

Ceux qui doivent se servir des banques d'alimentation connaissent trop bien les maux de la pauvreté : le stress, la peur de ne pas pouvoir subvenir aux besoins de la famille, la faim et la malnutrition. Une employée de la Daily Bread Food Bank de Toronto nous fait part des résultats d'un sondage d'opinion de ceux qui ont eu recours aux services de cette banque en février 1992, c'est-à-dire au milieu de la crise économique. En comparant les réponses des femmes et des hommes, l'auteure conclut que les mères seules et leurs enfants sont les plus vulnérables et que ce groupe, qui s'efforce de survivre tant bien que mal, mérite d'être mieux protégé.

Food bank need is a measure of absolute poverty. Those who use food banks can afford neither food nor shelter—the basic necessities of life. They know the human costs of poverty: stress, fear of being unable to afford sufficient food, hunger, poor nutrition.

Twice a year, the Daily Bread Food Bank in Toronto conducts surveys of its users. In February 1992, we interviewed 849 people, asking them questions about themselves, their families, their health, their work history, and their children.

The most remarkable difference between the men and women we interview is the presence of children in the family. Only one in 10 women, compared to four in 10 men, are coming to pick up food for themselves alone. When a woman appears at the food bank door, nine times out of ten she is asking for food for herself and another. Half of all women using food banks are single mothers with children; only ten per cent of the men are single fathers.

The trend away from the predominance of single parent families in food banks is remarkable. Fifty-five per cent of households using food relief programmes in Toronto currently have children. In 1992, exactly half are two parent families. Three years ago, there were almost twice as many single parent households as two parent households.

Less than a quarter of the women we interviewed—and one-third of the single mothers—were living in subsidized housing. Seventeen per cent of the women were on waiting lists.

More women were receiving Family

Women Using Food Banks

By Susan Cox

Benefits than men: being a sole-support parent tends to gain one the classification "unemployable." More women were on Unemployment Benefits, too.

As a general rule, women using food banks are less well educated than men using food banks. Seventeen per cent of the women we interviewed had only grade school educations, compared to 13.3 per cent of the men. Only 44 per cent of the women were high school graduates, compared to 50 per cent of the men. Only 3.6 per cent of the women were university graduates. Almost a quarter were attending school full or part-time.

More women than men were likely to be working, although twice as many men had lost a job in the past six months. Women were also twice as likely to have worked part time. One woman in ten had never worked, as opposed to one in 20 for the men. Among single mothers, almost six per cent were working. Fewer than one per cent of the women were in government training programmes.

Previous jobs cited by food bank users were predominantly factory, food and restaurant, and office work. The primary difference between women and men here was that women were more than five times more likely to have lost office jobs,

and twice as likely to have worked in the food and restaurant sector.

More than one-third of the women described their activities in the past year as "keeping house." Fourteen per cent said they had mainly been seeking work. Forty-two per cent of men said they had been looking for work, but only two per cent of men said they had been keeping house!

Women seemed to be more aware of health issues than men. Sixty per cent said they could improve their health by eating better, but were unable to afford proper food. Only 55 per cent of the men identified a more nutritious diet as a factor that might improve one's health.

Three times as many women as men identified a family breakdown as the reason for their needing a food bank. With only one exception, all female food bank users had children. Among the women there was a fairly even three-way split between those who were single, those married, and those formerly-married (divorced, separated, or widowed). Only 14 per cent of male food bank recipients were formerly married: the breakdown of a relationship is clearly more likely to cause food bank need among women than among men.

What conclusions can be drawn about women and food bank use? The hardship endured by women and their children reflects the overall breakdown of Canada's social safety net. As a general rule, the larger the family, the more likely the household will have less money than is needed to buy food according to Agriculture Canada's pricing of a nutritious diet. One person households are virtually all male households. Any family of more than two persons has less after-rent money for food. All but a tiny per centage of larger food bank-using households include women, and these families, by definition, suffer greater hardship.

Single mothers and their children encounter extremely high risks of acute poverty. Fewer than 15 per cent of the single mothers we interviewed were receiving child support payments.

Eighty per cent of all food recipients had gone without food at least once a month because they could not afford it. Thirteen per cent of the single mothers did so once a day. Almost one-third of the single mothers had done so at least once a week. They are the victims of society's

failure to care for its most vulnerable citizens.

The safety net fails in several ways. Two-thirds of single parent households are not in subsidized housing, although half of these are on waiting lists. Many have been waiting for more than two years. Social assistance payments—either general welfare or Family Benefits—fail to provide for basic needs.

What do these women really want? Popular wisdom has it they want to stay home, have babies, and be supported. But 73 per cent of women surveyed said the thing that would make the greatest difference in their lives was a job. Seventy-five per cent wanted cheaper housing. Sixty-three per cent wanted more education or job training. This is a picture of people struggling to survive in a society where they are given less opportunities.

Let us hope that when this recession ends we will never again stand for the erosion of programmes designed to maintain people in health and dignity through rough periods in their lives. In the meantime, during this recession, we need a great public outcry against governments that put deficit reduction before hungry people, and blame those very people for their hunger while balancing budgets on their backs.

Susan Cox is Assistant Executive Director of the Daily Bread Food Bank in Toronto.

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HEATHER PYRCZ

Talking

I am learning
to listen
to myself
and watch while I
say poverty for property
not missing a beat

I expose myself
like an Ihalmuit shaman
to howling winds and unfathomable
hunger
to gainsay

Heather Pyrcz is a writer who lives in Wolfville, Nova Scotia. Her work has been published in Fiddlehead, West Coast Line, and Pottersfield Portfolio.

MAURA STOREY

Chasm

They get in through the walls
the cracks in the foundation
and floor the chasm under
the livingroom windows where
Summers a sow-thistle grows
blooms if tended toward
Fall inside my house mice
don't need much space even less
for going out again mornings I
find them cringing near my pillow
or in fractions
in miscellaneous, amputated bits
half-eaten twice now they've left
their precisely abandoned faces on
my carpet: whiskers taut, tiny
clenched teeth, eyes bulging alert
watching waiting for my house
to crumble.

Maura Storey lives on a farm north of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, and works on contract as an educational consultant.