

Equity in Canada's Food Banking Network: An Investigation into Eligibility Requirements

by
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Bachelor of Arts, University of Calgary, 2022

Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Public Policy

in the
School of Public Policy
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

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SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY
Spring 2024

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Abstract

This paper examines the operational challenges and systemic barriers within Canada's food bank network, focusing on eligibility requirements and their impact on client accessibility and dignity. Through a qualitative analysis and a review of the literature, it identified the disproportionate effects of stringent eligibility criteria on marginalized populations. It highlighted significant provincial disparities in food bank access protocols. The study underscored how current practices, especially those demanding proof of financial need or identification, complicate access and risk violating clients' dignity. Advocating for internal ID systems and a shift towards self-declaration models, the paper proposes reforms aimed at enhancing the accessibility and dignity of food banks based in rights-based approaches. These recommendations aim to address the core mission of food banks more effectively by ensuring that support is accessible and respectful to all individuals facing food insecurity, thereby contributing to a broader discourse on dignified food access and security.

Keywords: Food Banks; Food Security; Equity; Canada; Eligibility; Right to Food

Acknowledgements

I would like to offer my deepest gratitude to the Simon Fraser Vancouver University School of Public Policy for the opportunity to conduct this research, which has been percolating in my brain in some form or another for many years. I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr Mohsen Javdani, for your support, encouragement, and guidance through this entire process. I would also like to thank Dr Sophie Borwein and Dr Alex Rivard, whose expertise in quantitative methods significantly enhanced my analytical skills.

I would also like to offer my deepest thanks to my partner Arya for his unwavering support throughout the entirety of my education, and most especially this past year. He has been there every step of the way, and I am incredibly grateful. I would also like to thank my family for their eternal support and encouragement, and for having many one-side conversations about food banks.

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Glossary

Catchment Area	The geographical area served by a food bank or a similar organization, within which clients must reside to be eligible for services.
Eligibility Requirements	Criteria that clients must meet to receive aid from food banks, including ID requirements, proof of residence, and financial needs testing.
Financial Requirements	The process through which food banks assess the financial needs of clients to determine eligibility for services. Also called needs-testing.
Food Bank	An organization that collects and distributes food to those experiencing food insecurity.
Food Insecurity	When factors outside an individual's control negatively impact their access to enough foods that promote wellbeing" such as economic, social, environmental, and geographical factors.
Food Security	When everyone has equitable access to food that is affordable, culturally preferable, nutritious and safe; everyone has the agency to participate in, and influence food systems; and that food systems are resilient, ecologically sustainable, socially just, and honour Indigenous food sovereignty.
ID Requirements	The necessity for clients to provide identification to receive services from food banks.
Residence Requirements	Obligations for clients to prove local residency within a specific (catchment) area or region to access food bank services.

Executive Summary

This policy paper presents a comprehensive analysis of the current practices and challenges faced by food banks across various provinces in Canada, focusing on the critical aspects of eligibility requirements and their impact on accessibility and dignity for food bank clients. Through qualitative analysis and a review of existing literature, the paper identifies systemic issues within the food banking network, emphasizing the need for reform to ensure these vital services are accessible and respectful to all individuals in need.

This paper delves into the critical issues surrounding food bank access in Canada, focusing on eligibility barriers, their disproportionate impact on marginalized populations, and the notable variations in access protocols across different provinces. The paper highlights how eligibility requirements, particularly those requiring proof of financial need or identification, can impose unnecessary barriers for food bank clients. These barriers not only complicate access for those in dire need but also risk violating the dignity of individuals by subjecting them to judgment and embarrassment. The findings underscore that the most economically and socially marginalized individuals often face the greatest challenges accessing food banks. The paper points out that stringent eligibility criteria disproportionately affect these groups, thereby exacerbating their food insecurity and social exclusion. The analysis also reveals significant differences in the implementation of eligibility requirements and accessibility measures across provinces.

Two recommendations were developed to address the inequities that emerged. Both recommendations were developed from a human rights-based framework. The first recommendation is wider adoption of internal IDs for food banks. This approach facilitates access for unhoused individuals or those without traditional forms of identification, aligning with the core mission of food banks to support the most vulnerable. The second recommendation is a shift towards a self-declaration model for assessing eligibility to mitigate indignity and reduce barriers to access. This recommendation is rooted in the understanding that encounters at food banks significantly influence individuals' well-being and willingness to seek other help.

Beyond these recommendations, in response to pressing challenges of food insecurity and supply-side challenges in food banks, this paper presents additional

recommendations to address food insecurity more directly and enhance food bank operational efficiency. Firstly, the paper advocates for the adoption of systemic approaches that tackle food insecurity at its source by engaging in community-level initiatives and partnerships that expand beyond immediate food provision to include sustainable support services. This includes improving logistical coordination between food banks and local businesses to optimize food recovery and distribution, thereby reducing waste, and increasing food availability. Additionally, the recommendations emphasize the importance of enhancing food banks' capacities through technological innovations that streamline operations and improve data management. These changes aim to not only increase the immediate availability of food but also to ensure that food banks are more responsive to the fluctuating needs of the communities they serve, ultimately making them more effective and resilient in their fight against hunger.

The paper reiterating that by addressing the identified challenges and adopting the recommended practices, food banks can significantly improve their accessibility and the dignity of their service, thereby better fulfilling their mission to support those experiencing food insecurity in Canada. Finally, the discussion concludes with avenues of future research to pursue greater understanding, and enhanced operation, of Canada's food banking network.

Chapter 1.

Introduction

In March 2023, there were 1.9 million visits to food banks within the Food Banks Canada Network, representing a 32% increase compared to 2022 and a 78% increase compared to 2019 (Food Banks Canada, 2023, p.4). This significant rise highlights the growing crisis of household food insecurity across Canada. Food banks have provided immediate hunger relief and support for over 40 years. Despite this, food banks only reach a fraction of Canadians experiencing food insecurity. Historical and recent studies indicate that most food-insecure Canadians do not use food banks, with many opting for other coping mechanisms, such as relying on family and friends (Tarasuk et al., 2019). This discrepancy raises critical questions about the role of food banks in addressing food insecurity and underscores the need for deeper exploration into why food banks are not utilized by most food-insecure Canadians.

Individuals facing food insecurity might hesitate to utilize food banks for several reasons related to the quality and quantity of food and issues of choice and agency (McIntyre et al., 2015). While food banks are crucial in providing immediate relief to severe food deprivation, they are limited in enhancing overall food security outcomes. Over time, food banks have made efforts to improve their food's nutritional quality, and many food banks have adopted 'choice' models of food distribution to provide greater agency to clients (Rizvi et al., 2021). However, amidst these evolving practices to enhance the quality and accessibility of food bank offerings, there lies a fundamental challenge rooted in the structural operation of food banks. This challenge arises from the nature of food banks as primarily donor-driven, a dynamic that shapes both the availability and distribution of food aid. There is a critical disconnect between the supply of donations and the community's actual needs.

Food banks and other hunger relief programs are described as 'donor-driven' rather than 'needs-driven,' as the level of supply within a particular food bank is dependent upon donations of funds and food, regardless of the level of need in the community (Tarasuk & Eakin, 2003). As a result, food banks implement measures to limit access in an attempt to ensure that food aid can be provided to those who need it

the most. A food bank can attempt to manage a limited food supply in several ways. A food bank can reduce its operating hours, reduce how many people can access it, reduce how many times a person can access it, or it can impose eligibility requirements. There are three categories of eligibility requirements utilized in food banks: ID, residence, and financial requirements. Financial requirements, or needs-testing, is the most effective way for food banks to limit access. By implementing needs-testing, food banks can 'weed out' those 'less in need' to prioritize their limited resources. From these eligibility requirements, two potential harms emerge. Firstly, eligibility requirements can result in unintended harm to food bank clients by imposing unnecessary barriers that risk violating an individual's dignity. Secondly, eligibility requirements can result in barriers that unintentionally prevent economically and socially marginalized individuals from accessing food banks.

This paper explores food insecurity and food banking in Canada, focusing on the roles and challenges food banks face to provide food to all those who need it. Chapter 2 will set the stage, detailing the prevalence of food insecurity in Canada, and highlighting the contributing factors and the populations most affected. The discussion will move into an overview of food bank usage and operation and the rise of food banking in Canada. Chapter 3 delves into the implications of food bank eligibility criteria, considering how they factor into the broader food bank network, as well as their impact on food bank clients. Chapter 4 describes the research methodology, focusing on a qualitative analysis of food bank operations across Canada to assess how eligibility requirements impact service delivery. Chapter 5 presents the findings, revealing significant disparities in how food banks operated, depending on the demographic and geographic context. Chapter 6 offers recommendations to reform food bank eligibility policies and practices to enhance their effectiveness and the dignity of their clients. Chapter 7 will discuss the implications of this research, and Chapter 8 will conclude with a final discussion and avenues for future research.

Chapter 2.

Background

Food Insecurity in Canada

The B.C. Center for Disease Control (BCCDC) defines *food security* as existing when “everyone has equitable access to food that is affordable, culturally preferable, nutritious and safe; everyone has the agency to participate in, and influence food systems; and that food systems are resilient, ecologically sustainable, socially just, and honour Indigenous food sovereignty” (2022, p. 1). When these factors do not exist, individuals experience food insecurity. Food insecurity is understood to exist “when factors outside an individual’s control negatively impact their access to enough foods that promote wellbeing” such as economic, social, environmental, and geographical factors (BCCDC, 2022, p. 2).

Understanding food insecurity requires recognizing that it results from intertwined economic, social, environmental, and geographic factors. Moreover, understanding how these various factors contribute to food insecurity provides a greater understanding of why it has increased to the extent it has in Canada. Economic aspects, such as employment status, income levels, and rates of inflation, play a crucial role, with lower-income households facing greater risks due to limited funds for food (Tarasuk & Fafard St Germain, 2022). The rise in precarious employment and poor working conditions, coupled with Canada’s housing crisis, are significant contributors to the increasing rates of food insecurity across the country (Oddo et al., 2023). Precarious employment, characterized by unstable, low-wage jobs without long-term contracts or benefits, directly impacts individuals’ ability to afford necessities, including food. The lack of job security and the associated financial instability means that more Canadians have to choose between paying for housing and buying food. This situation is exacerbated by the country’s ongoing housing crisis, where skyrocketing rents and the scarcity of affordable housing options are forcing individuals and families to allocate a larger portion of their income toward housing costs, leaving less available for other essentials (Loopstra & Tarasuk, 2013; Dachner & Tarasuk, 2017).

Social elements, including family support and social status, intertwine with economic factors, impacting food accessibility. Moreover, the adequacy of Canada's social safety net, including social assistance, disability benefits and old age security, plays a critical role in influencing food insecurity in Canada. In 2022, 70% of households relying on social assistance in the prior year were food insecure, reflecting notable concerns about the programs' efficacy (Li et al., 2022). The financial stability provided through these systems directly impacts the landscape of food insecurity. For instance, introducing comprehensive poverty reduction strategies in Newfoundland and Labrador between 2007 and 2012 led to significant reductions in food insecurity, most notably among social assistance clients (Loopstra et al., 2015). Geographic location affects food security through challenges like unstable supply chains and higher costs in remote areas, while environmental issues, including climate change and natural disasters, exacerbate the situation by affecting food production and availability (Ostry et al., 2011; BC Centre for Disease Control, 2022). Together, these factors create a multifaceted challenge that leaves certain households more vulnerable to food insecurity than others and increases rates of food insecurity broadly.

Household food insecurity increased from 16% to 18% between 2021 and 2022, amounting to approximately 6.9 million Canadians (Uppal, 2023, p.1). The incidence of household food insecurity varies significantly across different provinces and territories. In 2022, Quebec saw the lowest rate of household food insecurity at 14.1%, and the highest rate was in Newfoundland and Labrador at 22.6% (Uppal, 2023, p.15). Among the provinces included in this study, Alberta had the highest rate of food insecurity in 2022 at 21.7%, followed by Saskatchewan at 19.7%, Manitoba at 18.8%, Ontario at 18.7%, and British Columbia at 16.9% (Uppal, 2023, p.15). Though food insecurity data from the territories is infrequently collected, in 2020, it was reported that 46.1% of people in Nunavut, 23.1% in the Northwest Territories, and 15.3% in Yukon lived in moderately or severely food insecure households (Caron & Plunkett-Latimer, 2022).

Canada's household food insecurity disproportionately affects specific populations and demographics, highlighting significant disparities. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these disparities across demographics, amplifying the existing vulnerabilities and straining the resources of already at-risk populations. Among these, renters, who often grapple with high housing costs and a scarcity of affordable housing, are left with limited financial flexibility for food. In 2023, the national vacancy

rate declined for the second year, down to 1.5% from 3.1% in 2021 (CMHC, 2024). This is the lowest national vacancy rate on record since tracking began in 1988. Beyond record vacancy rates, record rent increases have occurred over the past two years, leaving renters facing multiple challenges. In 2022, 28% of renter households were food-insecure, compared to 16.4% of owned homes with mortgages and 8.4% without mortgages (Li et al., 2022). Furthermore, 51.3% of the food-insecure households across the ten provinces were renters (Li et al., 2022).

Family type can play a significant role in the risk of experiencing food insecurity. Households with children face a heightened risk of food insecurity, as the financial demands of parenting exacerbate the challenges of securing adequate nutrition. Currently, 1 in 4 children in Canada live in food insecure households (Li et al., 2022). This vulnerability is particularly pronounced in single-parent families, most notably those led by women, who among family types had the highest rate of household food insecurity in 2022, 41%, as they navigate systemic barriers to adequate income and resources amidst the high costs of child-rearing (Uppal, 2023).

Indigenous communities, especially those in remote and Northern areas, confront food insecurity due to geographical isolation, high living costs, and limited access to affordable, nutritious food options. However, even among households with an Indigenous major income earner living in the provinces and off-reserve, 34% experienced food insecurity, nearly double that of non-Indigenous households (Uppal, 2023). These conditions, compounded by historical and ongoing inequities, render food security a significant concern.

Racialized groups in Canada experience elevated rates of food insecurity, a manifestation of systemic racism and socio-economic barriers that restrict access to essential resources, including employment and educational opportunities. Households with a racialized major income earner reported higher food insecurity, 23%, compared to non-racialized households, 16%. This was especially the case for Black Canadians, of whom 38% reported experiencing food insecurity. (Uppal, 2023).

Individuals with health issues or disabilities face unique challenges that contribute to higher rates of food insecurity. Medical expenses and limited earning potential place a substantial financial burden on these individuals, while physical and

accessibility barriers hinder their ability to secure food. 30% of households with a major income earner who was disabled reported being food insecure, and that figure increased when the disability was more severe or when they had multiple disabilities (Uppal, 2023).

Food Bank Use in Canada

Since 2019, year-over-year, food insecurity has increased significantly, resulting in a similar increase in food bank usage. Every year, Food Banks Canada publishes its annual report, *The Hunger Count*. Across Canada, in March 2023, there were 1,935,911 visits to food banks (Food Banks Canada, 2023a). Also published in *The Hunger Count* were survey results, where clients were asked why they accessed a food bank in the past year, and the top responses were food costs, housing costs, and low wages, or not enough hours at work (Food Banks Canada, 2023a). See Table 1 for a breakdown of the number of visits in each province included in this study and the change between 2019 and 2023. Figures from 2019 for Manitoba were not present due to the amalgamation of the Manitoba Association of Food Banks in 2020.

Table 2-1: Food Bank Usage and Change

Province	Total Visits	Total Visits Children	% Change in Total Visits 2022-2023	% Change in Total Visits 2019-2023	Food Banks Reporting	Number of Food Banks Per Capita	Average # of Visits Per Food Bank Per Capita
Ontario	681,292	202,914	40.1	100.6	499	3.15	8.64
Manitoba	57,351	20,794	30.4	--	8	0.5	489.2
Saskatchewan	55,753	22,193	24.3	49.8	42	3.45	108.9
Alberta	174,311	63,729	11.9	94.1	150	3.15	24.4
British Columbia	195,925	62,481	20	57.1	127	2.3	27.64

As stated, not all Canadians experiencing food insecurity rely on food banks. However, certain demographics are prevalent in Food Banks Canada's most recent

annual usage statistics. Certain family types were more represented among food bank clients than others. Single-parent households and single individuals had significant representation among clients (Food Banks Canada, 2023a). Children are unfortunately over-represented, making up 33% of food bank clients (Food Banks Canada, 2023a). The most common source of income for food bank clients is provincial social assistance, accounting for 42.4% of clients; however, the proportion of clients who reported employment as their primary income source increased to 17% in 2023, up from 12% in 2019 (Food Banks Canada, 2023a). The most common form of housing among food bank clients was renting. However, 5.4% of clients were unhoused or living in a temporary shelter (Food Banks Canada, 2023a). Also significantly over-represented are Indigenous people, who account for 12.2% of food bank clients despite constituting only 5% of the general population (Food Banks Canada, 2023a). Finally, more newcomers to Canada used the food bank than any year prior, with 26.6% of food bank clients arriving in Canada in the past ten years (Food Banks Canada, 2023a). Moreover, this figure is up dramatically from only 2022, when they comprised 17.2% of food bank clients, and has more than doubled since 2016, when they comprised 12.5% of clients (Food Banks Canada, 2023a).

Several Canadian population surveys conducted in the 1990s revealed that one-third or fewer households experiencing food insecurity used food banks (Rainville & Brink, 2001; Vozoris & Tarasuk, 2003). Food bank use is most prevalent among households reporting severe food insecurity, but even amongst those in this group, fewer than half reported accessing a food bank (Rainville & Brink, 2001). Moreover, a smaller study focusing on low-income households in Toronto conducted in 2012 found that among food-insecure households, only 28% had used a food bank in the past 12 months (Loopstra & Tarasuk). These findings were confirmed by Tarasuk et al., a study using the Canadian Household Panel Survey Pilot from 2008, which found that most people using food banks are moderately or severely food insecure and that most food insecure households do not report using a food bank (2019, p. 11). In the study, it was asked what common strategies the household employed to manage their food insecurity, the most common of which was asking for help from friends and family (59.1%), missing rent or mortgage payments (28%), using a food bank (20.6%), and pawning or selling possessions (19.6%) (Tarasuk et al., 2019, p. 14). Among food-insecure households, if a household only used one of the strategies, the least common single measure taken to

get support was using a food bank (Tarasuk et al., 2019, p. 15). Moreover, it was found that households who used food banks were more likely to have asked for financial help from friends and family and help from other community or welfare organizations compared to those who did not use food banks (Tarasuk et al., 2019, p. 15). As Tarasuk says, this evidence does not present a food banking system that is well accepted but remains a strategy of last resort (Tarasuk et al., 2019, p. 15).

The decision to visit a food bank is not one that food-insecure individuals make easily, with many having to overcome shame and embarrassment before access (Pineau et al., 2021, p. 114). A feeling of shame or indignity has been described as a 'hidden cost' of accessing a food bank, and for many, those feelings might be so great that an individual might not choose to use a food bank at all, regardless of their level of need (Pineau et al., 2021, p. 114). Furthermore, the feelings of judgement and internalized stigma associated with food banks and other charitable assistance can lead to detachment from society and rejection of help, leading to further social isolation (Pineau et al., 2021, p. 114). Another reason individuals might utilize other coping strategies prior to/ instead of a food bank, proposed by Tarasuk et al. (2019), is that they are potentially more effective at resolving a household's food insecurity (p. 16). More common than using a food bank was missing rent or mortgage payments, and while the ramifications of this are serious, so too is the reward. In January 2024, asking rents for all residential properties in Canada reached a record-high average of \$2196 per month, meaning that a food-insecure household would have much more to gain from skipping a payment than going to the food bank (Rentals.ca, 2024). Moreover, using these coping strategies over accessing a food bank allows households to avoid the social stigma of seeking charity (Tarasuk et al., 2019, p. 16). However, coping strategies like this cannot be utilized repeatedly, and households that have exhausted their ability to manage their financial situation using other coping strategies might have no other option but to utilize charitable assistance like a food bank (Tarasuk et al., 2019, p. 16).

Rise of Food Banking in Canada

The first food bank in Canada was established in Edmonton in 1981, initially as a temporary response to high unemployment due to the 1981-1982 recession (Riches, 2002). By 1985, the rapid expansion saw 94 food banks operational across the country, particularly in regions like Alberta, British Columbia, and Saskatchewan, where they first

emerged due to a combination of high unemployment, demand for social assistance, and provincial government spending cuts (Riches, 1986). The formal institutionalization of these efforts culminated in 1988 with the establishment of the Canadian Association of Food Banks (CAFB), which was later renamed Food Banks Canada (Riches, 2002).

This organization was pivotal in structuring the national food bank system, acting as a coordinator for food and transportation donations, and serving as a liaison between food banks, industry, and government. A critical development was the introduction of the National Food Sharing System in 1995, which centralized the distribution of food donations from major corporations and facilitated the movement of substantial quantities of food across the nation—112 million pounds of food between 2012 and 2022 (“Food Recovery and the Environment,” 2022).

By 2001, CAFB represented food banks that served 80% of food bank clients in Canada, growing to support 4,750 food banks and affiliated agencies by 2023 (“Provincial Associations,” 2023). The expansion of food banks across Canada dramatically increased from the 1980s to the 2000s. However, recent studies suggest a plateau in these numbers, indicating a potential saturation in communities’ capacity to support new food banks (Tarasuk et al., 2019).

Food Bank Operation

Food banks are non-profit, charitable organizations that collect and purchase food, redistributing it to those in need. While some food banking organizations receive some funding from different government programs, such as the Emergency Food Security Fund, the role the government plays in the food banking network is primarily supportive (Government of Canada, 2021). No food bank in Canada is operated or funded entirely by the government. Each food bank will have a catchment area they commit to serving. The catchment area’s size depends on the size of the community the food bank is serving. Food banks in urban areas might have district or neighbourhood-based catchment areas; others might provide service to an entire community or city, and others might provide for an entire community and adjacent rural communities.

Food banks provide food to clients in a ‘hamper’ format, providing unprepared cooking ingredients at home. Some food banks allow clients to select the items to fill their hamper themselves based on predetermined allotments. The frequency with which

a client may access the food bank depends significantly on the food bank's own rules, which range from once a week to only six times per year, providing anywhere from 1 day to 10 days of food. Food within the food bank hampers is commonly a mix of perishable and non-perishable goods, with fresh produce, meat, eggs and dairy products subject to availability. The population served by any one food bank and the size of its operation varies significantly across Canada. Some food banks may act exclusively as distribution centres for member agencies, such as the Daily Bread Food Bank in Toronto, managing sizeable operations. In contrast, others may run part-time out of community centres or church basements. Most fall somewhere in the middle.

Any food bank that is a member of Food Banks Canada is required to abide by The Ethical Food Banking Code. The Code mandates aiding without discrimination, ensuring dignity and respect for all service clients, and adhering to food safety and storage practices. It emphasizes protecting the privacy and confidentiality of personal information, forbids the sale of donated food, and promotes cooperation among food banks and programs. Additionally, the Code advocates for raising awareness about hunger and its causes while acknowledging that food banks should not be seen as a long-term solution to hunger, urging efforts to reduce food aid dependency ("Operational Excellence," 2023).

Dignified Food Access

Previous discussion highlights a complex landscape where, despite the severity of food insecurity, a significant portion of affected households either delay or altogether avoid utilizing food banks, resorting to various coping strategies ranging from social borrowing to financial juggling. This avoidance is rooted in more than logistical challenges; it is deeply entwined with the sense of dignity among those experiencing food insecurity. Andrlessen and van der Velde (2023) conducted a scoping review on dignity and food aid in Western high-income countries. Five dimensions of food aid important for clients' dignity were identified: access to food aid, social interactions when receiving food aid, the food, the physical space of food aid, and needs beyond food (Andrlessen & van der Velde, 2023). Particularly relevant to this study was the dimension of access to food aid, which concerned the rules and regulations of food aid organizations that affect clients' access, such as eligibility requirements and operating hours (Andrlessen & van der Velde, 2023, p. 7). On this dimension, they found that food

bank clients experienced moral judgements of their behaviour, feeling degraded and embarrassed when organizations asked to disclose their financial situation or criticized about how their budget is spent (Andrlessen & van der Velde, 2023, p. 7). In addition, they discuss eligibility assessments as violating clients' dignity by provoking an informal hierarchy of deserving or undeserving (Andrlessen & van der Velde, 2023, p. 7). Beyond these, they found that relaxed eligibility requirements, in terms of paperwork, as well as no eligibility requirements, served to protect the dignity of food aid clients and that not requiring clients to disclose financial information or other personal information reduced feelings of shame and fostered a sense of social inclusion and a feeling of trust (Andrlessen & van der Velde, 2023, p. 7). Based upon these findings, Andrlessen and van der Velde believed that a clear message was being conveyed: strict eligibility assessments by food aid organizations violate clients' dignity (Andrlessen & van der Velde, 2023, p. 7).

Eligibility Requirements

Food banks and other hunger relief organizations use three 'levels' of eligibility requirements. Formal eligibility requirements can be understood as a set that clients must meet, focusing primarily on income and household expenses, though individual organizations may use additional criteria (Salt & Nelson, 2012, p. 8). Informal eligibility requirements are present when the determination of eligibility is up to those operating the food bank, making decisions based on internal guidelines and personal discretion (Salt & Nelson, 2012, p. 9). Minor or no eligibility requirements mean that any person who requests food receives it. However, there are typically ID requirements, and some food banks may require proof of living in a particular area (Salt & Nelson, 2021). Generally, formal requirements were more common among larger organizations, while smaller organizations were likelier to use informal or minor requirements (Salt & Nelson, 2012, p. 9). Many food banks have an eligibility assessment process with formal and informal eligibility requirements.

In *Charitable Food Assistance as Symbolic Gesture: An Ethnographic Study of Food Banks in Ontario* (2003), Tarasuk & Eakin found that food bank distribution practices that limit access are rooted in managing a limited supply. These distribution practices were governed by the principle that "all those deemed eligible for assistance be given something, no matter how little" (Tarasuk & Eakin, 2003, p.1511). Twenty years

ago, when Symbolic Gesture was written, food bank usage was not nearly as high as in 2023. However, in 2003, 40% of banks had difficulty meeting demand (Canadian Association of Food Banks, p. 3). As a result, food banks would be forced to introduce new measures to manage dwindling supplies, including turning people away, closing on certain days or reducing the amount of food people received (Canadian Association of Food Banks, 2003, p. 17). These efforts were implemented so food banks could ensure that those experiencing more severe food insecurity would receive support. This principle still underlies the practice of eligibility testing in food banks today, specifically needs-testing, as food banks still need to manage limited supply, especially in the face of unprecedented food bank usage. In *A Survey of 5 Canadian Food Banks*, Tarasuk et al. (2014) found empirically that the more food banks try and base their service on need rather than supply, i.e. by serving more people, serving people more often, or scheduling around clients, the more likely that food bank would be to report difficulty meeting the demand.

Many food banks, even those with ‘minor’ eligibility requirements, require ID, typically government ID, to be presented for food to be provided (Salt & Nelson, 2012). This is a way for food banks to collect information about the individuals and households accessing their services, keep track of how frequently they use them and prevent ‘abuse’ (Salt & Nelson, 2012). However, not everyone has a readily available ID, and if a person is unhoused or precariously housed, this is significantly more likely (Sanders et al., 2020). Moreover, as Sanders et al. (2020) found, possessing ID is a gateway to accessing the social determinants of health, as access to education, healthcare, protection, housing, and participation in society is nearly impossible without ID. Both gaining and retaining ID were a challenge for many individuals. Many unhoused individuals lost or had their IDs stolen, requiring constant vigilance (Sanders et al., 2020). Though the exact figure of individuals living in Canada without ID is impossible to know, the problem is of enough significance to warrant the emergence of several ‘ID clinics’ across the country (Sanders et al., 2020). As a result, many Canadians experiencing homelessness and potentially severe food insecurity might struggle to access support at a food bank due to a lack of ID.

Food Bank Associations

Food Banks Canada comprises the ten provincial food bank associations, their food banks, and affiliated agencies (“Provincial Associations,” 2023). A food bank can only become affiliated with Food Banks Canada by joining one of these provincial associations. Provincial associations are not governing bodies that regulate how food banks do and do not run beyond requiring certain standardization guidelines (Food Banks Alberta, 2022). Food banks are required to apply for membership to provincial associations, and though the nuances of these applications vary between associations, there are some standard requirements. A food bank must be the only one operating within a community; if another food bank is a member and is operating in that area, it cannot become a member (Feed Ontario, 2022). A food bank must also be a CRA-registered charity (Food Banks BC, n.d.). Membership will also typically require an annual fee, which, in the case of Food Banks Alberta, is on a scale dependent on the number of people served monthly (Food Banks Alberta, 2022). Food banks must be willing to abide by Food Banks Canada’s Ethical Food Banking Code and any additional codes or operational standards devised by the provincial association (Food Banks BC, n.d.). From this membership, affiliated food banks get access to the large-scale food donations collected by Food Banks Canada, proportionate to the number of people they serve. There are other benefits to being a part of this network, including a voice in the Member Council, sharing of knowledge and expertise, access to grants and programs from Food Banks Canada, and the research and policy analysis done to support food security advocacy (Food Banks BC, n.d.; Feed Ontario, 2022).

Unlike the association model described above, which is found in some variations in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Ontario, Harvest Manitoba, Manitoba’s provincial association, is unique. Harvest Manitoba was founded 1985 as Winnipeg Harvest, collecting and distributing food in Winnipeg (“About Us”, 2023). In 2020, Harvest Winnipeg amalgamated with the Manitoba Association of Food Banks (MAFB), making Harvest Manitoba a centralized distributor for all member food banks in the province (“About Us,” 2023). Initially, Winnipeg Harvest served the Winnipeg area, and the MAFB focused on rural areas across the province. The amalgamation was driven by a shared objective of feeding Manitobans more effectively, leveraging Winnipeg Harvest’s expertise in collecting, sorting, packing, and distributing food, and combining it with the rural operational strengths of the MAFB. This means that rather than having anywhere from a dozen to several thousand hunger relief organizations operating

individually with support from a non-governing provincial association, those organizations now serve as the front end only, with centralized distribution and eligibility determination.

Chapter 3.

The Food Bank Landscape

This section delves into the systemic challenges facing food banks in Canada, crucial entities in alleviating immediate food insecurity yet constrained in their efficacy by various factors. Central to the discourse are two intertwined critiques—inaccessibility and indignity—rooted in operational challenges characterized by a limited supply in the face of excess demand. Such operational constraints result in failure to address the root causes of food insecurity and lead to unmet needs and stigma surrounding the use of food banks. This critique, documented in the literature, including the work of McIntyre et al. (2015), reveals how food banks are compelled to implement allocation mechanisms, like eligibility criteria, to manage scarce resources efficiently. However, these mechanisms inadvertently heighten barriers to access and contribute to the indignity felt by clients, underscoring the shameful experience associated with relying on food banks and perpetuating societal inequities. This paper posits that the operational challenges inherent to the food banking system—stemming from the dichotomy of supply and demand—are at the heart of these critiques, necessitating a critical examination of the policies and practices that restrict accessibility and exacerbate feelings of indignity.

Barriers to Access

Stigma represents a formidable obstacle to accessing food banks, deeply rooted in societal attitudes towards charity and operational protocols that may inadvertently undermine the dignity of those in need. This stigma partially arises from stringent, whether perceived or actual, eligibility criteria, which can dissuade individuals from seeking assistance. Assessing eligibility can place clients in a compromising position, exposing them to potential indignity as they navigate a system that assesses their “deservingness” (Jacobson, 2007; Andrlessen & van der Velde, 2023). Recognizing this challenge, there has been a shift towards implementing more compassionate support models to reduce stigma. Various food banks have adopted different strategies, with some eliminating needs-testing and favouring a self-declaration approach for determining eligibility. This evolution represents a growing awareness of the need to

treat clients with respect and dignity, attempting to mitigate the stigma associated with receiving charitable assistance (Andrlessen & van der Velde, 2023).

Enhancing Food Bank Access

Some food bank organizations, like the Daily Bread Food Bank in Toronto, Ontario, recognize food as a human right and, as a result, attempt to reduce barriers to access where possible (Daily Bread Food Bank, 2024). Most notably, this includes their methods of determining eligibility. The Daily Bread Food Bank is committed to “Providing low-barrier service and equitable access to nutritious food and variety at all food programs. [They] do not require documentation at food programs. [They] will facilitate access to food to anyone who needs it, regardless of circumstance, and enable food choice whenever possible” (Daily Bread Food Bank, 2024). This more inclusive approach prevents individuals from being inadvertently excluded from access, which strict eligibility requirements can result in. This challenge is particularly acute for individuals lacking ID or a stable residence, who find accessing food bank services difficult due to stringent access criteria. In response, some food banks have innovated to lower these barriers, implementing internal ID systems for known unhoused clients, referrals to external organizations for ID support, such as ID clinics, and directly assisting with obtaining necessary identification. These efforts ensure that food banks effectively reach and serve those in dire need, reflecting a shift towards more accessible and supportive services.

Operational Challenges

Since Food Banks Canada was founded, funding has historically been supplied through a combination of corporate, foundation, and individual donations of funds and food (Food Banks Canada, 2023b). However, in April 2020, due to the pandemic, the Federal Government announced the Emergency Food Security Fund, which would provide funding to Canadian food banks and other food rescue organizations (Government of Canada, 2021). Over the next year and a half, the Fund would provide \$330 million (Government of Canada, 2021). This infusion of funds, of which Food Banks Canada received over \$119 million was crucial in meeting the surge in nationwide demand (Food Banks Canada, 2021, 2022, 2023b). By 2023, food insecurity and food bank usage are still rising. However, there was no funding received by Food Banks

Canada from the Emergency Food Security Fund (Food Banks Canada, 2023b). As food bank usage and household food insecurity rates have shown no evidence of decline and are, in fact, likely increasing, ways to address these operational challenges must be considered, as it is evident that government funding cannot continue to be relied upon to manage surging demand.

Enhancing Food Bank Supply

As food banks have historically relied upon private donations, they must try to manage their supply constraints. Food banks have several avenues through which they can solicit funds and food donations to increase supply. Food banks will often partner with food producers, processors, and retailers to facilitate the donation of surplus food, a process institutionalized in Canada through the National Food Sharing System and Retail Food Program (“Food Recovery and the Environment,” 2022). Beyond these, individual food banks can also partner with local organizations and businesses to increase their donor network. Food banks also consistently utilize awareness and promotional campaigns to increase private donations. Some food banks do still use food drives to solicit food donations; however, in recent years, concerns about the quality of food being collected at these drives have pushed many to refuse private donations of food altogether, accepting only individual donations of funds and retail/corporate food donations (Hopper, 2022). This has also occurred as food banks typically can purchase the foods desired by their clients. Food banks are not without options to increase their supply. However, these programs might still not be sufficient to manage the supply-demand challenges.

While granting them the autonomy necessary for flexible and responsive operations to local demands, the decentralized structure of food banks inadvertently introduces challenges to the broader food aid network. This autonomy often results in a lack of cohesion and efficiency, with the reluctance to transparently share information exacerbating these issues. Such opacity hinders the effective coordination and optimization of resources, complicating efforts to address food insecurity comprehensively (Akkerman et al., 2023). In this context, the ability of individual food banks to increase their donations is inherently limited, particularly during times of economic downturn. Therefore, focusing solely on augmenting donations may not be a viable strategy. However, these organizations can significantly bolster their impact by

enhancing their supply chain efficiency and overall operations. A key strategy in achieving this lies in adopting technological innovations, which can streamline processes, improve data sharing, and optimize aid delivery.

For instance, the OPTIMUS model by Zero Hunger Lab optimizes food aid supply chains through advanced mathematical techniques. Its application by the World Food Programme, particularly its success in Iraq, which led to a 12% reduction in operating costs without compromising nutritional quality, highlights the model's effectiveness (Zero Hunger Lab, 2024a). Similarly, the Under the Radar program employs econometric and statistical methods to identify individuals who are eligible for food bank services but are not availing them, thus ensuring that assistance reaches those who need it most (Zero Hunger Lab, 2024b). In the Canadian context, Food Banks Canada's adoption of the Link2Feed program serves as a testament to the potential of technology in enhancing food bank operations. Utilized in 65% of their network, Link2Feed streamlines the client intake process, enhances the security of client files, and provides crucial data for usage tracking and demand forecasting (Food Banks Canada, 2022b). Expanding this program could significantly bolster the operational efficiency of food banks across Canada.

Food bank operators recognize many of these challenges, dealing with them daily, and as a result, many food banks across the country have taken steps to improve food bank operations. While this paper has discussed the food bank network as a disparate, decentralized body of autonomous operations, the Food Banks Canada network indicates a clear effort to address the challenges that emerge from such a system. Food banks will continue to attempt to increase their donations as that is necessary for their operation. However, increasing the efficiency of food bank supply chains will require more holistic, comprehensive, and technologically innovative solutions. Though, the impact of such approaches could be much greater than simply focusing on increasing donations. Improvements such as the Link2Feed assessment program or the Retail Food Program represent action to improve some of the many challenges discussed. Increased adoption of such programs and potential expansion using programs like Under the Radar to identify populations facing increased risk of food insecurity without support could enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the food bank distribution system. This could ameliorate some of food banks' challenges in meeting demand. By reducing the supply issues food banks face, more clients can access them, and those that do will likely experience less strict eligibility assessment.

However, increasing supply alone is not sufficient to address the harmful impact of this system. Efforts to enhance inclusivity and accessibility through modifications to eligibility criteria and the implementation of supportive measures can result in clients feeling more empowered and better supported, making them more likely to use the service again if needed (Andrlessen & van der Velde, 2023). Furthermore, initiatives to reduce stigma and promote dignity among clients demonstrate a more client-focused, compassionate, and evidence-based approach to food aid.

Chapter 4.

Research Methodology

The qualitative coding process systematically examined food bank eligibility requirements across Canada between October 2023 and January 2024. The selection process began with examining the ten provincial associations affiliated with the Food Banks Canada network. This was followed by a visit to each provincial association's website to identify individual food banks for inclusion in the study. It was found that food banks in Nova Scotia either lacked a dedicated website or were represented only through Facebook pages, necessitating a login for access. The New Brunswick Provincial Association's website was discovered to be inaccessible. Due to linguistic barriers encountered by the researcher, the province of Quebec was excluded from the study. Furthermore, neither Prince Edward Island nor Newfoundland had their websites listed on the Food Banks Canada website; another website could not be found upon further inquiry.

Food banks were further narrowed down by excluding those without operational websites or listed eligibility criteria from the remaining provinces of British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Ontario. The number of member food banks within a provincial association varied significantly in terms of actual food banks and food banks included in this study: 55 from Ontario, 45 from British Columbia, 25 from Alberta, and 5 from Saskatchewan. Manitoba has only one food banking organization for the entire province, so they only have one set of eligibility requirements. Food banks were only included if they had active websites with clear eligibility requirements. Food banks that only had contact information with an informal eligibility assessment were excluded from this study.

The final sample of food banks underwent an iterative qualitative coding process based on their eligibility requirements. Before coding eligibility requirements, descriptive information about each food bank was collected: the province and the size of the population centre served. Population centres in Canada are classified into three groups, with the rest of Canada being considered 'rural' (Statistics Canada, 2019). Small population centres have populations between 1,000 and 29,999; medium population

centres between 30,000 and 99,999; and large urban population centres have populations of 100,000 or more (Statistics Canada, 2019). Including this would allow for consideration of how relative need in the communities might contribute to the strictness/formality of the eligibility requirements.

The coding commenced with an open approach, allowing the data to shape the coding framework. Three primary themes were identified: ID requirements, residence requirements, and financial requirements/needs testing. This initial phase informed the development of a coding map, refined to 19 codes encompassing the identified themes. These codes facilitated the categorization of qualitative responses into binary, categorical, or numeric data, thereby streamlining the analysis of food bank eligibility criteria. Coding logic for each of the three sections of the coding framework was developed. Each section's sequences comprised a combination of conditional and non-conditional progression. Conditional codes require a specific response to a preceding code within the same section to be considered applicable for a given observation at a food bank. This mechanism allowed for a dynamic and responsive analysis, where the application of certain codes depended on the context established by previous responses. Non-conditional codes were applied universally across all observations within their respective sections, irrespective of prior responses. These codes were designed to capture essential characteristics and phenomena relevant to the study's objectives, regardless of the specific pathways through which each food bank's data was navigated. For example, in Table 4-1, C2 is conditional on a 'yes' response from C1, a non-conditional code applied to all food banks analyzed. See Tables 4-1, 4-2, and 4-3 for a full description of each code and sequencing.

As this dataset is built upon iterative qualitative coding of eligibility requirements publicly available on food banks' websites, the accuracy of the findings is not certain. The simpler the code, e.g. "Is ID Required?", the more confident the reviewer is of the accuracy of the response. However, food banks presented eligibility requirements differently and lacked consistency in language, potentially leading to miscommunication of expectations. The reviewer assumed the information on food banks' websites to be accurate but not necessarily complete. However, it is recognized that some websites were infrequently updated, especially for food banks in small population centres, meaning that eligibility requirements might have changed in the intervening period. With many food banks providing clear ID and residence requirements, but financial eligibility

determined through an in-person interview, the reviewer could not accurately reflect the scale of the utilization of needs testing. These findings alone should not be considered a perfect reflection of needs testing in food banks across Canada. However, using population data from provinces and food bank (usage) data from Food Banks Canada, the findings can be grounded in the larger context, providing greater confidence. Though the limitations of this methodology are notable, the results are still worthy of consideration.

Table 4-1: Coding Logic for ID Requirements

Code Number	Code Language	Progression	Type	Response Options
C1	Is ID Required?	Non-Conditional	Binary	Yes/No
C2	Is a Specific Type of ID Required?	Conditional on C1 (Yes)	Binary	Yes/No
C3	What Type is Required?	Conditional on C2 (Yes)	Categorical	Government (inclusive), Healthcare Card, ID w/ Residence, Photo ID, Student
C4	How Many Pieces of ID are Required?	Non-Conditional	Numeric	0,1,2
C5	Are ID Requirements the same for Minors (under 19)?	Non-Conditional	Binary	Same/Different
C6	If a specific type of ID is required for minors, what type is required?	Non-Conditional	Categorical	Birth Certificate, Government (inclusive), Healthcare Card, Healthcare Card or Birth Certificate, No ID Required, Other
C7	Is there a way to access the food bank for those without ID?	Non-Conditional	Binary	Yes/No
C8	What Options for those without ID	Conditional on C7(Yes)	Categorical	No Id Requirements, Direct Support to get ID, Referral for Support, No ID option, Other

Table 4-2: Coding Logic for Residence Requirements

Code Number	Code Language	Progression	Type	Response Options
C9	Is residence required?*	Non-Conditional	Binary	Yes/No
C10	Is specific proof of residence required?	Conditional on C9(Yes)	Binary	Yes/No
C11	What proof is required?	Conditional on C10(Yes)	Categorical	Housing Receipt, Utility Bill, Recent Mail, ID with residence, Multiple (options)
C12	Can those without fixed address access?	Non-Conditional	Binary	Yes/No
C13	What supports offered to those without fixed address?	Conditional on C12(Yes)	Categorical	No Residence Requirements, No Proof Required, No Fixed Address option, Other

*What 'residence' meant in each food bank was not the clearest. The terms 'proof of address' and 'proof of residence' were frequently used interchangeably across food banks. In some instances, it referred to proof of residence within the food bank's catchment area, whereas others were less specific, potentially requiring only provincial residence.

Table 4-3: Coding Logic for Financial Requirements

Code Number	Code Language	Progression	Type	Response Options
C14	Is needs testing conducted?	Non-Conditional	Binary	Yes/No
C15	Is income information collected?	Conditional on C14(No)	Binary	Yes/No
C16	Are specific documents required?	Conditional on C14(Yes) or C15(Yes)	Binary	Yes/No
D1	Are housing payments/ contracts required?	Conditional on C16(Yes)	Binary	Yes/No
D2	Is a bank statement required?	Conditional on C16(Yes)	Binary	Yes/No
D3	Are household expenses required?	Conditional on C16(Yes)	Binary	Yes/No

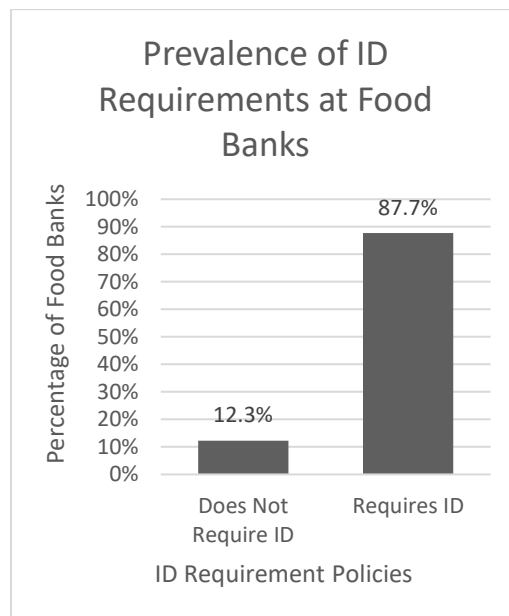
Chapter 5.

Research Results

This study sought to uncover patterns and disparities in the accessibility of food banks by creating and analyzing a dataset encompassing 132 food bank organizations. Recognizing and addressing the inequities present in this system is a prerequisite to mitigating the adverse effects experienced by its clients. This analysis is grounded in a descriptive examination of the dataset, unveiling themes that show the challenges faced by Canada's food banking network. These themes illuminate the efforts of organizations to harmonize accessibility and dignity with the implementation of necessary restrictions, a balancing act that makes clear the broader tensions within the system. This analysis will present an overview of the results of the three coding themes: ID, residence, and financial requirements.

ID Requirements

Figure 5-1: Prevalence of ID Requirements at Food Banks



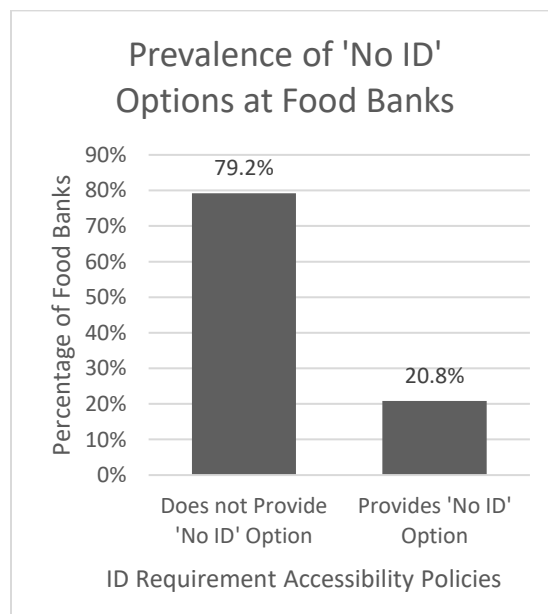
An overwhelming majority, 87.7% (114/130), of food banks mandate some form of identification from clients, leaving a small fraction of 12.3% without such a requirement. A closer look at provincial data shows Saskatchewan leading with a 100% (5/5) ID requirement rate among its food banks, followed closely by Alberta at 96%

(24/25) and Ontario at 85.2% (46/54). British Columbia had the lowest provincial ID requirement rate at 84.4% (38/45). Manitoba also requires ID for access, though it does not require a specific type.

However, 54% (62/114) of food banks did require a particular type of ID, with Alberta's food banks (79%) most frequently demanding specific ID forms. Conversely, Ontario's food banks (45%) are less likely to request specific ID types, highlighting regional disparities in ID requirement practices. The types of ID requested vary, but Photo and Government IDs emerge as the most common. ID requirements were distinct for minors in 70% of food banks, with healthcare cards being the most requested form of identification. Only 30% of food banks provided specific requirements for minors, potentially indicating increased flexibility for this demographic.

Regarding the number of IDs required, the overall trend leans heavily towards a single piece of ID, with 96% (110/114) of food banks adhering to this practice. Exceptions exist in Alberta and British Columbia, where some food banks request two pieces of ID. Of the four food banks that required two pieces of ID, two were from small population centres, one was from a medium population centre, and one was from a large urban centre.

Figure 5-2: Prevalence of 'No ID' Options at Food Banks

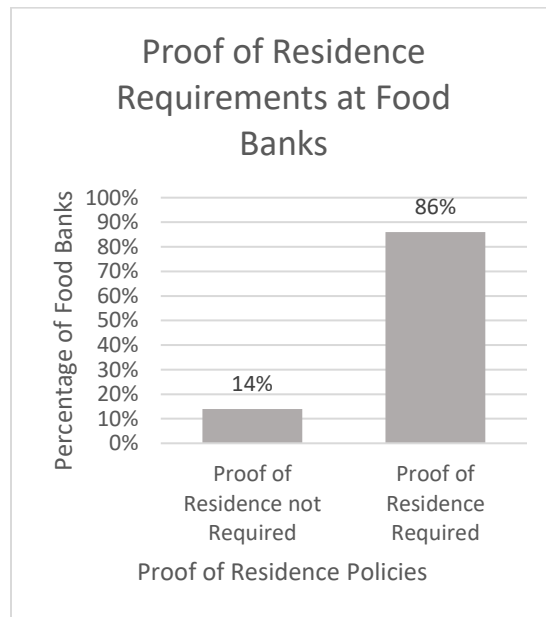


Lastly, stated options for individuals without ID were notably limited, with 79.2% of food banks lacking a “No ID” option on their websites. Manitoba allows individuals to

create an internal ID, meaning that 100% of the food banks in the province of Manitoba are accessible to those without ID. Ontario food banks lead among the other provinces, with 22.2% (12/54) offering alternatives for those without ID. Approximately 20% of British Columbia and Saskatchewan food banks had a No ID option. Alberta's food banks are the least accommodating in this regard, with only 16% offering alternatives for those without ID. This trend is more pronounced in smaller population centres, 23%, compared to 17% of medium population centres and 12% of large urban centres, aligning with theories that suggest increased flexibility in areas where need is lower.

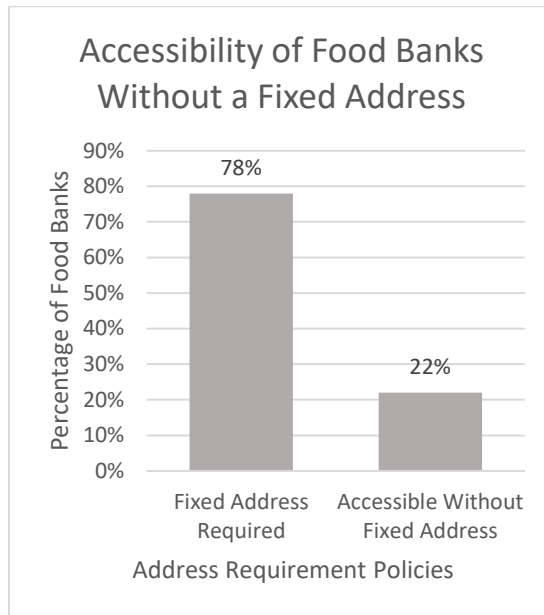
Residence Requirements

Figure 5-3: Proof of Residence Requirements at Food Banks



A significant majority (86%) of food banks overall required proof of residence, with provincial variations highlighting Alberta (88%) and Ontario (87%) as having the highest requirements. Large urban centers showed a slightly lower incidence (76%). Furthermore, when proof of residence was required, 70% of food banks remained flexible on the type, although Saskatchewan showed a higher inclination (75%) towards specificity. Manitoba also required proof of residence but did not specify a type. Multiple options of proofs were accepted by 40% of food banks overall, indicating a degree of flexibility within the constraints. Utility bills emerged as the most common required proof, followed by recent mail, housing receipts, or ID with an address.

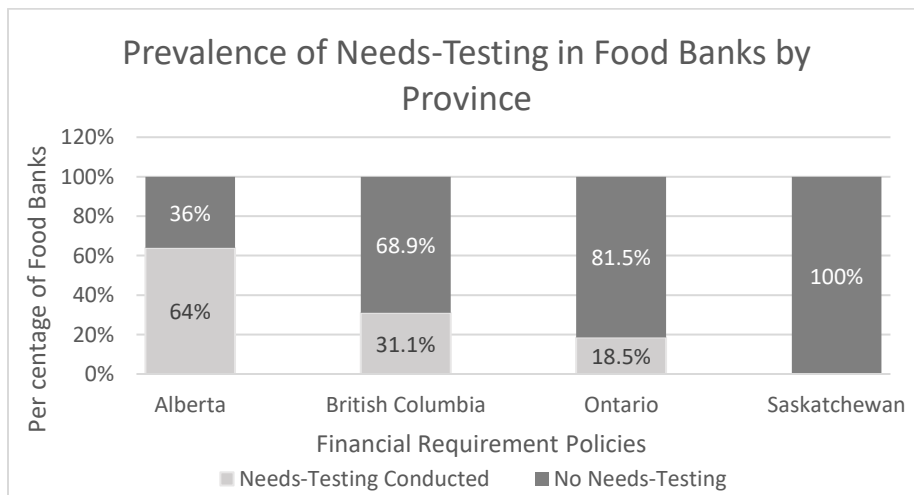
Figure 5-4: Accessibility of Food Banks for Clients Without a Fixed Address



Access for unhoused individuals was limited, with only 22% of food banks explicitly accommodating those without a fixed address. Saskatchewan food banks appeared more accessible to the unhoused (60%), contrasting with Alberta’s lower accessibility rate (16%). The methods to support unhoused individuals varied, with 50% of the accessible food banks having no residence requirements and others providing accommodations or referring to alternative resources. Notably, a designated “No Fixed Address” option was available in some food banks, including Manitoba, reflecting a structured approach to assist those in need without a permanent residence.

Financial Requirements

Figure 5-5: Prevalence of Needs-Testing in Food Banks by Province



Approximately 30.8% (40/130) of food banks engage in need testing. However, this underestimates the prevalence of needs testing in Canada's food bank network, as this study relied on food banks to state that needs testing was occurring. An unknown number of food banks operate using a self-declaration model, meaning an individual would be asked questions about their income, including the dollar amount within a recent period and the source and household expenses, without being asked to provide proof. The prevalence of this approach could not be ascertained using the selected methodology. Further research would be needed to understand greater nuance within food bank approaches. However, of the food banks that clearly state that they conduct needs testing, the frequency varies significantly across regions. Alberta stands out with 64% (16/25) of its food banks conducting need testing, marking a stark contrast to Ontario, where only 18.5% (10/54) engage in similar practices, and Saskatchewan and Manitoba, where no food banks reported conducting need testing. British Columbia fell right in between, with 31% (14/45) of food banks using this approach. Notably, medium population centres demonstrate the highest incidence of need testing, with nearly 44.8% (13/29) adopting this approach compared to 36% of large urban centres and 23.6% of small population centres, confirming a nuanced application of need assessment across different urban densities.

Despite the selective application of need testing, many food banks that opt out of this process still gather income-related information from their clients, primarily for data purposes rather than eligibility determination. This occurs in 28% (25/90) of food banks not engaged in need testing, with British Columbia leading in this practice, as 35% (11/31) of its food banks collect such data. This trend is also observed in Alberta, where 33% (3/9) of food banks gather income information. To a lesser extent, in Ontario and Saskatchewan, approximately 20% of both provinces' food banks collect income-related information. These trends highlight a broader interest in understanding the financial backgrounds of food bank clients without directly influencing eligibility.

When delving into the requirement for specific documentation to substantiate need, 27% (17/64) of food banks mandate such proof. This reflects a predominant preference for self-reported financial information among Canadian food banks, whether for need testing or data collection. Alberta's food banks are more inclined to require specific documents, with 42% (8/19) adhering to this policy, whereas Ontario and British Columbia show more leniency, with 28% (5/18) and 16% (4/25) respectively requiring

such documentation. Beyond income (source) information, other information requested by a small portion of food banks, most frequently in Alberta and Saskatchewan, were housing payments and household expenses, including utilities and childcare.

Discussion

The first key finding was the prevalence of ID and residence requirements across food banks and an absence of options for those without ID or a fixed address. Most food banks required a piece of ID and proof of residence, and the vast majority provided no options for those without. 24.6% (32/130) of food banks required ID and proof of residence, conducted needs testing, and had no options for those without ID or fixed addresses. At this point, it is important to note that just because a food bank does not state they have options for those without an address or ID does not mean they will refuse service to such an individual. Many food banks would likely offer resources to that person to help them get an ID, and other food banks would not require any proof of anything for a first visit, with an eligibility assessment occurring on subsequent visits. However, accessing the food bank is a stigmatized and stigmatizing experience, and eligibility requirements themselves can deter people who are eligible from accessing services (Pineau et al., 2021). This means that an unhoused person or a person without ID might read their local food bank's "Get Help" page and assume they will be turned away as, on paper, they cannot meet the eligibility requirements. Moreover, as 54% of food banks require a specific ID type, a lack of flexibility with ID requirements might also be a concern for unhoused individuals as they may not have the appropriate form of ID required by the food bank.

In general, flexibility around residence requirements was more common than flexibility around ID requirements. However, this varied most notably between population centres. Large urban centres were found to have eligibility requirements that were more accessible to unhoused clients than medium or small centres. However, small centres were likelier to have 'No ID' options than medium or large urban centres. These findings indicate that no fixed address options are more prevalent where they are most needed, indicating that many food banks are already attempting to make their operations more accessible for unhoused individuals. On the other hand, it would seem that 'No ID' options are more prevalent where abuse is less likely, and demand is lower.

The second key finding was how financial requirements were utilized in food banks nationwide. Though the prevalence of needs testing was likely underreported in this dataset, there remains a sizeable minority of food banks that collect income-related information to determine eligibility. Financial requirements are where provincial variation becomes the most pronounced, with the frequency of needs testing in food banks being dramatically different. Interestingly, the prevalence of needs testing across food banks in each province did not always align directly with the level of food insecurity. Regarding needs testing and level of household food insecurity, Alberta had the highest rates, with 64% of food banks conducting needs testing and a household food insecurity rate of 21.7% (Uppal, 2023). However, among the five provinces included in this study, Saskatchewan (19.7%) and Manitoba (18.8%) have the next highest rates of household food insecurity, and they do not report conducting needs testing at all (Uppal, 2023). Moreover, Ontario had the lowest rate of needs testing among food banks but a household food insecurity rate of 18.7%, nearly as high as Manitoba's. British Columbia had the lowest household food insecurity rate at 16.9% but conducted needs-testing in 31% of food banks (Uppal, 2023). These findings indicate that needs testing is not necessarily utilized based on the level of food insecurity.

It has been discussed previously that food insecurity rates and food bank usage are not synonymous with one another (Tarasuk et al., 2019). Returning to the figures in Table 2-1, we can consider how the number of food banks within each province and the number of visits to each might paint a better picture of demand facing food banks. Alberta had the same number of food banks per capita as Ontario, 3.15. However, the average number of visits per food bank per capita differed significantly, 8.64 in Ontario and 24.4 in Alberta. These figures indicate that demand facing food banks in Alberta is higher than in Ontario and that the prevalence of needs testing depends instead on the level of need food banks are trying to manage. This is validated by the figures from British Columbia, where the province has lower numbers of food banks per capita and household food insecurity rates but a higher average number of visits per capita (27.64) and more food banks conducting needs testing than Ontario (31%). Though food insecurity is lower in British Columbia, there are fewer food banks, resulting in relatively higher demand and needs testing.

This analysis revealed a complex landscape where most food banks implement ID and residence requirements. The study highlights disparities in enforcing these

requirements and the presence of need testing mechanisms, which vary significantly across provinces, potentially based on the level of demand food banks face. The analysis across provinces uncovered notable disparities, with Saskatchewan and Alberta showing the highest frequency of ID requirements while British Columbia demonstrated the lowest. Furthermore, the study identified a variance in practices based on the size of population centres, suggesting that smaller population centres might exhibit more flexibility in ID requirements but less flexibility in residence requirements than their larger urban counterparts. Need testing practices vary significantly by province, with Alberta leading in implementing these measures, contrasting sharply with Ontario's lower prevalence of need testing and Saskatchewan and Manitoba's total lack. Furthermore, the findings underscored food-insecure individuals' challenges in accessing support, particularly among the unhoused or those lacking proper identification.

Chapter 6.

Recommendations

This analysis navigated through complex layers of the food banking network, evaluating the roles and potential levers for change within this ecosystem to enhance the effectiveness and accessibility of food bank operations across Canada. Despite increased government involvement during the past several years in food bank operations, there is no evidence that this will continue. Furthermore, this investigation uncovered that food banks in provinces other than Manitoba enjoy significant autonomy, as provincial food banking associations outside Manitoba have no substantial authority over food bank operations beyond basic guidelines. Therefore, this paper positions food banks—not government or food bank associations—as the critical focus for immediate actionable recommendations.

Food banks determine their eligibility requirements based on local needs and operational capacities. This insight directs the focus towards leveraging existing practices within the food banking system that embody flexibility and inclusiveness, thus presenting a pragmatic avenue for enhancing food bank accessibility and equity. These recommendations, rooted in the qualitative analysis and informed by a comprehensive literature review, advocate for a shift towards more inclusive eligibility determinations that reflect a human rights-based approach to food assistance.

The conventional view holds that human rights approaches, particularly those advocating for the Right to Food, stand opposed to needs-based approaches typified by food banks (Riches, 2011). However, this supposed opposition is not absolute. In practice, numerous food banks and charitable hunger relief organizations increasingly embrace rights-based approaches and champion the broader adoption of the Right to Food (Daily Bread Food Bank, 2024). This shift, informed by academic research and international human rights standards, suggests that food banks can move beyond their traditional operational frameworks. By incorporating rights-based principles into their eligibility criteria, food banks can align their practices with the core principles of human dignity, health, and well-being, which are central to Right to Food frameworks (Chilton & Rose, 2009). This evolution represents a significant step toward reconciling the

immediate relief provided by food banks with the long-term goals of human rights-based food security strategies.

This paper proposes two key recommendations to reform food bank eligibility requirements: developing an Internal Food Bank ID and adopting a Self-Declaration model for eligibility assessment. These recommendations are predicated on the understanding that enhancing operational mechanisms to improve client experiences can align with the Right to Food's core principles, fostering low-barrier access, respectful interactions, and a culture of dignity and rights within food bank operations.

Defining Criteria & Measures

Due to the decision to direct recommendations to food bank operators, each recommendation's merit will not be compared to one another. This investigation did not focus on one singular food banking body that would be able to change its eligibility requirements all at once. Nor could this investigation accurately consider the impact these recommendations would have on each food bank that might adopt them. These recommendations must be adopted individually in each food bank currently lacking them to make an impact. As a result, recommendations will be presented, and their impacts on specific provinces and population centres will be considered. Food banks can evaluate whether these recommendations are appropriate for their organization based on their contexts and constraints.

Table 6-1 provides an overview of the societal impacts and objectives. Criteria and measures for each equity objective and both societal impacts were considered. In addressing the dual objectives of enhancing equity in food bank accessibility for economically and socially marginalized individuals and reducing harm from eligibility assessments, the focus centers on increasing the number of food banks with rights-based approaches to eligibility requirements. This single measure gauges the enhancement of equitable access and preserving dignity in service provision. The societal impacts of these recommendations were considered through operational efficiency and stakeholder acceptance, measured by food banks' adoption and retention of these practices. The recommendations aim to strike a balance between advancing equity and ensuring the practicality and sustainability of these changes within the

operational realities of food banks, thereby aligning with the broader goal of mitigating food insecurity effectively and compassionately.

Table 6-1: Criteria & Measures

Societal Objectives & Impacts	Criteria	Measure
Equity	Increase accessibility to food banks for people who are the most economically and socially marginalized	Number of food banks with rights-based approaches to eligibility requirements
Equity	Decrease harm and indignities that occur because of eligibility assessment	
Efficiency	Whether the recommendation threatens food banks' ability to manage supply	Number of food banks that adopt recommendations, and retain them
Stakeholder Acceptance	Acceptance by food bank operators, Provincial Associations, and clients	

Recommendation 1: Internal Food Bank ID

Human Rights Principle: Access to Food as a Basic Right

The first recommendation advocates for the implementation of Internal Food Bank ID systems, as exemplified by Harvest Manitoba and Daily Bread Food Bank. This system facilitates access for unhoused individuals or those lacking identification, broadening food bank services' inclusivity. The approach underscores the necessity of ensuring that food bank eligibility criteria do not exacerbate vulnerabilities or barriers for those facing food insecurity, aligning with the human right to food that emphasizes accessibility and non-discrimination.

When investigating food bank eligibility requirements, it was found that just over 20% of food banks had a 'No ID' or a 'No Fixed Address' option. This means that most food banks are potentially impeding individuals from access who might otherwise be eligible. The development of an internal ID system can increase accessibility for unhoused clients, which risks facing more severe levels of food insecurity and material deprivation. Moreover, providing these options can have additional benefits, such as the protection and promotion of dignity which has a domino effect on an individual's likelihood to reach out for additional support (Andrlessen & van der Velde, 2023).

Internal ID can be implemented within food banks to serve the same purposes as other identification. Several food banks provided internal IDs for unhoused community residents that were known to them. This ensures that clients experiencing more severe economic deprivation interact with food bank staff more directly and consistently, opening the door for more support and increasing connection within the community. For example, in Manitoba, unhoused clients provide a postal code of residence instead of a fixed address, allowing them to place themselves within a community despite their living situation. This allows clients to state a clear connection to a particular community, which is especially critical for clients experiencing chronic homelessness. Internal IDs also serve one of the significant purposes of current ID requirements: to prevent the 'misuse' of a food bank. Ensuring the identity of a particular client is known within the food bank ensures that individuals do not attempt to access a food bank several times and will make rules such as the prohibition on selling food received from food banks easier to enforce.

The lack of flexibility in ID and residence requirements was prevalent across selected jurisdictions. While large urban centres were more likely to provide options for those without a fixed address, they were less likely to provide 'No ID' options, indicating there are still gaps through which inequities can emerge. Internal food bank IDs would be effective tools in all provinces. However, they would likely make a larger difference in food banks serving large urban and medium population centres, where the demographic primarily targeted by this recommendation is more populous. There was a strong showing of internal ID options in no province besides Manitoba. However, as Manitoba has a single central eligibility determination model across the entire province, it is much easier to manage internal IDs. While Manitoba has excellent examples of implementing rights-based approaches to food bank eligibility requirements, this paper does not expect

the adoption of an internal ID approach in other provinces to look the same, without significant change to provincial food bank associations, the approach will be much more decentralized.

Recommendation 2: Self-Declaration

Human Rights Principle: Dignity and Non-Discrimination

The second recommendation, the Self-Declaration model, emerges from recognizing indignities associated with rigorous eligibility requirements. Most food banks do not report conducting needs testing. However, a sizeable minority does, which results in potential indignity, which can, in turn, prevent individuals from seeking support. The emphasis on dignity reveals a critical need to reorient food bank operations toward a self-declaration model, eliminating the necessity for financial proof. Food banks can mitigate the harms of stringent eligibility requirements by allowing individuals to self-declare if they require support without demanding proof of financial status. This model embodies a trust-based approach, respecting clients' dignity and fostering an environment encouraging social inclusion and support-seeking behaviors.

Jacobson (2007) illuminated how interactions between individuals, the surrounding environment, and wider societal norms profoundly affect dignity. Practices like needs testing and requiring financial documentation compromise the dignity of those seeking aid and contribute to a judgmental atmosphere, effectively sorting individuals into categories of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' based on their economic status (Pineau et al., 2021). Such practices have been shown to intensify feelings of shame, degradation, and exclusion, underscoring a departure from the principles of a rights-based approach that champions human dignity and equality (Chilton & Rose, 2009; Andrlessen & van der Velde, 2023). On the contrary, adopting less restrictive eligibility requirements, especially those that forego financial documentation, aligns with rights-based principles by upholding clients' dignity and fostering an environment of trust and social inclusion (Chilton & Rose, 2009; Andrlessen & van der Velde, 2023; Sampson et al., 2021). Rights-based approaches do not have to challenge food bank operations. Instead, they can be incorporated within them to provide better client service.

This recommendation is irrelevant to the province of Manitoba, and any food banks included in this study from Saskatchewan, as neither reported any needs testing. While British Columbia and Ontario's food banks conduct some level of needs testing,

the province with the strictest financial requirements was Alberta. Adopting a self-declaration model across a province's food banks would make the most difference in Alberta, where need is high and strict eligibility requirements are common. It is important to note that this recommendation is not being made to increase the accessibility of food banks to all, only to reduce the harm of accessing for those who are already eligible. Whether a self-declaration model would result in a food bank struggling to meet demand would depend on the specific context of the food bank.

Chapter 7.

Implications

The recommendations hold significant implications for the food bank network and Canadians experiencing food insecurity, primarily focusing on making food banks more accessible and operations more equitable. Implementing an Internal Food Bank ID system would significantly enhance the inclusivity of food banks, particularly benefiting unhoused individuals or those without standard forms of identification. Adopting a Self-Declaration model for eligibility assessment can transform the interaction between food banks and their clients, promoting a trust-based approach that respects clients' dignity and fosters an environment of social inclusion. Together, these recommendations encourage a reorientation of food bank operations towards more rights-based, inclusive practices that address immediate needs and respect and uphold the dignity of every individual seeking assistance. However, beyond recommendations regarding eligibility requirements, this paper would be remiss not to reiterate that these measures, while important, do not address the overarching supply challenges faced by food banks or the root causes of food insecurity.

Enhancing Food Bank Operations

Food banks should continue to expand their supply-side capabilities to meet growing demand effectively. This includes expanding strategic partnerships with food producers, processors, and retailers to facilitate the donation of surplus food, as institutionalized in Canada through the National Food Sharing System and Retail Food Program. Furthermore, expanding the adoption of technological innovations, such as the Link2Feed program, can enhance operational efficiency, improve data sharing, and optimize aid delivery. These efforts should be complemented by increasing transparency and coordination within the decentralized structure of the food bank network to maximize resource utilization and address operational challenges comprehensively.

Governmental Role in Addressing Root Causes

While food banks play a crucial role in alleviating immediate needs, government policies must address food insecurity's root causes, including economic instability,

insufficient social safety nets, and the housing crisis. Each year, in Food Banks Canada's *Hunger Count*, policy recommendations are made to address food insecurity directly. For two years in a row, they have called for the expansion of Canada's social safety net through the development of a minimum income floor for all people in Canada including single working adults and people living with a disability (Food Banks Canada, 2023a). Beyond this, the 2023 recommendations emphasize broadening the availability of non-monetary benefits such as childcare and housing supplements to all low-income families, not just those on social assistance. They also suggest updating Employment Insurance to serve low-income single adults better and launching the Canada Disability Benefit by early 2025, ensuring it provides support comparable to other significant benefits like Old Age Security. Additionally, the recommendations call for creating mental health initiatives focused on the impacts of low income on mental well-being (Food Banks Canada, 2023a).

Chapter 8.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the intricate dynamics of food insecurity in Canada, highlighting the pivotal role of food banks within the social safety net. Through a detailed analysis of food bank operations and eligibility requirements, it has become evident that while food banks serve as crucial support mechanisms during immediate crises, they also embody a system fraught with challenges that hinder their effectiveness in providing sustainable food security solutions. The findings underscore the necessity of reevaluating food banks' operational frameworks and eligibility criteria to make them more inclusive and aligned with the principles of equity, dignity, and human rights.

The analysis underscores the limitations inherent in the current food bank model—particularly its dependency on fluctuating donations and the donor-driven approach, which often fails to meet the actual needs of food-insecure populations. The discussion also addresses the critical issues of accessibility and the potential indignity experienced by food bank clients due to stringent eligibility criteria. By proposing the adoption of an Internal Food Bank ID and a Self-Declaration model, the analysis advocates for systemic changes that prioritize the dignity of clients and reduce barriers to access, thus enhancing the overall effectiveness of food banks. Furthermore, the analysis presented reflects on the operational aspects of food banks and engages with broader social implications, emphasizing the urgent need for a shift towards more sustainable and rights-based approaches in addressing food insecurity. The recommendations aim to mitigate the harms associated with traditional eligibility assessments and foster an environment where food assistance is administered respectfully and without discrimination.

Continued research is essential to evaluate the efficacy of these proposed changes and the persistent issue of food insecurity more broadly. Future research should regularly update and expand investigations into food bank operations, focusing particularly on the impacts of eligibility requirements on usage. Such studies are crucial for improving the food aid system's transparency, efficiency, and effectiveness. They can contribute to developing policies and practices that address immediate needs and aim to

eradicate food insecurity in the long term. Further study into the food banking network itself is also warranted. Specifically, exploration of how different food bank associations operate and how that operation impacts food banks and, by extension, clients. For as long as individuals are experiencing food insecurity and accessing food banks, efforts to improve equity, dignity, and accessibility in the food banking network must persist.

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