

HOW DO PEOPLE USE FOOD BANKS?

Understanding how people use food banks can provide insights into where the holes are in our social safety net.

In a publication released in 2018, researchers Jennifer Black and Darlene Seto use finely detailed data to describe food bank use in Vancouver. They observed 116,963 people who in aggregate made over 2.2 million visits to a food bank over the period January 1992 to June 2017. The table at right reports some findings drawn from their study.

The authors use a statistical method that groups clients into three clearly defined clusters differentiating them by the frequency of their food bank visits and the time between their first and last visit. Clients they label as “transitional” users visited food banks infrequently and over a very short period. Over 91% of clients used food banks in this way. The average client in this category made 7 visits to a food bank over a period of 62 days after which they never returned. The large number of transitional clients means that, despite their limited individual use of food banks, in aggregate they accounted for one-third of all visits.

Most people using a food bank do so rarely and only for a short period of time. However, most food provided by a food bank is provided to clients who visit frequently and over long periods of time.

At the other extreme were clients the authors label as “chronic” users who used food banks frequently and did so over a very long period. The average client in this category made nearly 25 visits to a food bank each year over a period of 13 years. While they made up only 1.5% of the food banks’ clientele, the frequency of chronic users’ visits meant they accounted for 26% of all visits. Finally, the average client labelled as an “episodic” user visited food banks only half as frequently as “chronic” clients but, at an average of 8.6 years, still did so over a long period. Episodic clients accounted for just over 40% of all food bank visits in Vancouver.

Food Bank Usage in Vancouver, 1992-2017						
	Clients (%)	Average No. of visits	Time span	Total Visits	Average visits per year	% of all visits
Transitional	106,921 (91.4%)	7	62 days	748,447	0.17	33.6%
Episodic	8,247 (7.1%)	109	8.6 years	898,923	12.6	40.4%
Chronic	1,795 (1.5%)	322	13 years	577,990	24.8	26.0%
Total	116,963			2,225,360		100%

Source: J. Black and D. Seto. Time span refers to the time between the first and last visit to a food bank by the average client in this category. Average visits per year is defined over the time span of food bank use by the average client in this category.

One reason these calculations are important is that they may provide information about the reasons why individuals and families use a food bank. This, in turn, provides information useful for understanding where holes are to be found in the social safety net.

A possible explanation for why most clients are transitional users is that their use of a food bank is a response to a rare event, either a loss of income or an unexpected expenditure. Individuals and families without savings must meet the shortfall immediately and a food bank offers a ready solution by reducing food expenditures by enough to meet other needs. If this interpretation is correct, income support programs could be improved by quickly providing a way of bridging rare and temporary income shortfalls. Were they successful, such an approach might eliminate the need to rely on a food bank for 90% of those currently using them. While the number of people served by the food bank would fall, their services would still be required by the 10% of clients who visited them frequently over long periods and account for two-thirds of all visits. For these clients there is a yawning hole in the system of supports that leaves them in perpetual need of additional income to meet basic needs.