

# One of every four Ottawa food bank users has post-secondary education, new data shows

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A degree or diploma doesn't necessarily keep hunger at bay. More than one quarter of people who use the Ottawa Food Bank have post-secondary education, such as a university degree, college diploma or trade accreditation, says a new report released by the food bank.

"For the first time, we have data that really tells the local story," said Michael Maidment, the organization's executive director, on Wednesday. The new data, collected through a system implemented in 2015, shows that 41,540 people use the Ottawa Food Bank each month.

"The sheer number itself is striking," says Maidment, who said that because the central food bank supplies 112 food banks and other agencies across Ottawa, it hasn't had firm numbers on its total users in the past.

"What is more alarming is some trends that number uncovers," Maidment said. "Hunger is not reserved for the homeless or those on social assistance. It is all around us and largely invisible. It could be someone you work with or your neighbour."

The new data show 26 per cent of food bank users have post-secondary education, including everything from trade accreditations to post-graduate degrees.

Maidment said 65 per cent of people who turn to the food bank are on social assistance.

"The rest of the story is people who are not typically living in a shelter or who are on assistance. Hunger can strike anyone. It could be because of an event, like illness. Even if you have a good job, benefits can run out. Or people can lose their job. Or it could be students or seniors who are living paycheck to paycheck."

Maidment said food bank use was about the same in 2016 as 2015, but there were some spikes just after Christmas at food banks in areas where Syrian refugees were housed.

"Some areas were dramatically higher, with increases as high as 115 per cent, mostly driven by Syrian refugees."

Maidment said the report, released Wednesday, puts focus on issues the food bank must address. Citing Dr. Isra Levy, medical officer of public health for Ottawa, he said that supplying food with good nutritional value is key for people struggling with health issues and stress.

Through a program called "Food Bank Better," the Ottawa Food Bank is working harder to recover food that would otherwise go to waste, such as collecting and freezing meat from grocery stores that is approaching its best before date. It is also growing produce locally, with the help of 700 volunteers, on donated farmland near Stittsville.

But Maidment said that once the local growing season is over, fresh produce gets steadily more expensive.

"A nutritional review of all the perishable food we provide made recommendations that would cost \$82,000 per year

to implement,” Maidment said. “Better food is more expensive and that’s part of the challenge for families as well as for a food bank.”

He said he expects more difficulties for individuals and food banks in the year ahead, citing a recent Dalhousie University study that estimates food prices for a family will increase \$420 over the next year.

Maidment said that supplying more food, and even better food, isn’t going to change the underlying problems, however.

“Distributing more food isn’t going to change the number of people turning to a food bank. For the 65 per cent of food bank users who are on social assistance, clearly that assistance is not enough. Their expenses are higher than their incomes. Giving out more food is not going to change that. We’re the emergency room of the system. We want to address the broader changes that are needed.”