



CANADA'S Invisible Food Network



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Second Harvest is Canada's largest food rescue organization and an expert in perishable food recovery. Every year we are expanding our network to include more farms, manufacturers, distributors and retailers. We work with hundreds of businesses across the food supply chain, reducing the amount of edible food going to waste, which in turn stops millions of pounds of greenhouse gases from damaging

our environment. The food Second Harvest recovers is redirected to social service organizations and schools, ensuring people have access to the good food they need to be healthy and strong. Second Harvest is a global thought leader in preventing food loss and waste, and continually innovates processes and shares methods, to create a better future for everyone.
www.SecondHarvest.ca



Value Chain Management International (VCM) has authored/co-authored several publications on food loss and waste and is a leading public and industry voice in bringing awareness to the opportunities and solutions surrounding food waste reduction, traceability, and the environment. VCM measures waste within the overall analysis of food systems to create pragmatic and sustainable solutions for businesses and

industry organizations along the value chain. VCM applies specialized value chain diagnostic tools to detect where waste occurs and to determine how to eliminate it. VCM then participates in the implementation of new practices to solve the issues and ensure successful outcomes.
www.VCM-International.com

THIS RESEARCH IS A

Canadian First

What is the research?

Following our 2019 report, The Avoidable Crisis of Food Waste, Second Harvest commissioned new research to look further into the problem of food insecurity in Canada. "Food insecurity" means a lack of regular access to enough safe, nutritious food to meet your dietary needs.¹

Our first report provided a roadmap of how edible food ends up being wasted within our food system. An estimated 24.6 billion pounds (11.2 million metric tonnes) of potentially avoidable food loss and waste occurs in Canada each year.² Much of this could be redistributed to hunger relief organizations or other social service organizations that use food in their programming.

This new report, Canada's Invisible Food Network, focuses on charitable food redistribution: the number of players involved in getting food into the hands of Canadians; how much food is being given away; the gap in resources; and the impact of COVID-19 on the disjointed food support system.

- **It's the first to identify all non-governmental organizations in Canada that are supporting people with food.**
- **It's the first to map where these food charities are located across the country.**
- **It's the first to measure how much food is being given out per year.**
- **It's the first to quantify supply vs. demand (and identify a shortfall).**
- **It is the first to measure the food types NGOs need most and least.**
- **It is the first to measure the impact of COVID-19 on the demand for food charity.**

Why we did the research

We need to **RADICALLY CHANGE** how we value people and how we understand food charity in this country.

The charitable food system as it exists today in Canada is an invisible network. It needs to be demystified, destigmatized, disrupted, and deinstitutionalized so it can better achieve its purpose of providing fresh, healthy food (that would otherwise be wasted) to Canadians who need it.

But first we had to find out where Canadians in need were accessing food.

If we understood who is helping distribute food, how many places there are, and where they're located, we'd be in a better position to get food into the hands of Canadians who need support.

We mapped out this patchwork of organizations reinforcing Canada's social safety net because people, including governments, simply don't know the scope of the problem, and it is not getting the attention it deserves. We need to see these organizations and support them if we hope to tackle the bigger inequities that require them to exist in the first place.



WHAT WE Discovered

Did you know that there are four times more food charities in Canada than there are grocery stores? For every Loblaws, Metro, Safeway or Northern store in your community there are four churches, temples, mosques, senior centres, schools, or social programs providing food for people who may not have the means to buy it.

The supermarket might be two blocks from home but for millions of Canadians, it's out of reach.³ Poverty is increasing.⁴ More and more people are being forced to choose between paying rent or buying food. Such food insecurity has been associated with poor diet quality that leads to physical and mental health problems⁵, as well as lower educational outcomes.⁶

We wanted to find these places and map them to get a sense of how many organizations make up this invisible food network supporting people across the country.

Still, we were not prepared for what our research uncovered.

There are more than 61,000 community organizations in Canada providing food in their communities.⁷

It's a shocking number, especially considering there are only 15,344 grocery stores in Canada (which includes everything from big-box retailers to your local corner grocer).⁸

What's more, if you place a dollar value on the amount of food being distributed by these organizations, the \$33 billion dollars in food they distributed in 2020⁹ would make them the *second-largest grocery store in Canada*.

It may surprise you that so many Canadians need help putting food on the table. What's even more surprising is that we are mostly unaware of the tens of thousands of charitable food organizations trying to help. Yet these groups exist in churches, social clubs, schools, or community centres across the country, hiding in plain sight.

This report shines a spotlight on what we're calling "Canada's Invisible Food Network" as part of our goal to demystify, destigmatize, and disrupt the charitable food sector in Canada to meet people where they are.

We have **4X** times more food charities than grocery stores in Canada





WHY YOU SHOULD Care

The cycle of poverty is often a downward spiral and the biggest impact is often at the kitchen table.

We know from research that 52 million people can be fed with Canada's food production — a massive surplus considering our population of 38 million people. Yet 58 percent of all food is wasted.¹⁰

This points to a serious problem in our country's food system. It shows that there are roadblocks for making food affordable, accessible and abundant on the tables of every Canadian, instead of ending up in landfill where it harms our planet.

Meanwhile we have the invisible food network trying to pick up the slack. About 3,600 of these organizations are in the food bank network in Canada.¹¹ The other 57,000-plus are invisible in the sense that providing food is not always their main purpose.

It's a red flag that Canada has four times more non-profits than grocery stores. It says that food access is a much bigger problem in our country than anyone realizes and one that is getting worse. Our data also shows that between 2019 and 2021, Canadians who suffered from hunger rose during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹²

It's hard to think about people not being able to access the food they need in Canada when our abundant food system produces and exports about \$65 billion in agricultural products and

\$28 billion in processed food and beverage products¹³, and wastes about 24.6 billion pounds (11.2 million metric tonnes) of edible food every year.¹⁴

Yet in 2019, Statistics Canada found that an estimated 1.2 million households in Canada were food insecure. About 4.4 million people — including 1.4 million children — cannot access enough food. Data from May 2020 showed that number increased dramatically during the pandemic, with one in seven Canadian families struggling to put food on the table.¹⁶

Food insecurity is worse in Northern Canada than elsewhere in the country. Indigenous peoples in the Yukon, the Northwest Territories and Nunavut are particularly at risk due to factors such as the remoteness and isolation of their communities, financial hardship and socioeconomic inequities, the legacy of colonial policies, climate change, and environmental dispossession and contamination.¹⁷

Now that we've mapped the invisible food system, what remains is to enact policies at all levels of government to support the work being done. We need investments in distribution infrastructure but also economic shifts like more affordable rental housing, accessible, affordable childcare, and improved social benefits. Only then will the hidden side of "Canada's second largest grocery retailer" fully come into the light. We need a plan and fast.

WHAT IS THE Main Issue?

A massive, invisible patchwork system supports vulnerable Canadians.

Grocery stores are not accessible to people who can't afford to buy food. So, where do you go when your grocery list is long, but funds are short?

The invisible food network.

Second Harvest's investigation from 2021 shows that about 6.7 million Canadians rely on community food organizations. This represents almost 20 percent of our population, roughly equivalent to the population of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta combined.¹⁸

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Almost 20% of Canadians, equivalent to the population of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta combined, get food from charitable organizations.

We went in-depth to identify as many organizations as possible that use food or food vouchers as part of their programming. After analyzing the data, we found 61,310 organizations that provide food; this number includes 15,207 schools.¹⁹

Beyond the obvious food banks, soup kitchens and homeless shelters, people are getting food from schools that offer breakfast and lunch; churches, temples, mosques and other faith-based organizations that provide meals or food vouchers; community centre day programs for young people, adults, and people with disabilities that provide

beverages and snacks; and drop-in centres and mental health programs where people can access fresh groceries.

The invisible food network also includes recreational and social clubs; libraries; job support programs; outreach organizations for new immigrants; low income and housing support programs; clinical services providing residential treatment and addiction rehabilitation; justice and corrections facilities; and medical services facilities among the 61,000-plus organizations working to make a difference.

It is tragic that so many Canadians are depending on an invisible and unrecognized food network that is disconnected and struggling to meet the enormous demand.

What exists is a patchwork system that lacks coordination, infrastructure, and resources. Most of the organizations depend on volunteer labour, which is challenging to manage and may not possess the required expertise. The unconnected nature of the system adds stress to those doing good work, often leaving them dispirited and lacking hope.

Over a third of charitable food organizations also act as distributors of food to other groups within their communities. This happens when an organization has more food than it needs and reaches out to another group to offer the excess. These are mostly informal relationships between organizations, and transportation of the food is part of the ad hoc arrangements they make with each other.

Without established, consistent relationships and transportation logistics, the invisible food network is more prone to stress and unnecessary gaps.



FOOD QUALITY IS ANOTHER Issue

Junk food is more available than fresh produce in the invisible food network.

People need good quality food for proper nutrition and health. The invisible food network has the biggest shortfall in providing fresh produce, eggs, meat, fish, and milk to clients. These items are perishable and cannot be distributed without proper refrigeration and cold-chain delivery infrastructure for safe storage and handling.

Refrigeration technologies are widely used in the food industry but due to the cost factor, they're mostly out of reach for organizations in the invisible food network. Not-for-profits and charities simply don't have the budget to afford handling massive volumes of perishable goods. They also lack the broad coordination and logistics of a national organization that could help them manage the infrastructure.

We were disappointed to discover that confectionary and soda pop are the most available items in the invisible food network – yet they are the worst for our health. There's also an abundance of grain-based products like

bread and pasta. We've heard from community organizations across the country that the bread they receive exceeds their needs on an almost daily basis. While shelf stable and easier to transport than meat, eggs or dairy products, these items have far less nutritional value.

This underscores our 2019 report's findings where, due to ineffective redistribution capabilities, food shortages are often localized. Organizations located in one region may receive one category of donation that exceeds their need (e.g., hothouse tomatoes in southwestern Ontario), while organizations located in a nearby region face shortages of those same foods.

Again, we see the invisible food network challenged by lack of coordination and poor transportation logistics. People need healthy food and Canada has it in abundance. Simple. Getting it into peoples' hands is the complicated part.

This is especially true in Northern Canada, where long distances and dangerous roads inflate transportation costs.



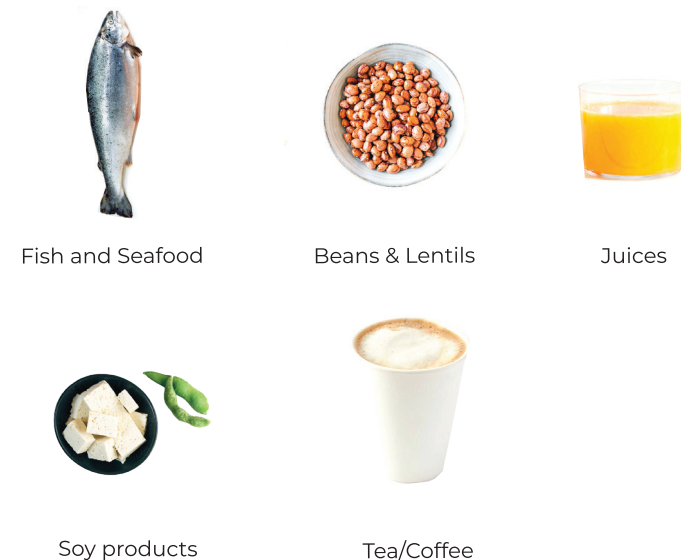
The Invisible Food Network: Most Needed Food Categories



MOST NEEDED



NEEDED



LEAST NEEDED



THE Covid-19 FACTOR

The number of Canadians who experience hunger has been increasing for decades. As a result of the pandemic, that rate increased at an even faster pace than before.

During the first year of the pandemic, the total amount of food provided to people through local community food organizations increased by 61 percent, to just under 10 billion pounds. This was driven by the fact that the number of people using these services increased by an astounding 72 percent.²⁰

When the pandemic struck, Canada's unemployment numbers spiked. One million people lost their jobs in less than three months and estimates show another million became underemployed.²¹ Layoffs and small business closures in such huge numbers meant that former breadwinners had little money available for grocery shopping, making entire families suddenly food insecure.

The pandemic had a huge impact on the invisible food system, too. Community food organizations were forced to shift their operations due to lockdowns and the limited availability of volunteers. Some organizations had to halt their programs, which put added pressure on those still serving

the community. Others redesigned their programs to work within COVID-19 restrictions. Kitchens that could no longer serve clients on their premises began providing take-out hampers and boxed meals. Many churches or faith groups switched to distributing food vouchers instead of food. Some of the schools that provide breakfast programs to students began providing food for families.

With growing demand and curtailed programming due to the pandemic, about five percent of organizations that previously did not distribute food started food programs and within weeks, they were providing food to hundreds of people.

While this increased demand is significant, it could have been much worse without public and private donors stepping up to help. Many organizations feel they would have experienced even more demand without people having access to emergency funding. And the generosity of Canadian individuals and businesses during a time of crisis meant the typical gap between total supply and demand in the invisible food network reduced by 49 percent.

Table 4-4: Increase in National Distribution of Foods and Beverages (lbs): 2019 vs. 2020/2021 ²²

	2019 (lbs)	2021 (lbs)	Increased volume %
Total lbs foods and beverages	6,190,152,699	9,989,983,955	61%



Table 3-3: The number of people served at charitable food organizations ²³

Total persons pre-COVID-19

5,373,820

Average persons pre-COVID-19

160

Total persons during COVID-19

6,663,430

Average persons during COVID-19

275

72%

Increase in people served



THE Covid-19

FACTOR CON'T...

Demand for food donations increased during the pandemic, but the national shortfall actually decreased from 319 million pounds of food to 162 million pounds due to the generosity of Canadians.

A smaller shortfall is still a shortfall. This is unacceptable in a country of food abundance like Canada. The invisible food network may distribute enough food to be the country's second-largest grocery store chain, but it's still not enough to meet the demand.

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When COVID hit, many of the organizations helping the vulnerable closed down, but thanks to... (SFRP and the Second Harvest Food Rescue App) ²⁴ we were able to remain open all year long, providing extra food to our community members who were left with few places to go to for help.

- Living Word Temple, Winnipeg



Table 4-5: National Shortfall Experience by Community Food Organizations: 2019 vs. 2020/21 ²⁵

	Estimated annual food usage (billion lbs)	Food value (\$ billion)	Estimated national shortfall (million lbs)	Value of shortfall (\$ million)	% Estimated shortfall of food distributed
Pre-COVID-19 estimate	6.190	\$19.6	319	\$1,003	5.2%
Post-COVID-19 estimate	9.990	\$31.4	162	\$508.4	1.6%
Change increase (decrease)	3.8	\$11.8	(157)	(\$494.6)	-

THE INVISIBLE FOOD NETWORK IS A Canada-Wide PROBLEM

We've broken the national shortfall down into regional numbers to map the differences between the number of grocery stores by province²⁶ versus the number of charitable organizations giving out food, as well as quantifying the gap in supply versus demand. When we measure people served by the invisible food network, we look at the number of organizations serving food, the number of people they are serving, and the food supply versus the demand, measured in pounds of food.



Atlantic Region

There are four times more charitable food organizations in the Atlantic than grocery stores. Over 200,000 people need to access food through these charities.

Number of grocery stores:

1,286

Number of charitable food organizations:

5,271

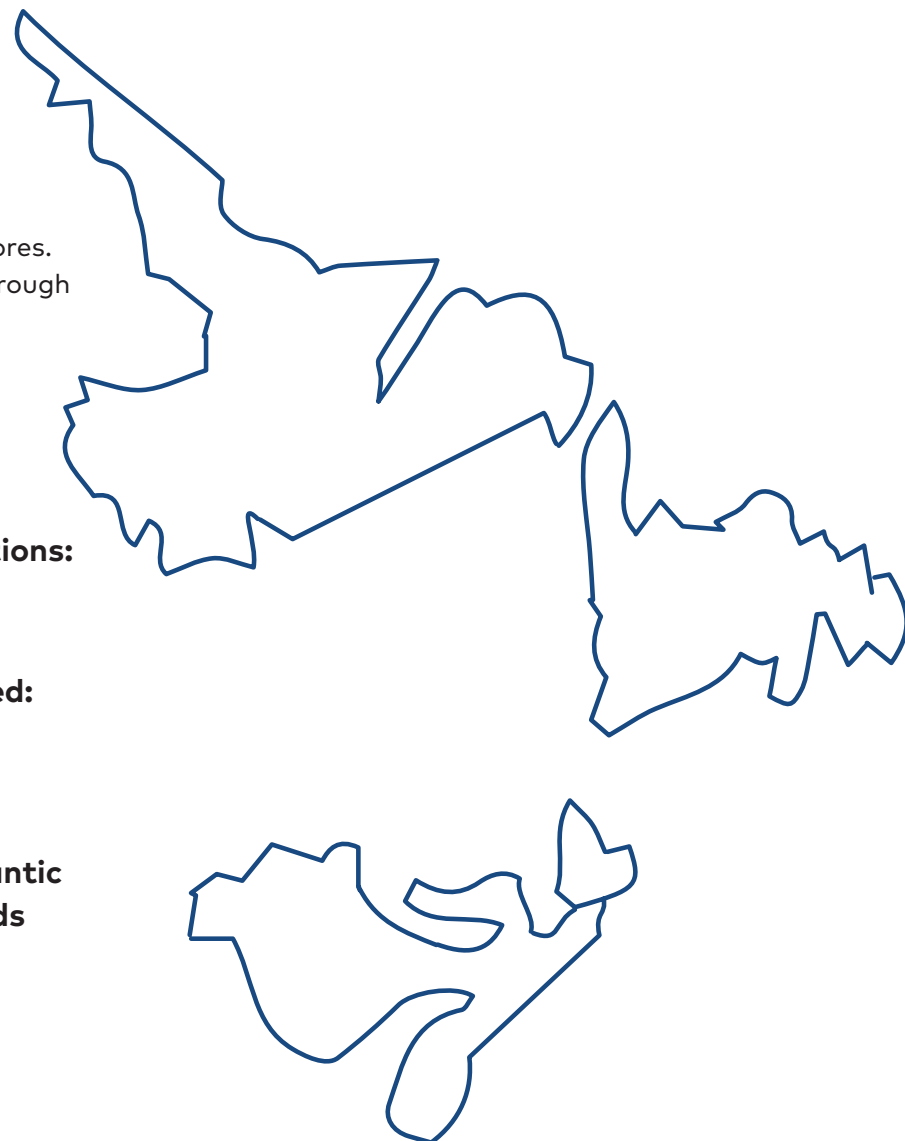
Estimated number of people served:

203,328

Food supply vs. food demand in Atlantic Canada, unmet demands in pounds

2019: 13,989,194

2021: 5,330,547



Quebec

Quebec experienced the highest increase in overall demand (89%) following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. Almost 100 percent more people needed to access charitable food organizations during the pandemic. Over 2 million citizens had inadequate access to good food.

Number of grocery stores:

4,217

Number of charitable food organizations:

12,009

Estimated number of people served:

2,005,285

Food supply vs. food demand in Quebec, unmet demands in pounds

2019: 37,615,530

2021: 80,287,729



Ontario

While Ontario had a reduced shortfall vs 2019, there were still almost 2 million people who needed support with accessing food in 2021.

Number of grocery stores:

5,368

Number of charitable food organizations:

21,502

Estimated number of people served:

1,878,225

Food supply vs. food demand in Ontario,
unmet demands in pounds

2019: 121,870,016

2021: 75,224,815



Prairies

Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta — the third-largest region in Canada has a population equivalent to the number of Canadians using the invisible food network.

Number of grocery stores:

2,713

Number of charitable food organizations:

12,718

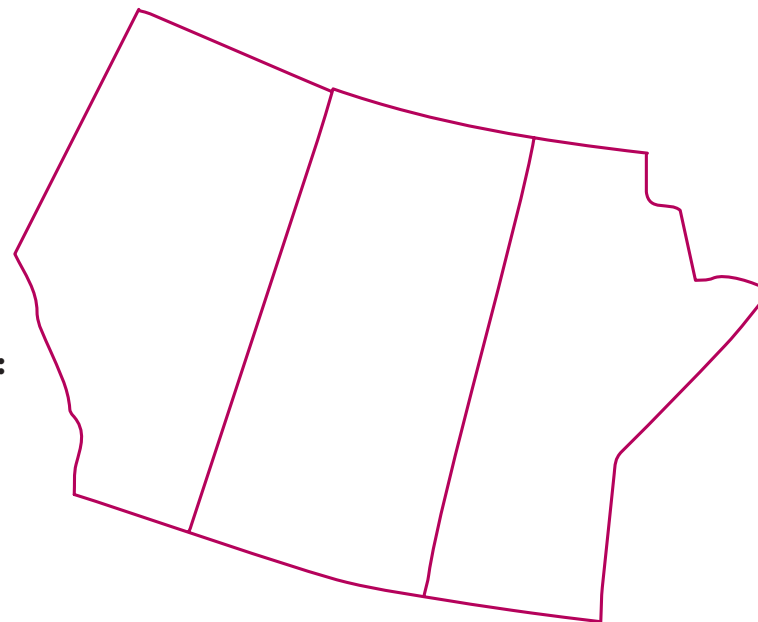
Estimated number of people served:

1,627,448

Food supply vs. food demand in the Prairies

2019: 64,428,463

2021: 20,383,816



British Columbia

In BC, there are more than 6 times more food charities than grocery stores.

Number of grocery stores:

1,647

Number of charitable food organizations:

9,299

Estimated number of people served:

1,089,510

Food supply vs. food demand in British Columbia

2019: 75,426,603

2021: 28,649,078



Territories Region

Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut had the second-largest increase in transactions during the pandemic. Before the pandemic, it had the greatest shortfall in supply. Unfortunately, we have insufficient data to estimate a post-COVID-19 scenario for this region. But community food organizations in the territories have told us they experienced a considerable increase in demand while also benefiting from an increased level of support.

Number of grocery stores:

113

Number of charitable food organizations:

511

Estimated number of people served:

65,283

Food supply vs. food demand in the Territories

2019: 998,344

2021: No data



WE HAVE A MAP. NOW WE NEED A Plan

Food access in a landscape disrupted by the pandemic is an open problem.

Private donors and government funding helped Canada's invisible food network cope with increased demand during the pandemic. Unfortunately, a supply shortfall still exists. Organizations are concerned about sustainability as demand for food continues to grow.

The ongoing reality is that reduced financial support from private and public sources will limit their ability to distribute enough food and beverages to people in need.

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This need will not go away after COVID, and programs like this (Surplus Food Rescue Program and the Second Harvest Food Rescue App)²⁷ are needed to continue to create relationships between those with access to excess food to those organizations that can use it to address food insecurity.

- MetroWorks Employment Association, Halifax.

And while 61,000 community food organizations – four times more than the number of grocery stores in Canada – should be more than enough help to solve the problem, people in vulnerable situations often cannot access the food they need.

Too much edible food is being wasted when people are going hungry. The system needs to change so we can fill the hunger gap while diverting edible food from the landfill, where it produces greenhouse gases. Cutting down on food waste is essential for the future of our planet as we grapple with climate change events that get worse every year.

Now that we've mapped the invisible food system, what remains is to enact policies at all levels of government to support the work being done. We need investments in distribution infrastructure but we also need economic policies to create affordable rental housing; accessible, affordable childcare; and improved social benefits. Only then will the hidden side of "Canada's second-largest grocery retailer" fully come into the light.





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¹³ Food Export USA; <https://www.foodexport.org/export-insights/market-and-country-profiles/canada-country-profile>

¹⁵ Statistics Canada. 2019. Household food security by living arrangement; Statistics Canada; Government of Canada. Accessible from: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1310038501>

^{24, 27} The Surplus Food Rescue Program (SFRP) is a \$50 million federal government initiative to help manage and redirect existing food surpluses to organizations addressing food insecurity and ensure that these surplus products are not wasted (<https://www.canada.ca/en/agriculture-agri-food/news/2020/08/surplus-food-rescueprogram.html>); the Second Harvest Food Rescue App connects businesses with surplus food directly to local non-profit organizations that support people in the community. The website and mobile app are available in every province and territory in Canada by downloading the mobile app from the App Store or Google Play (<https://secondharvest.ca/foodrescue/app/>)

²⁶ Statistics Canada, December 2020: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=3310030401>



Our Values:

Community

We improve food access to ensure everyone, regardless of their economic situation, can have good food

Environment

We consistently strive to have a positive impact on the environment

Integrity

Open, honest and transparent, we hold ourselves to the highest ethical standards

Collaboration

We believe we can accomplish more when we work together

No Waste. No Hunger.



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