

## Poorest families go hungry all day

### Study measures depth of poverty in Toronto

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Patricia McKenzie has no cable or Internet. She doesn't even have a television.

She has had to give them up for a far more basic staple: Food.



MICHAEL STUPARYK/TORONTO STAR

Patricia McKenzie, 38, waits her turn at east-end Agnes MacPhail food bank. She says she can't remember the last time she had fresh food. (April 15, 2009)

An unemployed 38-year-old, McKenzie says she has gone days without eating and has often had to choose between paying the rent and paying for groceries.

Thus, the Dawes Rd. resident likely would find no surprises in a new University of Toronto study that suggests two out of three families in the city's lowest-income neighbourhoods are unable to even get enough to eat.

"And 28 per cent of those were in a category that we would call 'severe food insecurity,'" says study co-author Sharon Kirkpatrick, who helped conduct the research as part of her U of T doctoral thesis.

"They had indicators like cutting or skipping meals and going a whole day without food being the most extreme," Kirkpatrick says.

The research is reported in the current edition of *Canadian Journal of Public Health*.

"What this study is really showing is that even though we have lots of food programs available in our communities, like food banks ... there's still a great degree of unmet need," Kirkpatrick says. "This really points to the need to

### BY THE NUMBERS

50%  
of families delayed paying bills when faced with food shortages

22%  
of families, in the past 12 months, used food banks in the areas studied

address the roots of the problem. It's not a food problem, it's a poverty problem."

The study surveyed 500 families in 12 neighbourhoods designated in a 2004 United Way report as being among the city's poorest.

Each household had children and rented their living space. Some relied on income from Ontario Works or provincial disability programs, but most were employed.

"We didn't expect to find that two in three (households) would have trouble accessing adequate food," says Kirkpatrick, who is doing post-doctoral work at the University of Calgary.

The study was conducted between October 2005 and January 2007 and Kirkpatrick says the economic downturn has exacerbated the problem.

The study chose its subjects based on income levels that fell below Statistics Canada's low-income cutoff and the levels vary based on the number of people living in each household, Kirkpatrick says.

A family of four living on an income of less than \$40,000 a year, for example, would be considered poor, according to the StatsCan criteria researchers used.

While McKenzie, who was waiting outside the Agnes McPhail food bank at Main St. and Danforth Ave. yesterday, has no children, she says she has often sacrificed food for her husband, who is ill.

"I go without fresh food or vegetables all the time," says McKenzie, who can't recall the last time she has had either. She lives mostly on canned food. No eggs. No milk. No cheese.

Among the study's findings:

- One in 10 of the interviewed families reported that adult members had gone entire days without eating because they could not afford food for the entire household.
- 45 per cent reported they could not afford to feed their children balanced meals.
- About half of the families said they delayed bill payments when food ran short, while 31 per cent have given up telephone, cable or Internet services.
- Almost one quarter of households say they delayed rent payments to buy food.
- Although they had access to them, only 22 per cent of the families reported using food banks in the previous 12 months.

The reasons for the food bank usage are unclear, but likely reflect cultural

qualms among new Canadians, who made up about 80 per cent of the study households, Kirkpatrick says.

"We have done a bit of follow-up work to try to look at that, which we're just in the process of analyzing, but it's not a new finding," she says. National data has shown that only about 30 per cent of such families use food banks, even if they are located near their homes, she says.

"The study is great – bang on," says Michael Oliphant, head of research and communications with Toronto's Daily Bread Food Bank.

"We have argued ever since the beginning of our existence that solving hunger is about government intervention to support people's incomes."