

FOOD BANK USE AND HOMELESSNESS

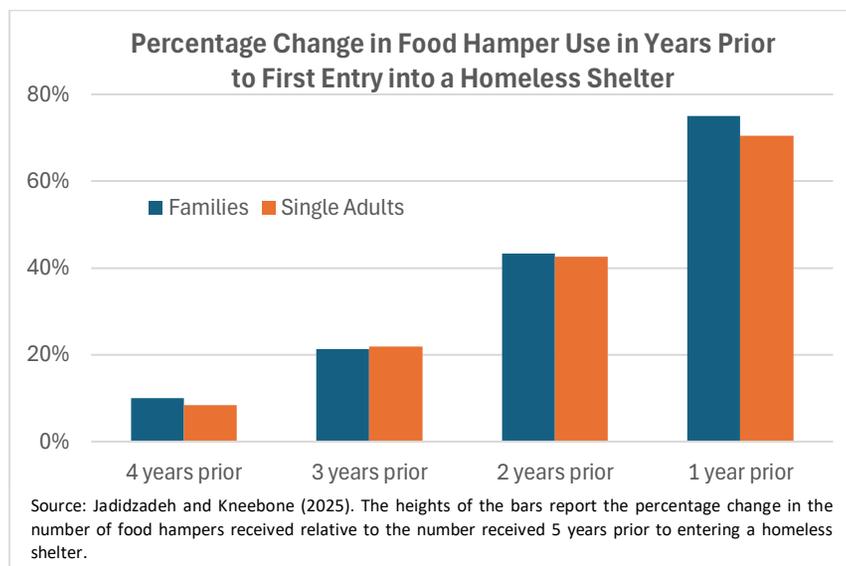
Problems such as homelessness, food insecurity, and ill health are rarely experienced in isolation from one another. Understanding how they are related is helpful for designing appropriate public policy responses.

In a [recent report](#), the Social Policy research team at the School of Public Policy worked closely with the Calgary Food Bank and the Calgary Homeless Foundation to “link” two large data sets describing how individuals and families use the food bank and whether they end up having to stay in one of the city’s emergency homeless shelters. The aim of that report was to investigate how food bank use changes in the years prior to an individual or family entering a homeless shelter for the first time.

Observing how people use food banks today may prove an effective way of predicting who will be homeless in the future.

The figure at right summarizes a key result from that report. It shows that individuals and families who eventually lose their housing and are forced to make use of an emergency shelter steadily increase their reliance on the food bank during the four years prior to entering shelter. We interpret this finding as indicating that for many people homelessness is not a sudden catastrophe, but one that is the result of a steady worsening of one’s circumstances, a worsening that individuals and families attempt to mitigate by increasing their use of a food bank to conserve income to pay rent. For the average individual and family, reliance on the food bank was 70 per cent higher in the year immediately prior to falling into homelessness than it was five years earlier.

In addition to that key result, the report found 59 per cent of families and 31 per cent of single people using homeless shelters also rely on the Calgary Food Bank between shelter stays. Prior to entering a homeless shelter for the first time, over 60 per cent of individuals and families made use of the food bank. All of these calculations make clear



these two problems associated with poverty – the threat of homelessness and the experience with food insecurity – are closely linked. When we observe individuals and families making use of a food bank, we should be aware we are observing people who are also at heightened risk of homelessness. We believe food bank use is an underappreciated predictor of future homelessness.

These results suggest there is potential for using data available from food banks to predict when an individual or family is about to lose their struggle to maintain housing. If this is shown to be possible, well-timed public policy interventions may be able to prevent homelessness from occurring. This is research we continue to pursue. This potential speaks more broadly to the value of examining the constraints and choices of individuals and families experiencing poverty not in isolation, but rather as a whole, taking into consideration how choices to resolve one issue impacts the choices required to resolve another.