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Food-bank usage soars, study shows

By TAVIA GRANT

Number of people needing help rises to second-highest level ever; immigrants hardest hit by recession

The recession never ended for many families in Canada's largest city, particularly immigrants.

Food banks in the Greater Toronto Area tallied more than 1.12 million visits in the year to March, the second-highest level on record, an annual study to be released Wednesday shows.

Food-bank usage – a key indicator of poverty – is now 18 per cent above prerecession levels. The growth reflects a number of economic shifts, from difficulties newcomers face in landing jobs that match their skills, to rapidly rising costs for food, energy and rent.

"Skilled newcomers who were highly educated, they're having trouble getting credentials recognized, and the work that they are finding is part-time or seasonal. It's not enough to pay the bills, pay rent and put food on the table," says Richard Matern, acting director of research at the Daily Bread Food Bank, which is publishing the paper.

At the same time, "the cost of food and energy is rising while incomes are relatively stagnant."

Some food-bank clients are regulars, but about half have been using them for less than a year – in many cases after an unfortunate turn of events.

Nagarajan Seenivasan, 42, never thought he'd be in this situation. The newcomer to Canada has worked in both India and Saudi Arabia as a welder, maintenance worker, real-estate investor and receptionist to the French firm Sanofi Pasteur. He speaks five languages and came to Canada this summer hoping to land work and bring his wife and four-year-old child.

He'd do any type of job, he says.

But on his first day in Canada, his passport was stolen. Without papers or a SIN number, no one will hire him for an above-the-board job. He is late on his \$400 rent and relies on food-bank groceries once a week. Cooking oil he borrows from a neighbour. When asked how much money he has at the moment, he opens his wallet to show a single five-dollar bill.

"Since I was 16 years, I have worked without stop," he says. "I don't want to get government money. This isn't my way. I just want to work."

The face of poverty mirrors shifts in Toronto's demographics. More than half of food-bank visitors were born outside the country. Three in ten have graduated from universities. And more are between 45 and 64 years old, displaced from old jobs and unable to find new ones.

The frequency with which people are going hungry is also growing – both for adults and children – and is "substantially" more than five years ago, the study says, based on interviews with nearly 1,800 clients at 40 food banks.

Need is growing in the inner suburbs. Visits have increased "markedly" in Etobicoke, North York and much of Scarborough since the recession, it says.

"This recovery has not lifted everyone equally. There are people being left behind," says Craig Alexander, chief economist at Toronto-Dominion Bank, who sees food-bank usage as one of the best measures of socio-economic challenges.

The income gap between Canadian-born people and immigrants has widened since the 1980s, even though immigrants tend to have a higher level of education, he notes. "That means we're undervaluing the skill-set that newcomers have."

The city's jobless rate is 8.5 per cent, more than a full percentage point higher than the national unemployment rate.

The jobless rate for Canadian-born people in Toronto was 6.7 per cent last month, compared with 9.2 per cent for immigrants. Immigrant jobless rates have been consistently higher than Canadian-born rates since 2006, with the gap widening since the downturn in 2008, according to York University's Toronto Immigrant Employment Data Initiative.

Shelter costs are eating up budgets. Visitors spend on average 71 per cent of their household income on rent, leaving little left over for transportation, clothes or food. Introducing a housing benefit to all low-income households would help address this, the report says.

The numbers reflect the changing nature of work. Thirteen per cent of respondents get their main source of income from employment. Most earn more than minimum wage. However, many have been shifted to part-time work from full-time, and do not have drug or dental benefits. "As a result, people have to choose between dental work and medications, or food."

The stats ring true on a rainy, Tuesday visit to Daily Bread, where lineups for food start well before its 11 a.m. open. In one corner, a group of North Korean women, with babies in snugglies, sit together (across Toronto, food banks are seeing an influx of newcomers from North Korea). In another sits a family from Hungary.

One man named Peter, from Ukraine, reads the newspaper as he waits. He both volunteers and comes to collect food after a car accident in 2006 left him unable to work. He's mostly recovered, but "it's hard to find a job, especially after 50."

There are dozens of couples, a few seniors, and many single, older men. They wait, sipping pea-and-carrot soup out of mugs until their paperwork is processed and they can choose enough pasta, canned tuna and cereal to last until the next visit. They fill their hampers, backpacks and shopping bags. And then they go, out into the rain.