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Welfare changes credited as Toronto food-bank use drops in first three months of 2018

By **LAURIE MONSEBRAATEN** Social Justice Reporter
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Food bank use in Toronto dipped by 16,000 visits between January and March this year, the first time in four years there has been a decrease during this time period, according to Toronto's Daily Bread Food Bank.

"The most remarkable aspect of this drop is that the largest decrease is among households that rely on social assistance," said the food bank's research director, Richard Matern.



Richard Matern, research director of the Daily Bread Food Bank, where new provincial social policies have been credited for a reduction in users in the first three months of the year. (CARLOS OSORIO / TORONTO STAR)

Total visits dropped to 186,835 during the first three months of the year, a decline of 8 per cent when compared to the first quarter of 2017, according to an update report, released Thursday.

Daily Bread credits several social policy changes for the drop, including an easing of provincial welfare rules over the past year, indexing of the Canada child benefit last July, and Ontario's minimum wage boost to \$14 on Jan. 1.

It is the first time food bank use has dropped during the first quarter — the post-holiday period when visits usually spike — since 2014, when Daily Bread began compiling data in this way, he noted.

Although the report covers just the first three months of the year — full results will be released in the food bank's annual report in September — the trend shows what can happen when federal and provincial social policy measures are aligned, Matern said.

"While the economy has been strong, there have also been numerous social policy initiatives, mostly at provincial level, that may have had an important impact on those struggling with hunger and poverty," he said. "It is something voters need to keep in mind during the provincial election."

The latest polls indicate that the Progressive Conservatives and NDP are running neck and neck in the [June 7 election](#).

Last year, [there were 990,970 visits](#) to food banks in Toronto. While food-bank use has been trending down from a high of almost 1.2 million visits in 2010, it is still well above pre-recession levels of the mid-2000s when there were between 700,000 and 800,000 visits annually, he noted.

This year's first-quarter decrease among households receiving social assistance was particularly noteworthy because this group is more likely to be living in poverty and going without food, Matern added.

People who rely on social assistance — Ontario Works (OW) or Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) — represented 64 per cent of food-bank users in 2017.

The drop in food-bank use among the working poor and seniors relying on old-age pensions was less dramatic, with both decreasing by just over 3 per cent.

January's minimum wage increase and introduction of automatic enrolment for the Guaranteed Income Supplement for seniors may have reduced food-bank visits among these groups, the report says.

Other changes that could account for the overall decrease in food bank use include:

- Full exemption of child support payments from social assistance claw-backs in early 2017 means support is no longer deducted dollar for dollar.
- A rise in the annual exemption for cash gifts to \$10,000 from \$6,000 for people on social assistance in September 2017 in recognition of the support people receive from family and friends when they are experiencing financial difficulties.
- An increase in liquid assets in early 2018 for people on social assistance to \$10,000 from \$2,500 for OW and to \$40,000 from \$5,000 for ODSP.
- The introduction of free college and university tuition for low-income students last September along with changes to the Ontario Student Loan Program (OSAP) to allow those on social assistance and studying full time to keep 100 per cent of any earnings. (About 10 per cent of food-bank users are college and university students.)
- The introduction of free prescription drugs for everyone under 25 in January 2018. (While not specifically targeted to people living in poverty, past research shows parents give up food to pay for children's needs, including prescription medication.)

Although it is difficult to attribute the decrease in food bank visits to any one change, research in Newfoundland and Labrador showed a significant decline in food insecurity — particularly among those relying on social assistance — from 2007-12 when that province enacted multi-year poverty reduction efforts including many of the recent measures adopted in Ontario, Matern said.

“There is no silver bullet to reducing poverty,” Matern said. “It is not just a strong economy or one policy or benefit.”

Ongoing reform of social assistance, more universal benefits such as prescription drugs for the working poor and seniors, affordable housing and collaboration at all levels of government are needed to reduce poverty and hunger in Ontario, he added.



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