

## Workers Hungry for Higher Wages

The record surge in visits to the country's food banks during the worst recession in decades masks the broader reality of deprivation in Canada.

Yes, it's shocking that there was an 18% jump in the number of people using food banks in March -- the largest year-over-year increase on record.

Of the 800,000 people who needed extra help to put food on the table, almost 10% used a food bank for the first time, according to survey results released by officials yesterday.

Even once-swaggering Alberta has fallen on hard times, experiencing a whopping 61% increase in food bank usage between March 2008 and March 2009, the largest jump in the country.

Such is the inevitable consequence of a downturn in a province whose economy depends on the health of the oil patch. (Nova Scotia, Ontario and Manitoba also experienced a dramatic rise in the number of food bank clients.)

Tellingly, 19% of those in households that resort to food banks each month are employed, or were until just recently. Canada's secret shame is that the extent of poverty in this wealthy country is much larger than people imagine.

Sure, only 5% of Canadian workers earn minimum wage, but 21% of them toiled for less than \$12 an hour last year. That's three million Canadians stuck in low-wage jobs. (The median hourly wage in 2008 was just under \$19 an hour.)

All across the country, people are struggling to pay the bills, feed the kids and keep a roof over their heads on a salary of less than \$25,000 a year. Try doing that month after month without dipping into the food bank. As Statistics Canada pointed out earlier this year, Canada has one of the highest proportions of low-paid workers in the industrialized world.

The U.S. has similarly high rates of low-wage workers. In contrast, a much smaller proportion of employees in many European countries are poorly paid.

Depending on where you stand on the ideological spectrum, some might argue that Canada's laissez-faire approach to the economy is preferable to the more socialist systems in Europe because our unemployment rates are lower.

Nevertheless, Canada isn't as compassionate as it pretends to be. Just ask the working poor lined up at our food banks.

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*This article is reprinted from the Toronto Sun with credit and thanks to them as well as author Mindelle Jacobs.*