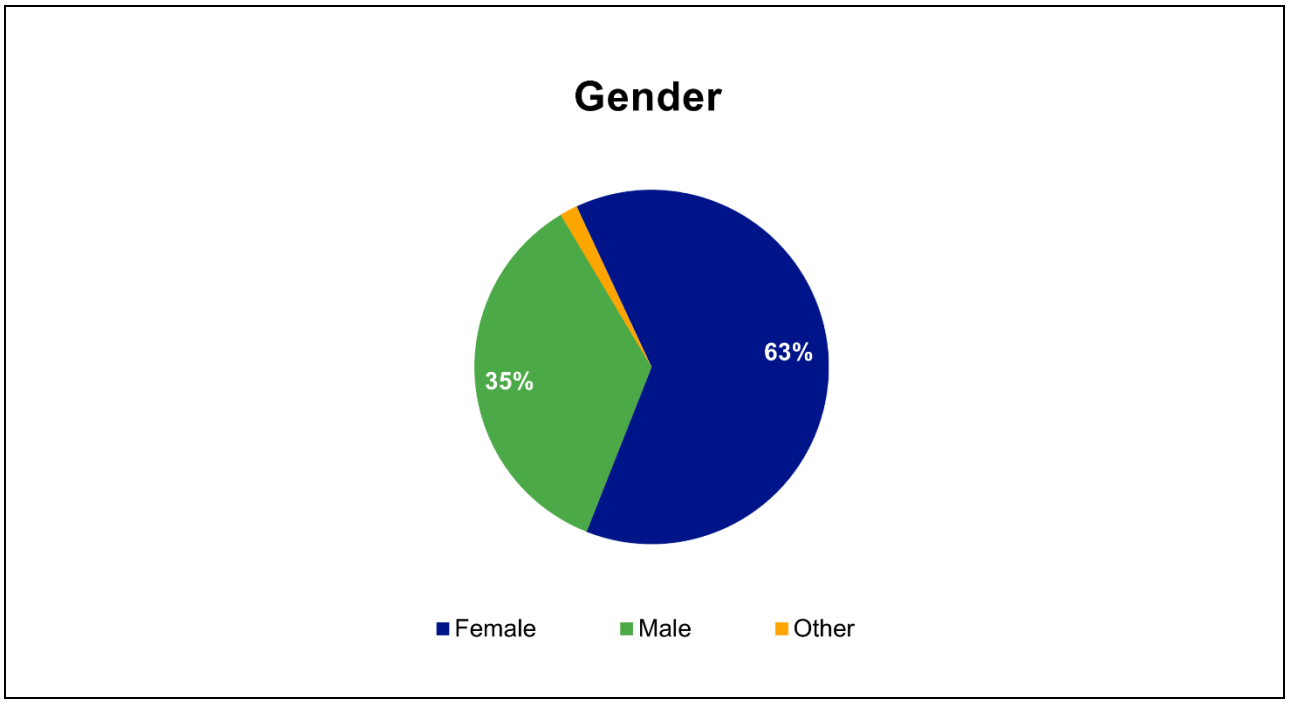
Furthermore, certain occupational industries tend to be overrepresented in the food insecurity pool, with nearly two thirds of participants working between sales and services (e.g. cleaning, retail, food service) as well as trades, transport, and equipment operation (e.g. construction, warehouse jobs, delivery). These occupations tend to assume non-standard and precarious work features, and low wages. As long as these structural employment issues persist, it can be expected that the Calgary Food Bank will continue to serve more and more working people.

Appendix

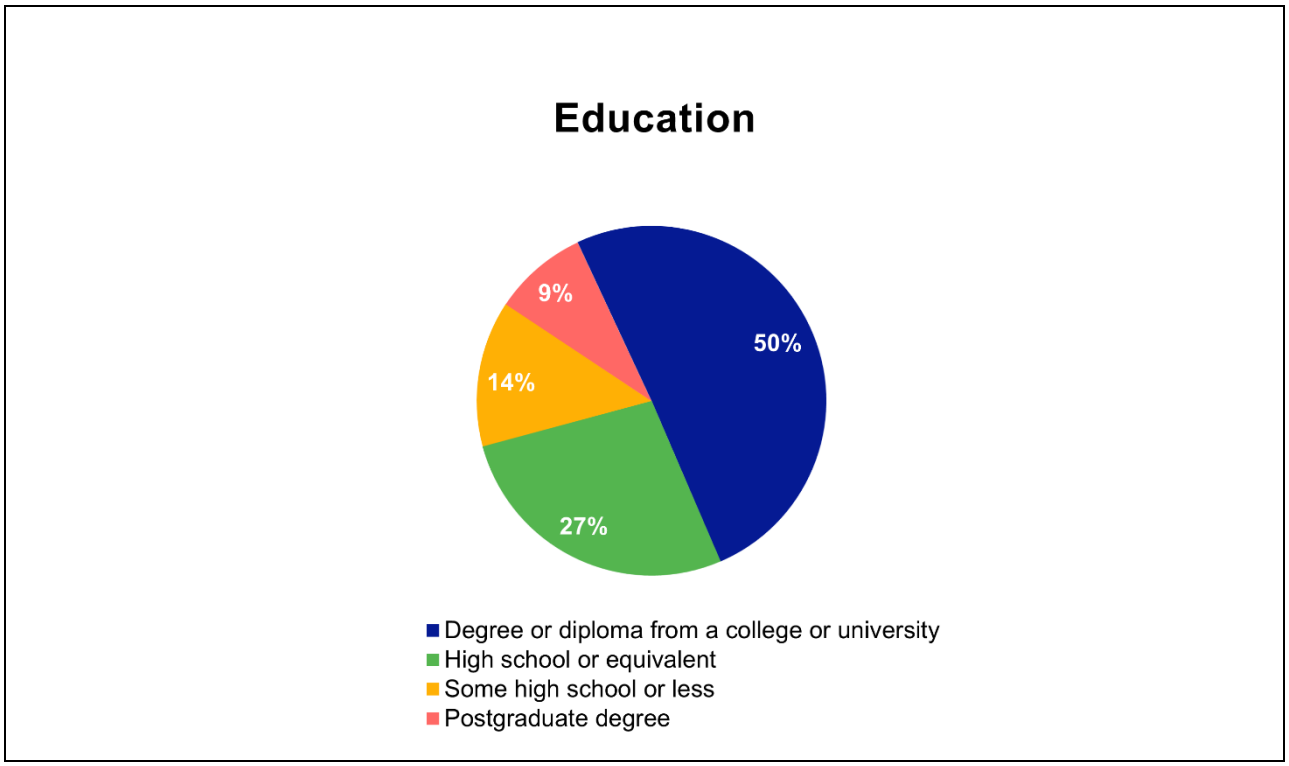
Breakdown of age of survey respondents



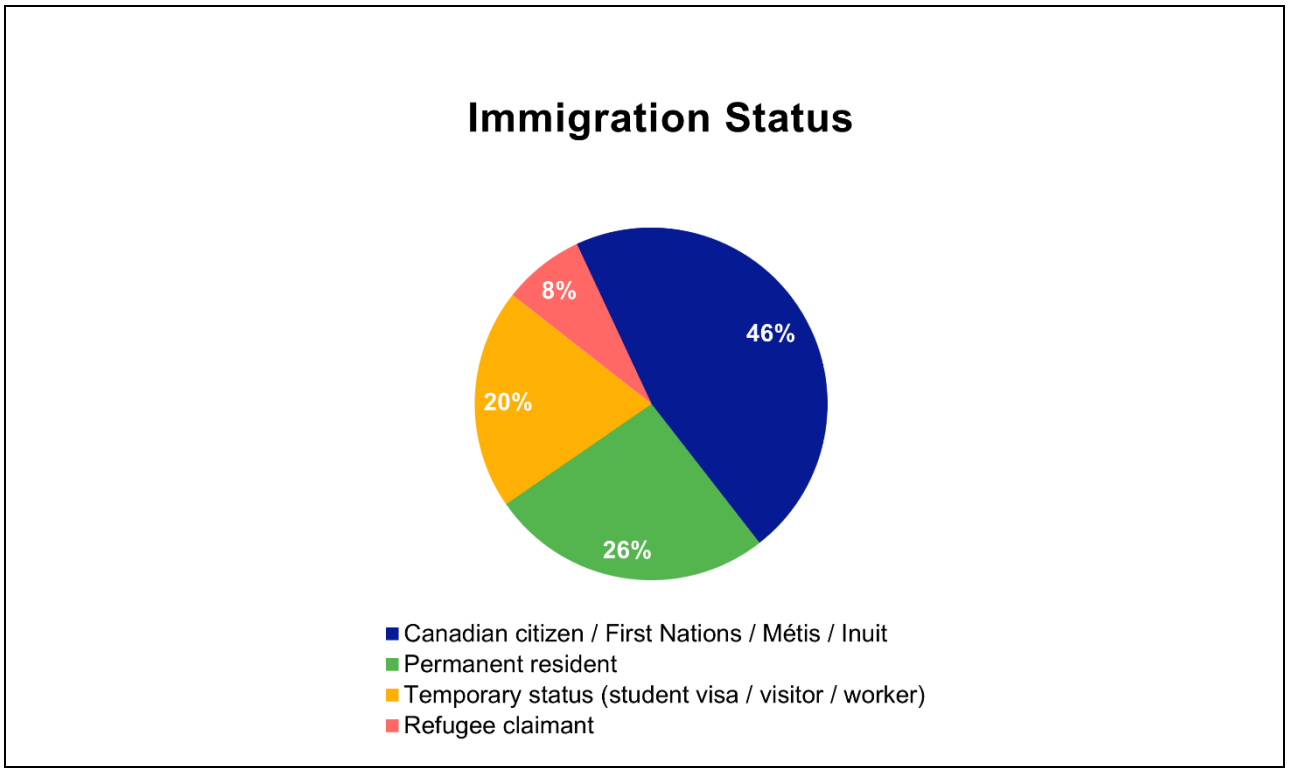
Breakdown of gender of survey respondents



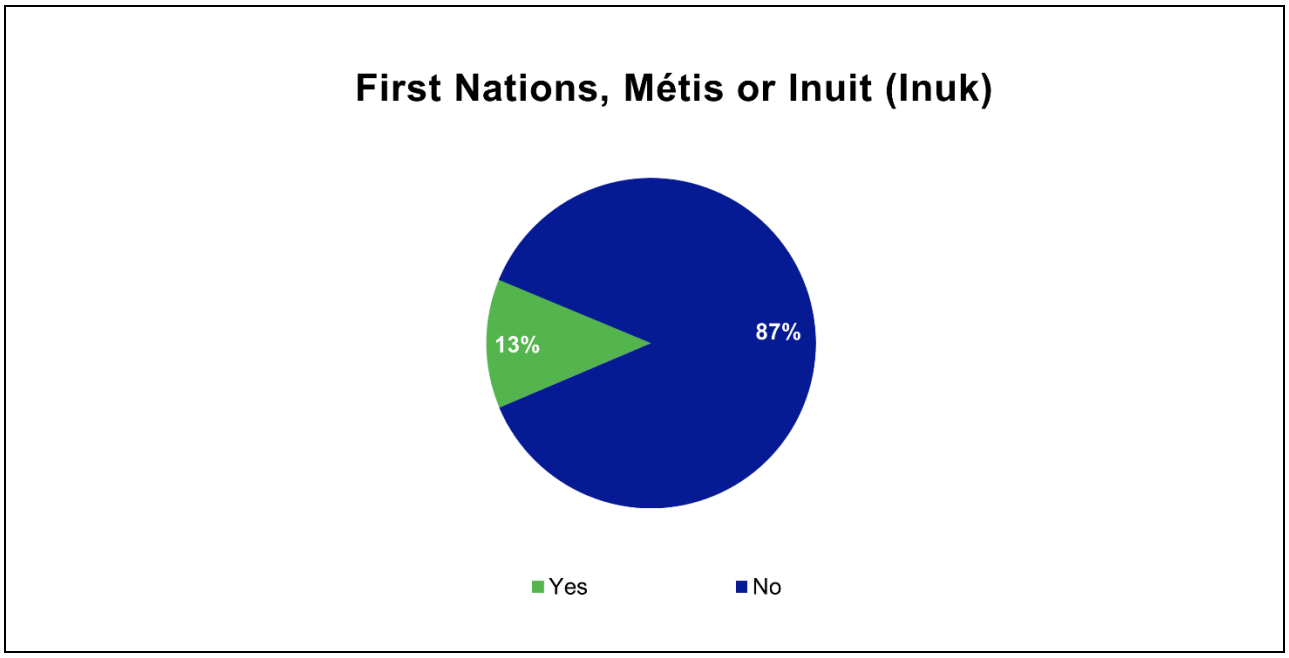
Breakdown of education level of survey respondents



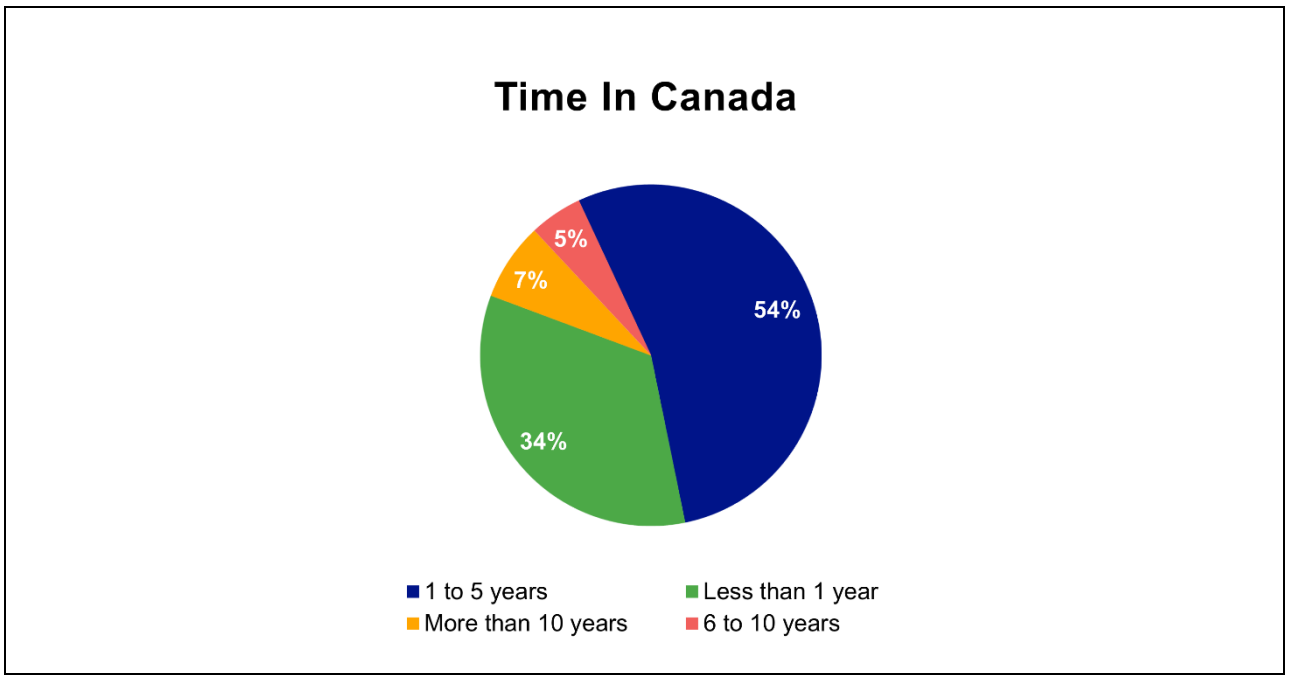
Breakdown of immigration status of survey respondents



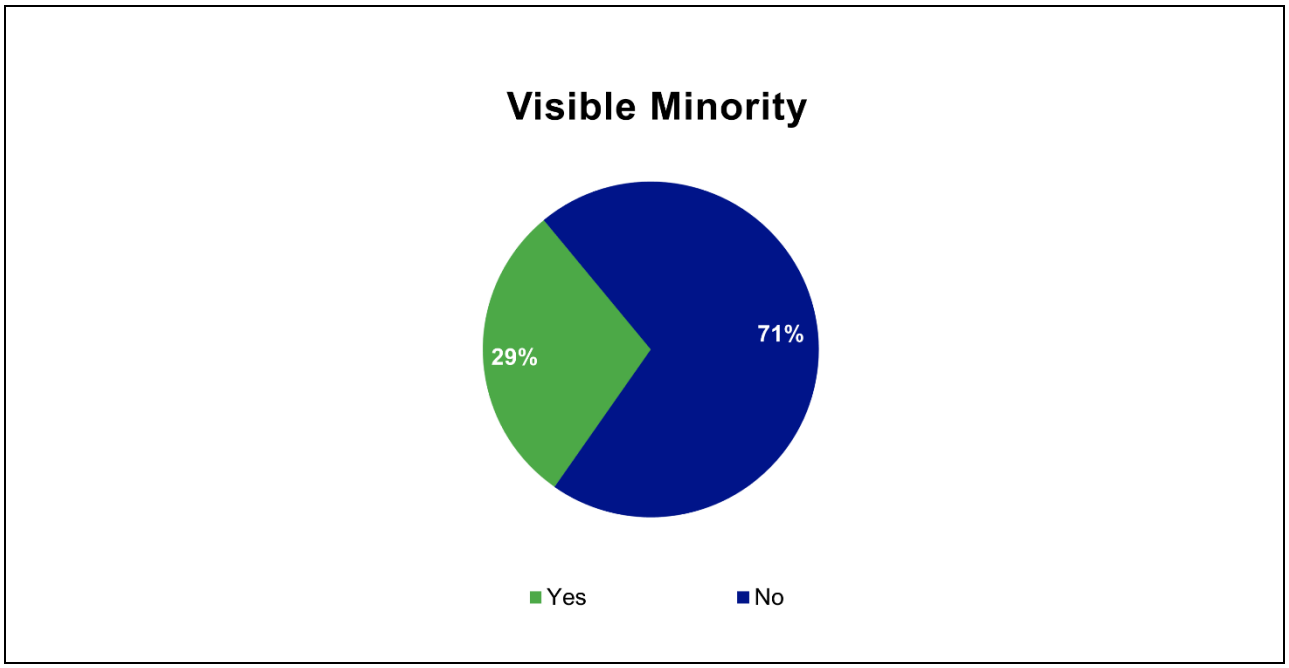
Breakdown of Indigenous status of survey respondents



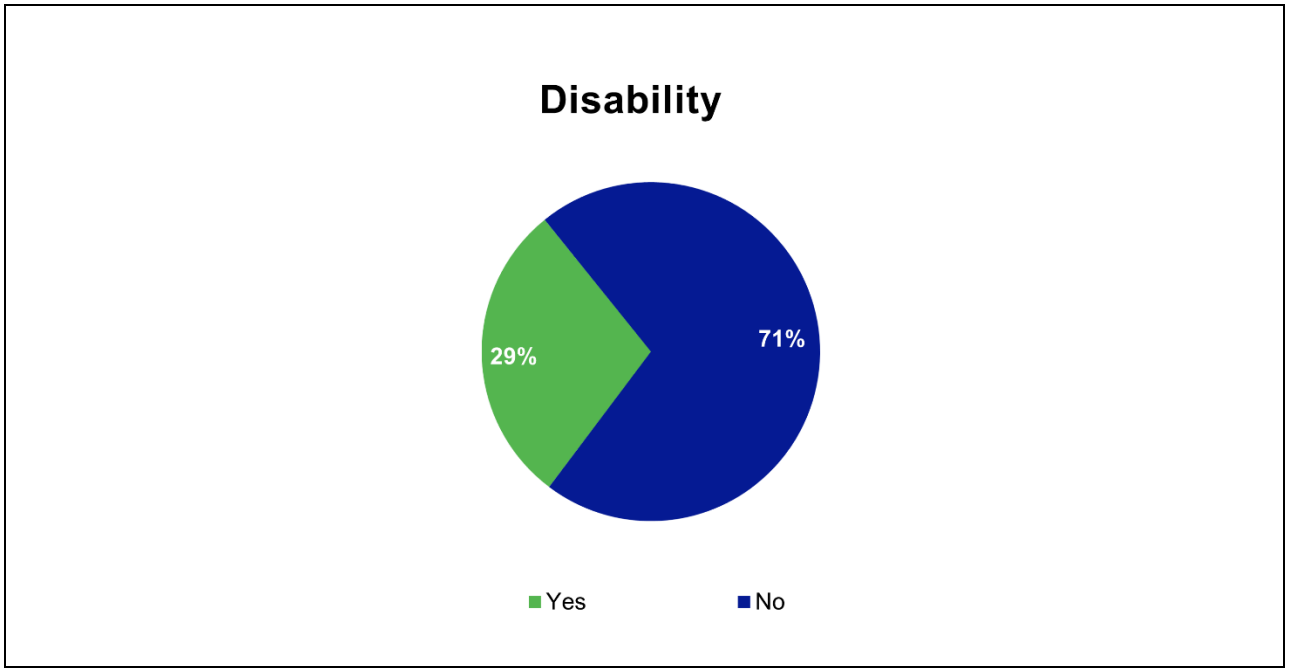
Breakdown of survey respondents' time spent in Canada



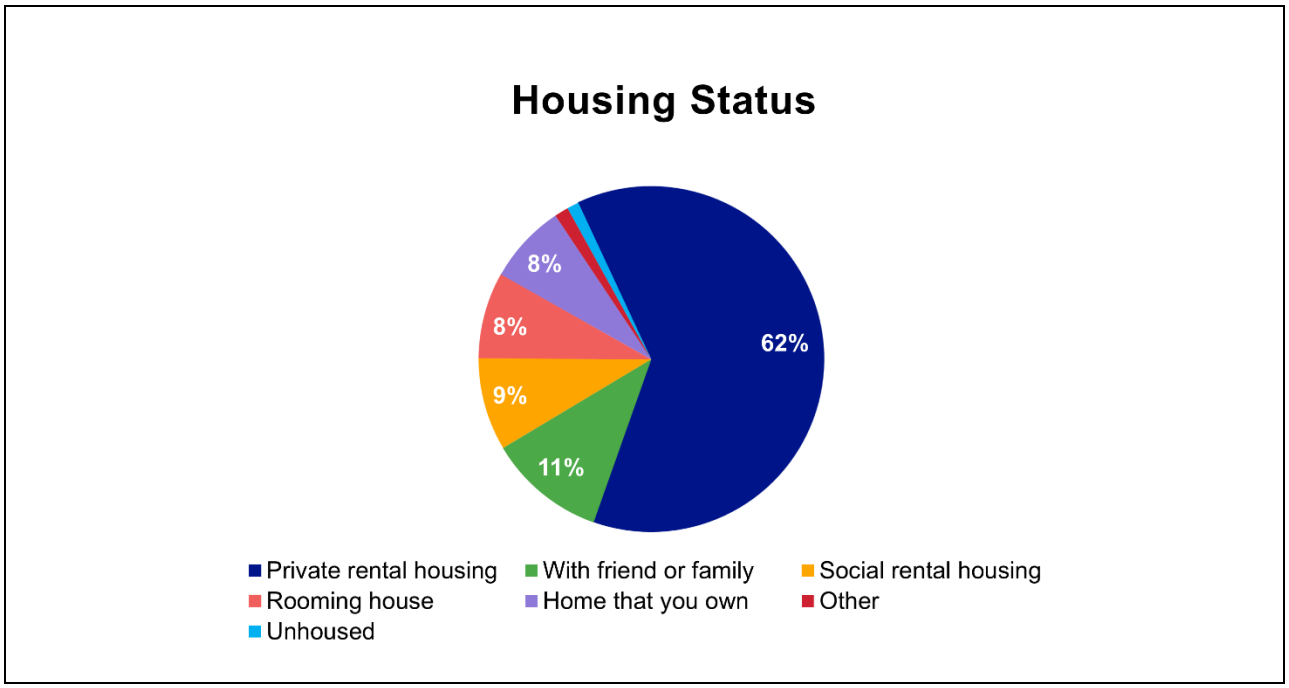
Breakdown of visible minority status of survey respondents



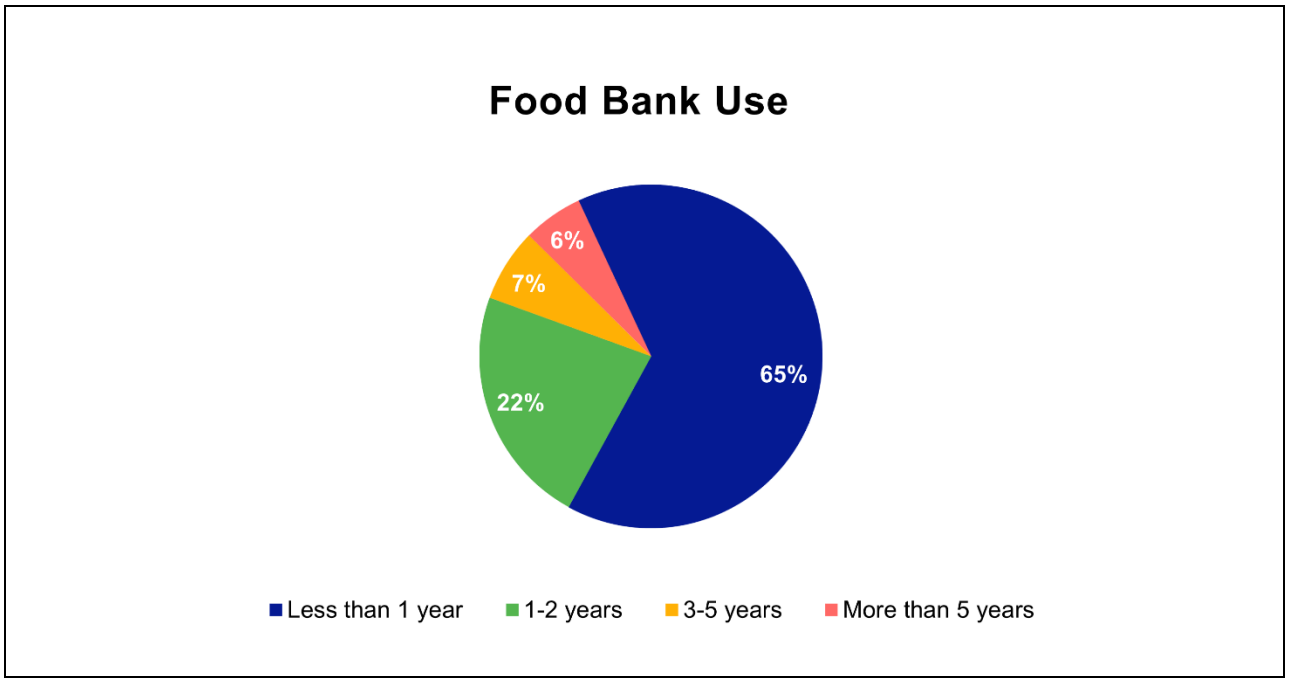
Breakdown of disability status of survey respondents



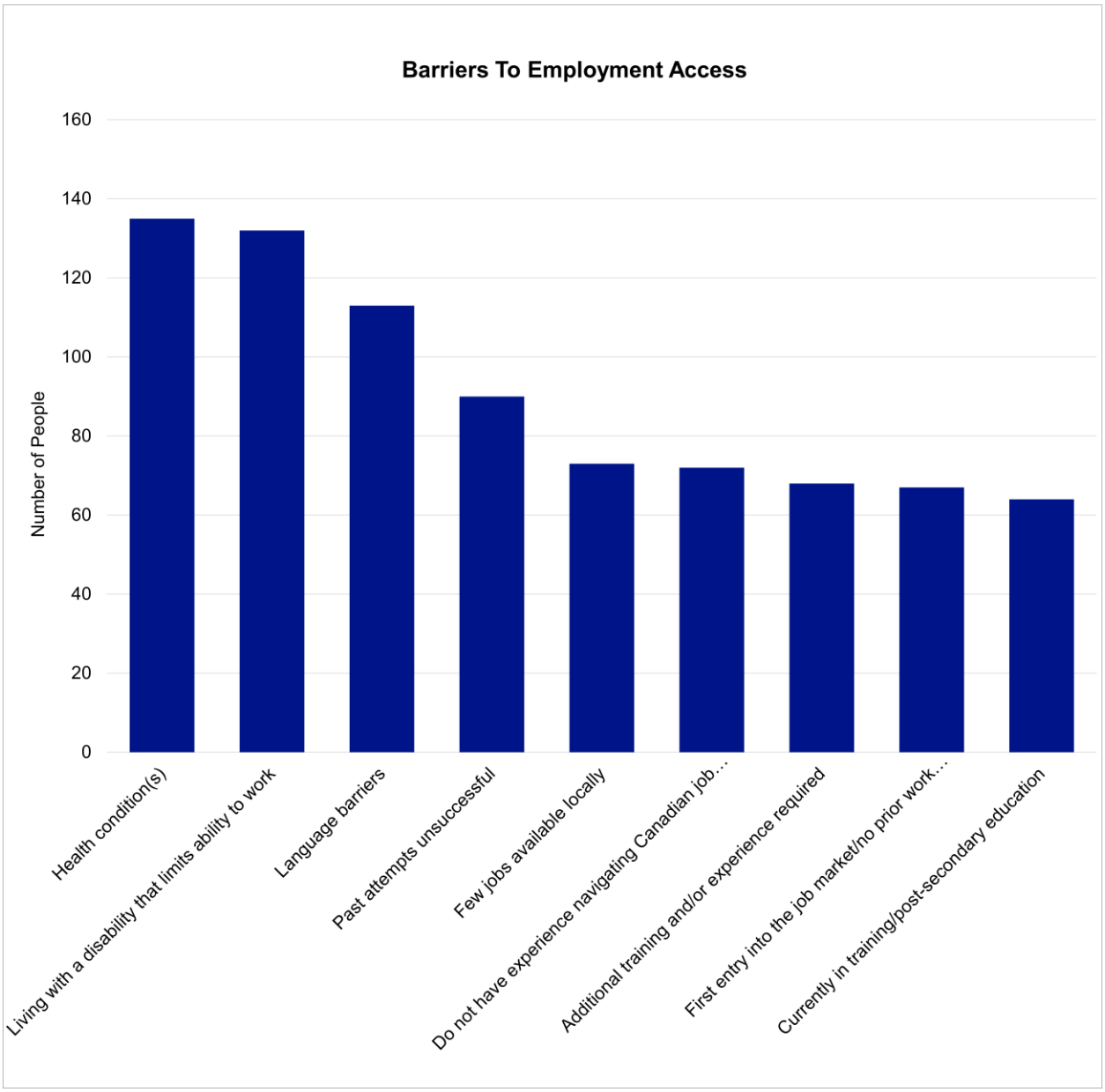
Breakdown of housing status of survey respondents



Breakdown of survey respondents' food back use duration



Breakdown of barriers to employment access for unemployed survey respondents


Barriers To Employment Access
Number of People
160
140
120
100
80
60
40
20
0
Health condition(s)
Living with a disability that limits ability to work
Language barriers
Past attempts unsuccessful
Few jobs available locally
Do not have experience navigating Canadian job…
Additional training and/or experience required
First entry into the job market/no prior work…
Currently in training/post-secondary education

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