

# HAMILTON HUNGERCOUNT 2006



Hunger. It's just unacceptable.

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## HUNGERCOUNT 2006

*"We need to stop blaming poverty on the poor."  
Paul Johnson, Executive Director, Wesley Urban Ministries*

The Canadian Association of Food Banks (CAFB) launches this survey annually across Canada to its members and to affiliated food relief programs. Hamilton Food Share, a member of the CAFB, is among the more than 500 food banks that respond nationwide to the annual survey. The HungerCount Survey is taken each year in the month of March. March was chosen as a typical month for access. The information in this report profiles the 13 Hamilton agencies representing 10 food banks and 7 hot meal programs that constitute the major emergency food programs operating in the Hamilton area. Also represented are 2 local child nutrition programs in the meal section of this report.

Since the first Canadian food bank was established a quarter of a century ago, 650 food banks have opened their doors across Canada. Food insecure households are low income households immersed in the depths of poverty. The proliferation of food banks over this period points to an unavoidable aspect of poverty – hunger. Hamilton is not immune to this trend as 95,000 of its citizens live in poverty. Hunger is a symptom of poverty and its harsh reality is felt by food bank recipients who make up approximately 19% of its most poorest of citizens.

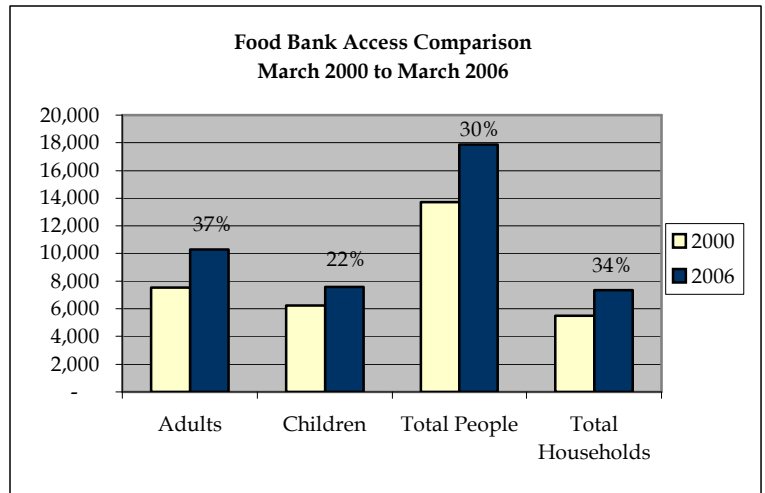
Increased access to emergency food programs in Hamilton has also challenged the operational limits of local food banks. As the degree of need increases, food supplies can quickly outpace the community resources marshaled to meet it. Food banks have felt the enormous strain. Local food banks seem to be heading on a parallel course as the people they serve and for similar reasons – lack of resources.

### **Food Bank Access: Number of People Assisted**

In the month of March 2006, 17,860 people accessed a food bank for emergency food assistance, up 10% from 16,250 people in March 2005. The marked increase represents an additional 1,600 people over the same month last year. Accordingly, the number of food insecure households also increased 12%, up from 6,597 households in March 2005 to 7,357 in March 2006. Currently, children are over represented at the local food banks and make up 42% of total people assisted yet represent only 26% of the general population. The number of children who visited a food bank has increased 9% from the year prior.

<b>Food Bank Access Comparison March 2006 to March 2005 Statistics</b>				
	<b>March 2006</b>	<b>March 2005</b>	<b>Difference</b>	<b>% Increase</b>
Adults	10,289	9,278	1,011	11%
Children	7,571	6,972	599	9%
Total People	17,860	16,250	1,610	10%
Total Households	7,357	6,597	760	12%

A comparison of food bank access from March 2000 to March 2006 showed a marked elevation in the need for emergency food support as the total number of people accessing a food bank jumped 30% over this period. Additionally, the number of food insecure households climbed a remarkable 34% indicating an increase in households relying on food banks to make ends meet. The most disturbing trend is the number of children who go hungry. Food bank access by children has increased 22% over the five year period.



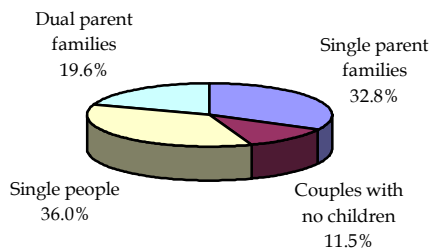
### Who uses a Food Bank: Family Composition and Household Income

The HungerCount captures four main target groups of those assisted by a local food bank. Families with children consisting of single and dual parent families, make up 52% of the total people served.

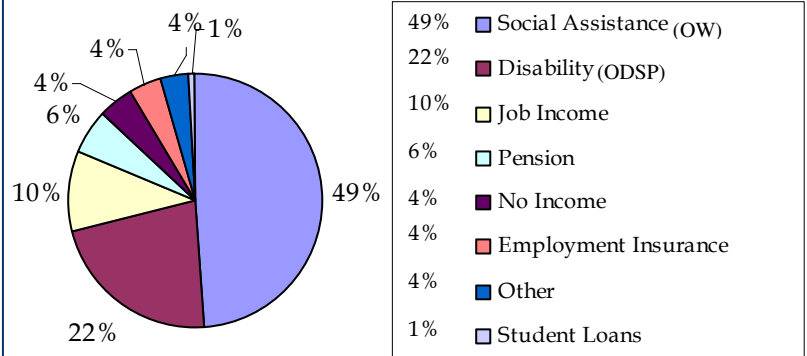
Couples with no children and single people remain at a steady level compared to the previous year at 11.5% and 36% respectively.

Food insecure households share one common experience. They all live in poverty with incomes well below the poverty line. Almost three quarters of the households assisted (71%) are ones that derive their household income from social assistance; Ontario Works (OW at 49%) and Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP at 22%). Households that had paid employment as their main income made up 10% or the second largest group of households in need.

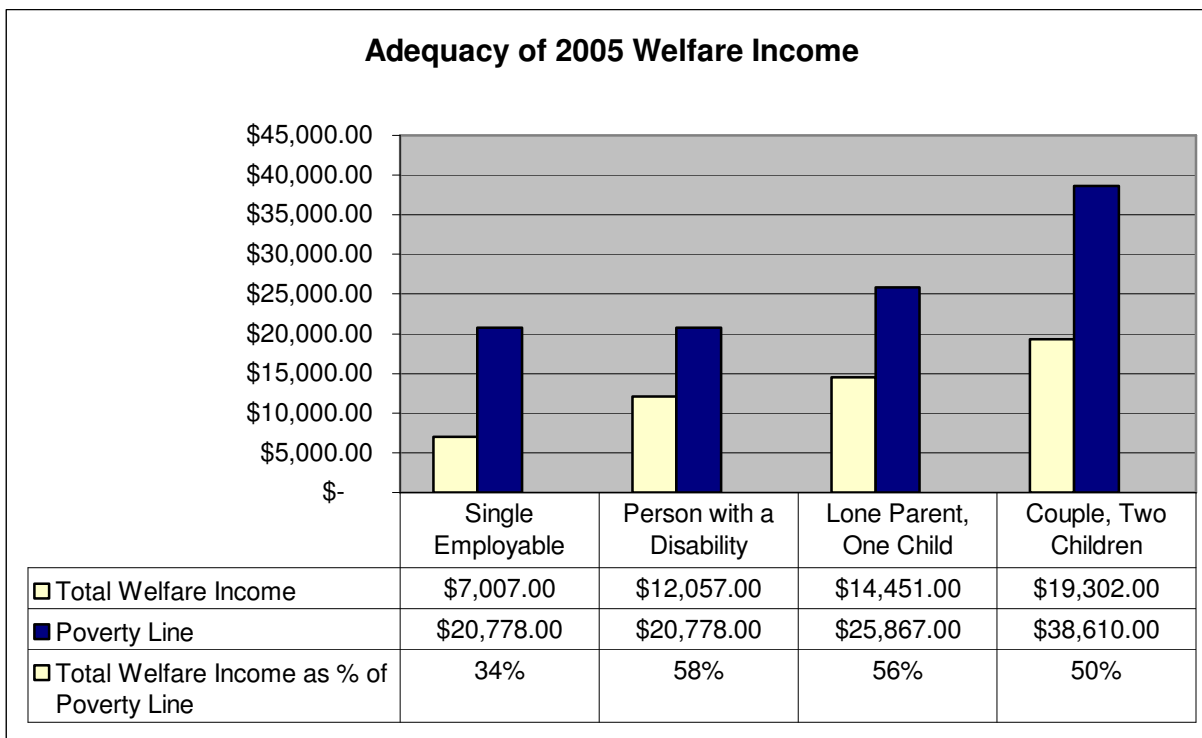
#### Family Composition



#### Household Income



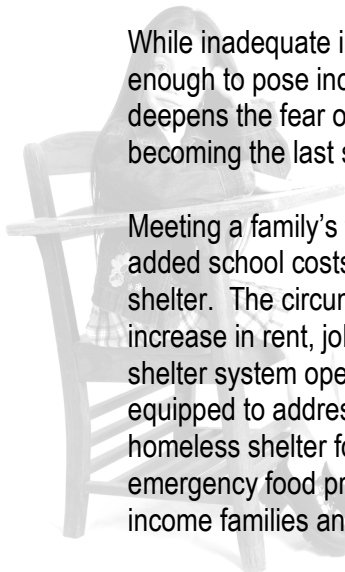
The graph below shows the inadequacies of these income sources as compared to the Statistics Canada poverty line or low income cut off rate (LICO) (*National Council on Welfare, July 2006*)



Family income as a percentage of the poverty line reaches only 50-56% of the LICO showing a poverty gap of \$11,416 for a lone parent family and \$19,308 for a two parent family. Inadequate income levels from this source that clearly do not reflect the actual cost of living continue to drive the need for emergency food. Children living in poverty in low income households where the household income is derived from welfare sources are 13 times more likely to experience hunger than non-welfare families. (*McIntyre, Connor and Walsh 2000*)

A single person on welfare has an annual income of \$7,007 that only meets 34% of the poverty line creating a poverty gap of \$13,771. While this situation seems to be the worst case scenario, there are people who do not even register on the meter at all. Remarkably, almost 412 people (4%) in March 2006 reported having no income at all, living solely off GST Credits and National Child Benefits. Minimum wage earners struggle to climb out of poverty as over 1,029 people (10%) accessing a food bank in March 2006 were employed. Holding a steady job for 35 hours a week at minimum wage of \$7.75 an hour doesn't bring low wage earners out of poverty. Annual income derived from this source yields \$14,105 making the poverty gap \$6,673. Clearly, these income levels do little to elevate struggling households to meet their basic needs and imply a consistent and substantive eroding of Canada's social safety net.

Many of our agencies are multi-service organizations who also provide hot meals programs. In March 2006, an estimated 53,347 hot meals were served. The number of meals is slightly lower (4.8%) than the previous year in March 2005 where 55,885 meals were served. (*The significant contributor to the decrease in meals is due to one agency who served 4,283 less meals than the year prior. Most of the other meal programs remained at a comparative level or higher*).



While inadequate income levels are not solely responsible for the depth of hunger, the impact is sufficient enough to pose increased risk to personal health, impairments in a child's ability to focus in school, and deepens the fear of many families exposed to an increase risk of homelessness. Food banks are becoming the last stop before families become homeless.

Meeting a family's food needs amidst the growing pressures of paying increased utility costs, market rents, added school costs and winter clothing, exposes 5,391 parents every month at increased risk of losing their shelter. The circumstances for families in low income households can easily change for the worse with an increase in rent, job loss, or ill health. The connection to staying housed is a fragile one. The emergency shelter system operating in Hamilton was not designed for this target group. The shelter system is ill equipped to address the phenomenon of families who become homeless. Hamilton has opened a homeless shelter for families, further illustrating how real the increased risk can be. Increased access to emergency food programs points to a broader issue illuminating the tenuous connection between low income families and the mainstream of our community.

There is little doubt that poverty plays a significant role contributing to the level of hunger in food insecure households. There is no easy answer as to why poverty has proliferated, but there are consistent trends of a complex set of factors inherent in systemic inadequacies within our social safety net, ones that make a significant contribution to entrenched levels of poverty in Hamilton. Local food banks stated that they support long-term solutions that address the root causes of hunger and poverty. The issues most supported by local food banks in the 2006 HungerCount were:

- Improve access & rates for *Social Assistance benefits* (OW & ODSP)
- Increase value and access to the *National Child Benefit*
- Increase availability and improve affordability of *Rental Housing*

While the initial short-term measure for food banks has now translated into the unexpected long-haul, currently these committed food relief organizations try to operate amidst the current climate of inadequate resources citing infrastructure limitations, need for more staff and supplies, extensive fundraising efforts, and the inconsistency and uncertainty of project funding verses program investments as just a few of the accumulative aspects exhausting food relief organizations. Also noted in the survey responses was the increased trend of immigrants and refugees accessing a food bank. More culturally appropriate foods need to be resourced or purchased such as beans, lentils and rice to better reflect food of diverse cultures. The food element is only part of the challenge as language barriers also exist in communicating with food bank workers and reading food labels.

Despite the difficult challenges experienced by food relief programs, they remain committed to serve people in need and supported by their local community. In March 2006, 4,733 volunteer hours were given by supporters of the local food bank and hot meals programs, up 17% from the previous year. Volunteer hours, in the month of March 2006 alone equate to 118 fulltime positions at 40 hours a week. Without the support of their local community for food supplies, assistance from volunteers, and financial contributions, many of the program coordinators say they simply could not operate. For food banks here in Hamilton, our very existence depends on it.

While food banks work toward long-term solutions they do so knowing they are only a stop gap measure. Food banks and hot meal programs are not the solution to hunger. Emergency food programs are a compassionate response to the unacceptable presence of hunger in our community. The doors of the food bank remain open until we as a community and a society "stop blaming poverty on the poor" and start eliminating the root causes of poverty that lead to hunger that would decrease the number of families suffering the indignity of being forced to use charitable feeding programs to feed their families.





## **HAMILTON FOOD SHARE AGENCIES**

*The following agencies participated in the HungerCount Survey, consisting of ten food bank programs, seven prepared meal programs, and two child nutrition programs.*

### **Food Bank Programs**

Good Shepherd Centres  
Living Rock Ministries  
Mission Services of Hamilton  
Neighbour to Neighbour Centre  
St. Matthew's House (2 locations)  
Stoney Creek Community Food Bank  
The Salvation Army Hamilton  
The Salvation Army Dundas  
Welcome Inn Community Emergency Food Pantry

### **Prepared Meal Programs**

Good Shepherd Centres  
Hamilton Out of the Cold Program Coalition  
Living Rock Ministries  
Mission Services of Hamilton  
St. Matthew's House  
The Salvation Army Hamilton  
Wesley Urban Ministries

### **Child Nutrition Programs**

Beasley Area Nutrition 4 Kids  
North Hamilton Community Health Centre