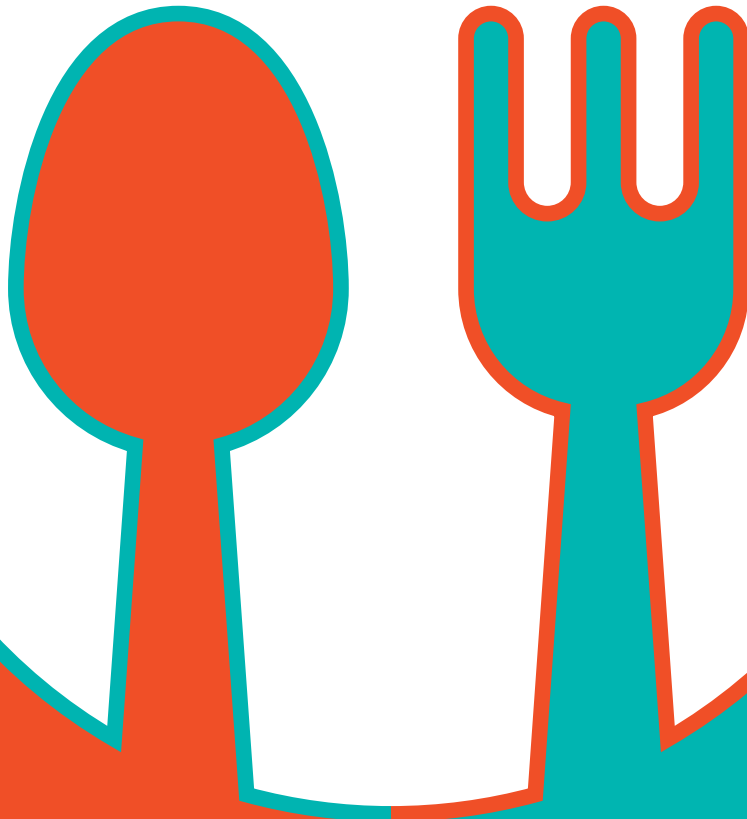


NO ONE SHOULD GO TO BED HUNGRY

Food insecurity among youth with government care experience in Metro Vancouver

COLLECTIVE
IMPACT

TRRUST



We gratefully acknowledge that TRRUST's work takes place on the ancestral, traditional, and unceded territory of the Coast Salish Peoples, including the territories of the xwməθkwəy̓ əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səliwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.

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Executive Summary

Young people transitioning out of government care in Vancouver are facing alarming levels of food insecurity. This report, grounded in the voices and experiences of over 140 youth, reveals a crisis that is both immediate and systemic.

Across this engagement, 94% of youth with care experience reported moderate to severe food insecurity, with the majority describing regular experiences of hunger. Many are skipping meals, reducing portion sizes, or going entire days without eating—not by choice, but because they cannot afford food. In comparison, the *2023 Canadian Income Survey* found that 24.4% of Canadians aged 18–24 lived in a food insecure household (Statistics Canada, 2025). As a peer researcher reflected, *“It is crazy that youth need three sources of income just to get by and still not be able to eat all of the time.”*

This reality is not the result of individual decisions—it is the outcome of structural barriers. Youth identified insufficient income as the primary driver of food insecurity, compounded by high housing costs and limited family support. Even with existing supports, incomes fall far short of the cost of living, leaving young people in a constant state of trade-offs between food, rent, and other essentials.

Food insecurity is further intensified by barriers to accessing existing supports. Mental health challenges, transportation difficulties, and restrictive eligibility criteria prevent many youths from consistently accessing food programs. Some reported traveling up to 90 minutes one way to reach services where they feel safe and supported. Others avoid programs altogether due to anxiety, stigma, or uncertainty about eligibility. Despite these barriers, youth are actively seeking out food through pantries, meal programs, and community organizations. These spaces provide more than food—they offer connection, safety, and dignity. However, the current system relies heavily on charitable responses that, while essential in the short term, fail to address the root causes of food insecurity.

The consequences are profound. Food insecurity is closely linked to poorer physical and mental health outcomes, including higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression (PROOF, 2025). Youth who consistently had enough to eat reported significantly greater hope for their future and overall well-being. The contrast is stark—and preventable.

This report underscores a critical truth: **food insecurity is not simply about access to food; it reflects deep and persistent inequities.** Addressing it requires more than expanding food programs. It demands coordinated action to ensure adequate income, stable housing, accessible services, and systems that support—not fail—young people transitioning out of care.

“Going to bed hungry should never be normal.”

Urgent action is required. Without meaningful intervention, youth leaving care will continue to face disproportionate hardship, with long-term consequences for their health, stability, and future opportunities. Ensuring that all young people can access food with dignity is not optional—it is a basic responsibility.

Our recommendations for immediate action include making food programs easier to get to and access, improving food quality with fresh and culturally appropriate options, and creating welcoming, stigma-free spaces where people can connect. Longer term, there needs to be a push for policies that address poverty with increased income supports so youth can afford food.

94%

of youth with care experience reported moderate to severe food insecurity.

Background

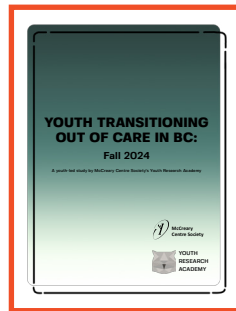
TRRUST Collective Impact

TRRUST (Transition in Resources, Relationships, and Understanding Support Together) is a Collective Impact initiative that began in 2014. TRRUST is comprised of over 80 organizations and 400 members, including non-profits, government agencies, and young people with lived experience in government care. The goal of TRRUST is to achieve systems-wide improvements in outcomes for youth transitioning out of care in Vancouver, British Columbia. The initiative is supported by the Collective Young Leaders (CYL) and the Strategic Advisory. McCreary Centre Society acts as the backbone agency that provides coordination and organization support. For more information about TRRUST, please email Nasra Mire, Project Manager, at trrustmanager@mcs.bc.ca.

Youth Transitioning Out of Care

While most young people welcome their 19th birthday, those in government care are more likely to be anxious about it as it represents the day they transition out of care. For many, this is the beginning of an uncertain journey to independence. For some, it's a highway with many challenges—poverty, homelessness, and precarity.

Economically, supports have improved, and they still fall short of the cost of living. The Ministry for Children and Family Development (MCFD) now provides unconditional income support, through the Strengthening Abilities and Journeys of Empowerment program (SAJE, which replaced the Agreements with Young Adults AYA) from the age of 19 to 20: \$1,250 per month. The SAJE benefit can continue through conditional income support while, for example, attending school or treatment, until their 27th birthday. Other income supports include income assistance for singles at \$1,060 and disability assistance (support for persons with disabilities or PWD) at \$1,483 per month. A young person transitioning to full time employment at minimum wage will net \$2,295 per month. Today's economic pressures, including high youth unemployment and a well documented shortage of safe and affordable housing, makes it hard to imagine anyone thriving.



Since 2019, McCreary's Youth Research Academy (YRA) has conducted the Youth Transitioning Out of Care (YTOC) study, a longitudinal study of the experiences of young people in BC during their transition out of government care. The YRA produces a yearly update of the results of that longitudinal study, including a report highlighting the experiences of young people in Metro Vancouver. Here are a few highlights of the **2025 report** for young people who had transitioned out of care:

73% experienced challenges to graduating high school.

66% reported having a mental health condition.

67% experienced challenges to finding housing.



The full report sheds light on the complexities and barriers faced by this vulnerable population following their transition out of care. The YRA also released **Supports in the spotlight II**, a report highlighting the experiences and helpful supports for youth aged 12–19 with care experience who completed the 2023 BC Adolescent Health Survey (BC AHS).

Food Security Passion Project Group

In January 2025, TRRUST brought together a group of service providers to discuss food security. Research from national, provincial and local perspectives highlighted food insecurity as a growing concern among young people. As a first step, the group produced a *Food Calendar* of youth-friendly free meals and pantries in the area. Next, it was agreed that a project to engage young people facing food insecurity would help understand the local context, supports, and gaps related to food security.

The **purpose** of the food security engagement project is to better understand the needs of Metro Vancouver young people with lived experience in care. This report will inform the implementation of collective solutions to address food insecurity for young people with care experience.

2025 FOOD CALENDAR		COLLECTIVE IMPACT TRRUST				
Meals & Groceries	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday Sunday
Breakfast	Directions 8:30am-10am Cereal Covenant House Drop-in Centre 9am-noon	Directions 8:30am-10am Hot breakfast Covenant House Drop-in Centre 9am-noon	Directions 8:30am-10am Cereal Covenant House Drop-in Centre 9am-noon	Directions 8:30am-10am Hot breakfast Covenant House Drop-in Centre 9am-noon	Directions 8:30am-10am Cereal Covenant House Drop-in Centre 9am-noon	Directions 8:30am-10am Cereal Covenant House Drop-in Centre 9am-noon
Lunch	Covenant House Drop-in Centre noon-3pm Soup & pastries	Covenant House Drop-in Centre noon-3pm Soup & pastries	Covenant House Drop-in Centre noon-3pm Soup & pastries Aunt Leah's Groceries & meal (for clients in housing, employment & life skills programs)		Covenant House Drop-in Centre noon-3pm Soup & pastries	Covenant House Drop-in Centre noon-3pm Soup & pastries
Dinner	Covenant House Drop-in Centre 3:30pm-5:30pm BYRC @5pm (ages 13-24) Directions 8pm-9pm	Covenant House Drop-in Centre 3:30pm-5:30pm BYRC @5pm (ages 13-24) Directions 8pm-9pm	BGC Drop-in 2pm-7pm Covenant House Drop-in Centre 3:30pm-5:30pm BYRC @5pm (ages 13-24) Directions 8pm-9pm	Covenant House Drop-in Centre 3:30pm-5:30pm BYRC @5pm (ages 13-24) South Vancouver Youth Centre 5pm-7pm (ages 12-18) Directions 8pm-9pm	BGC Drop-in 2pm-7pm Covenant House Drop-in Centre 3:30pm-5:30pm BYRC @5pm (ages 13-24) Directions 8pm-9pm	Covenant House Drop-in Centre 3:30pm-5:30pm Directions 8pm-9pm

2025 Food Calendar prepared by the TRRUST Food Security Passion Project.

Thank you to the Food Security Passion Project group for their guidance and participation throughout the engagement project:

Ailbhe Hilliard, Brooke Annable
Covenant House Vancouver

Brandon Muir
Broadway Youth Resource Centre

Dakota Shelby, Erin England
BGC South Coast

David Savory
Aunt Leah's

Ian Marcuse
Vancouver Neighbourhood Food Networks

Kiran Toor, Harpreet Jagdeo
Directions, Family Services of Greater Vancouver

Motl Pavlich, Kennedy Richards
Milieu Children and Family Services

Evelyn McGowan
McCreary Centre Society

Peers:

Cera, Fialka
TRRUST Collective Young Leaders (CYL)

Ashley, Danielle
CYL, in-person engagement team

Cheylene
CYL, survey analysis and report

Food Insecurity Context

“Food insecurity is a measure of material deprivation. It is most prevalent among households with inadequate, insecure incomes and limited, if any, financial assets, or access to credit. This means that population groups who face systemic racism and other forms of discrimination that present barriers to the accumulation of wealth are disproportionately affected by food insecurity.” (PROOF, 2022).

In simple terms, food insecurity is a lack of regular access to sufficient, affordable and culturally desired nutritious food. Young people with lived experience in government care are more likely to experience food insecurity than their peers without care experience.

Food insecurity is climbing rapidly. From the *2023 Canadian Income Survey*, Statistics Canada found that 25.5% of people lived in a food insecure household (Statistics Canada, 2025). The same survey shows 24.4% of Canadians aged 18-24 lived in food insecure households—close to 1 in 4. *The National Food Banks’ Hunger Count report* recognized more heartbreaking milestones; March 2025 saw over two million visits to food banks in Canada, an increase of almost double since 2019 and the highest number of visits in history. The report shows that 16.1% of those accessing food banks across the country are aged 16 to 30.

From their *Supports in the Spotlight II* report, the YRA present a snapshot of food security prior to leaving care. Although the majority of youth (70%) never went to bed hungry because there was not enough money for food at home, 30% lived in food-insecure households.

Youth who experienced greater food security were more likely to report positive health. For example, youth who never went to bed hungry, did not cut the size of their meals, and ate dinner every day were more likely than those who reported being food insecure to rate their overall health and quality of life positively and to feel hopeful about their future. They were also less likely to report stress, anxiety, depression, and despair.

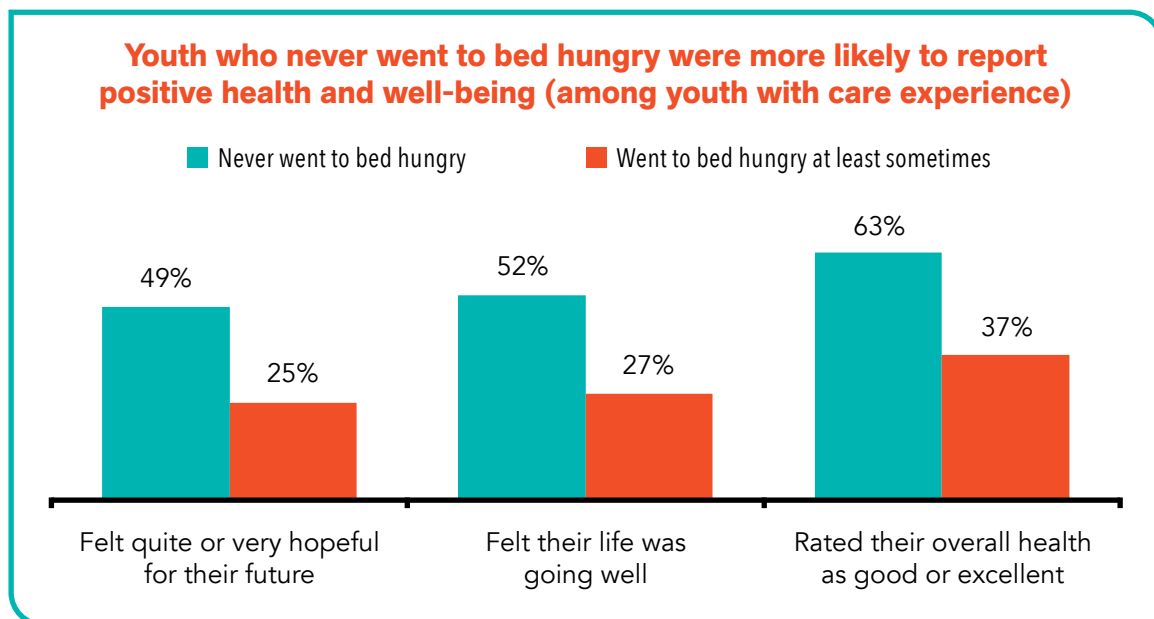


Figure 1.
Note: ‘Went to bed hungry’ refers to going to bed hungry because there was not enough money for food at home.
Source: BC Adolescent Health Survey.

From the YRA's 2025 report sharing updated YTOC results from Metro Vancouver, two thirds of youth (67%) went to bed hungry at least sometimes because there was not enough money for food, including 16% who had this experience often or always. Youth who experienced food security were more likely to report positive health and well-being. Figure 2 shows that those who never went to bed hungry were more likely to feel hopeful for their future (54% vs. 30% who went to bed hungry at least sometimes).

Although the majority (70%) of youth in care in BC never went to bed hungry in 2023, there is a significantly higher rate of food insecurity after they transition out of care. As indicated by the YTOC 2025 Metro Vancouver report, 67% of young people went to bed hungry at least sometimes. The 2023 Canadian Income Survey identified 24.4% of Canadians aged 18-24 lived in food insecure households—close to 1 in 4.

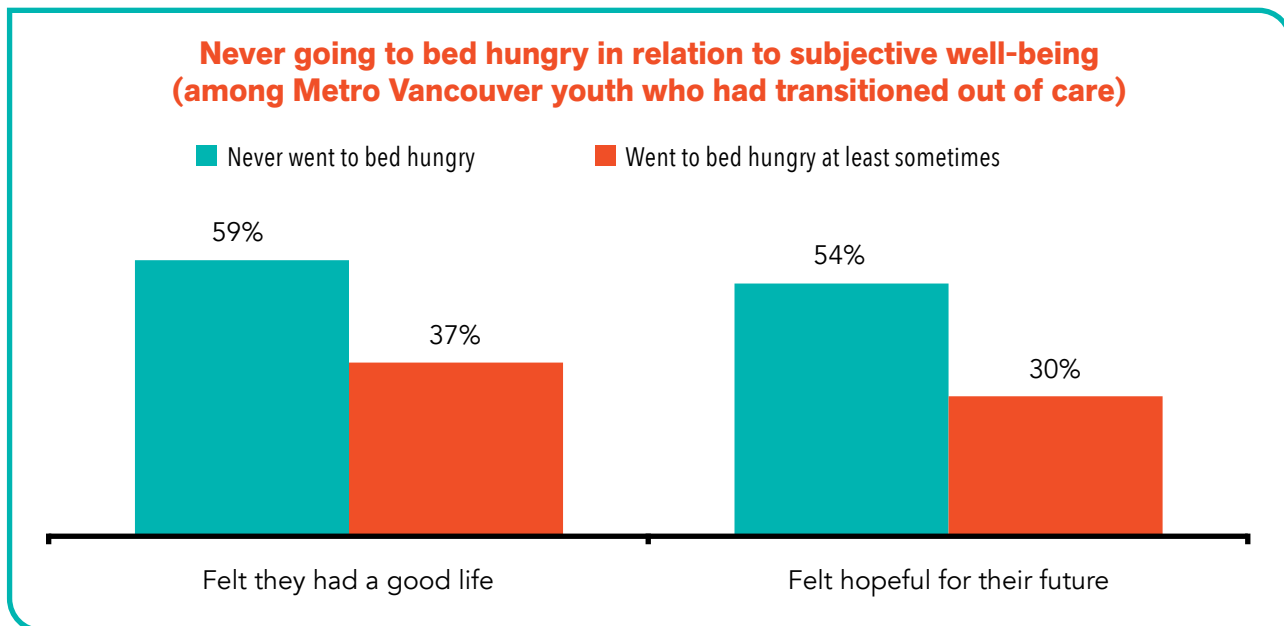


Figure 2.
Note: 'Going to bed hungry' refers to going to bed hungry because there was not enough money for food.
Source: Youth Transitioning Out of Care Study (YTOC).

24.4%
of Canadians aged 18-24 lived in food insecure households.

Food as a Human Right— Beyond Charity

Access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food is a fundamental human right that ensures everyone has enough food to maintain a healthy and active life. This right is theoretically upheld in Canada, under the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) which we ratified in 1976. Under this agreement, our governments have a primary duty to respect, protect, and fulfill the right to food by creating the enabling conditions that allow people to feed themselves and their families with choice and dignity. Sadly, Canada has failed to protect and guarantee the right to food as seen in alarming and growing rates of food insecurity in this country. Continued reliance on the charity and food banking system is a failed social policy.

Emergency solutions do not address the root causes of food insecurity. *Right To Food*, a national food security movement, advocates:

“we know that food insecurity is a symptom of deeper injustice. Real solutions begin not with charity, but with systemic change: livable incomes, Indigenous food sovereignty, and dignity for all.”

The Global Solidarity Alliance dedicates a website to *food as a right and not charity* and argue that:

“charity shifts attention away from structural issues and leads to superficial fixes which are neither dignified nor long-term. Charity provides short-term relief, but in the longer term, people experiencing food insecurity continue to risk facing the chronic and multiple realities of poverty because underlying causes remain unaddressed.”

The right to food matters.



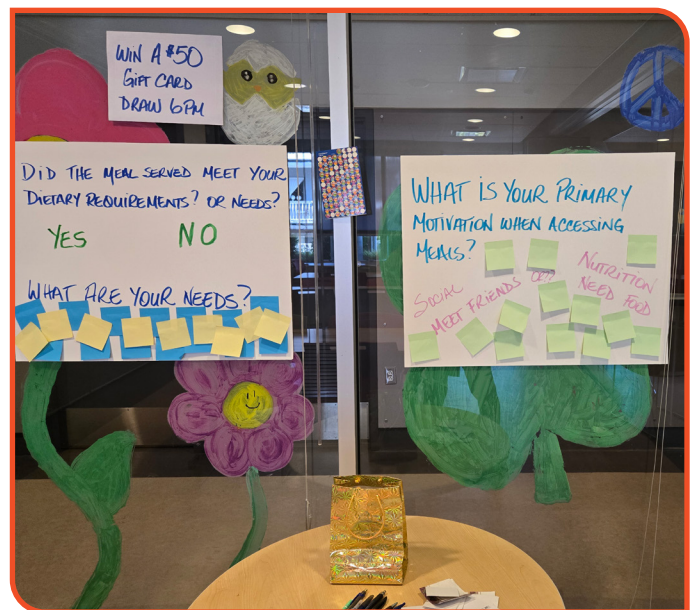
Methodology

The project had two streams of engagement: in-person sessions at organizations that provided free meal and pantry programs, as well as an online survey. The questions for this project were developed by the working group, which included youth with lived experience. Most of the in-person engagements were peer-led and were facilitated from July through October 2025, ending with a final feedback loop at TRRUST's Connect2Thrive event.

The in-person engagement sessions used a combination of methods, including posters with questions which participants could respond to using sticky notes and, where feasible, semi-structured conversations. Some locations were better suited to informal conversations. At locations where pantries and dining areas were separate two team members attended. Host organizations were given the opportunity to select the questions and received a summary of responses.

Questions for the in-person engagements consisted of a combination of the following:

- 🎯 Why do you access food at certain places? Why not other places?
- 🎯 Do you have any interest in learning how to cook? What are your cooking skills? What stops you from cooking?
- 🎯 What challenges do you experience in terms of accessing food?
- 🎯 How much time per week do you spend accessing food? How far do you travel to access food?
- 🎯 Did your meal meet your dietary requirements? Do you feel you have a choice in your food selection?
- 🎯 What would you gladly say yes to in a pantry?
- 🎯 What is your primary motivation for attending—nutrition and/or social?



Picture taken at an in-person engagement.

The in-person engagements did not include a survey to gather demographic information. It appeared that the majority of young people who attended were between the ages of 19 and 24, which corresponds to the ages of youth eligible to access services at these organizations. The online survey, administered separately from the in-person engagements, included 19 questions about youth's experiences with food insecurity, cooking, competencies, and other sensitive topics that youth may be less likely to share in group settings. The survey also captured demographic data. A copy is in [Appendix A](#).

Engagement Results

One hundred (100) young people participated in ten in-person sessions and 45 completed the survey. This report shares both the survey findings and young people's responses from the in-person sessions.

Demographics

The in-person engagements did not collect demographic information. Most young people in attendance were between the ages of 19 and 24. The majority had experienced government care or homelessness.

The survey captured the following demographic information:

- 📍 Survey respondents ranged in age from 17 to over 24 (47% were 24 or older).
- 📍 Just over half (53%) identified as female, 29% as male, and 18% as non-binary or another gender identity.
- 📍 Most (80%) had been in care or an alternative to care, including 34% who were currently in care.

Sources of Income

All participants in the in-person engagements identified financial barriers and a lack of money as their top challenge to accessing food.

Among youth with care experience who completed a survey, most reported SAJE/AYA as their current source of income. Other sources of income included employment, PWD and a bursary/scholarship, with comparable rates among youth ever and never in care. While most youth with care experience had one source of income, around 3 in 10 (29%) had multiple income sources. This included 17% who had three sources of income.

"It is crazy that youth need 3 sources of income just to get by and still not be able to eat all of the time. These services that offer income for people are useful, but obviously not enough to fully support youth with care experience."

—Comment from peer researcher

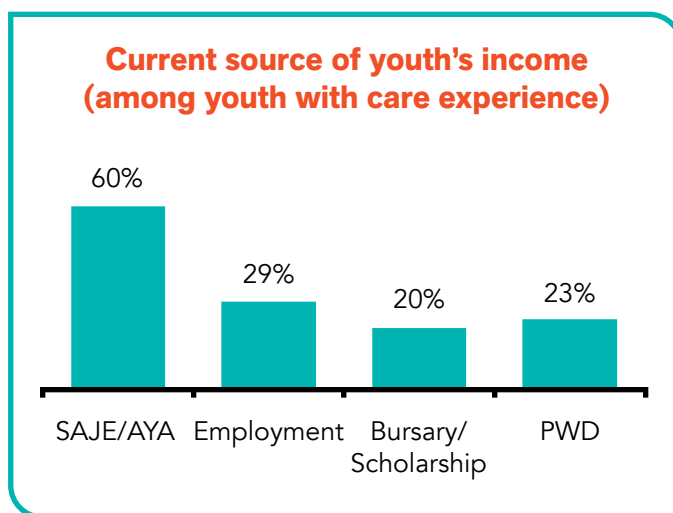


Figure 3.
Note: Youth could mark all that apply.
Note: A small minority of youth reported receiving Income Assistance and Employment Insurance, but percentages were not reportable.

Experiences of Food Insecurity

The survey asked respondents to identify where they saw themselves on the food security/insecurity scale using the following information:

- 📍 **Food Secure:** I never run out of money for food and eat mostly what I want.
- 📍 **Marginal Food Insecurity:** I worry about running out of food and/or limit my food selection due to a lack of money for food.
- 📍 **Moderate Food Insecurity:** I compromise quality and quantity of food due to a lack of money for food.
- 📍 **Severe Food Insecurity:** I miss meals, reduce food intake, and at the most extreme go day(s) without food.

Youth with care experience who completed the survey most commonly reported moderate food insecurity.

Rates of food insecurity for youth with care experience

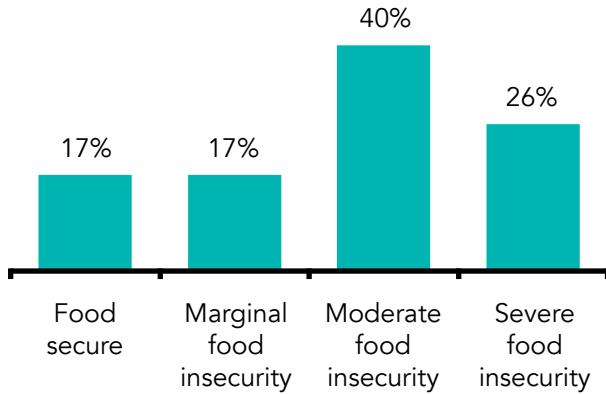


Figure 4.

Respondents were also asked how often they went to bed hungry and how often they skipped meals. Most youth with care experience (83%) went to bed hungry at least sometimes because there was not enough money for food, including 31% who went to bed hungry often. Also, around two thirds (66%) skipped meals on a regular basis because they did not have enough money for food.

Youth with care experience were much less likely than those never in care to experience food security (never running out of money for food and eating what they wanted) and were more likely to go to bed hungry and to skip meals because there was not enough money for food.

At in-person events, the majority identified food security (to eat) as their primary motivation to accessing food services.

84%

of youth with care experience reported some level of food insecurity.

Food security

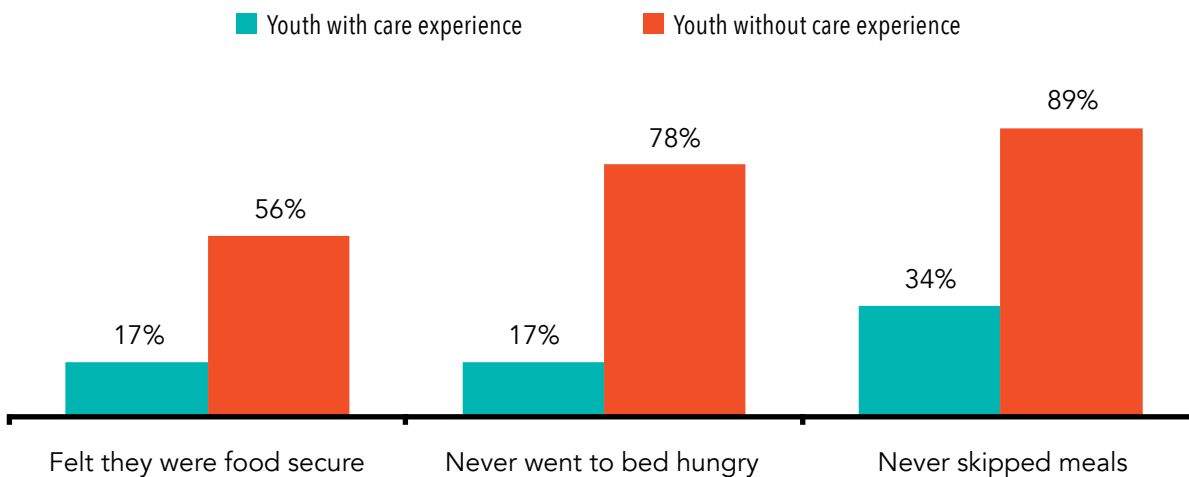


Figure 5.

Access to Food Pantries and Free Meals

FOOD PANTRIES

Around two thirds of youth with care experience (66%) who completed the survey accessed free food pantries.

Youth also listed accessing free food pantries at Covenant House, BGC, Directions, their neighbourhood pantry, Food for Families, Indigenous Early Years program, Kiwassa Neighborhood House, UGM/UGM Women & Families Centres.

Where youth in and from care most commonly accessed free food pantries

BYRC	26%
Food bank	26%
Aunt Leah's	17%
Other	17%
Did not access food pantries/food banks	34%

Reasons why youth reported accessing food from certain programs included being able to go more than once a week, there was parking available, good accessibility, easy to transit there, close to their home, they felt safe and comfortable there, it was cheaper, they were familiar with the staff/location, they knew the food was good, they could access emergency food hampers, and because they did not have enough money for food. The survey respondents who did not access food pantries cited reasons such as living too far away, their income being too high, and that food did not accommodate their dietary needs.

All in-person engagement participants accessed food pantries. When asked why they accessed food pantries at certain places, their responses mirror those mentioned by survey respondents. Convenience and ease of access were the most commonly reported reason, followed by a wide variety/selection, being able to access programs weekly, and familiarity with the staff and location. Several participants noted that it really comes down to community + people + food.

In-person engagement participants were asked to identify the item they would most want to see in pantries. Snacks and energy drinks were the most common choices. These were followed by unprocessed protein, dairy products, fruit and vegetables, oils and spices, canned goods such as heartier soups and chilis, and culturally appropriate foods. Most food banks provide mainly dry goods. Young people from care have access to a few pantries and food banks that provide refrigerated and frozen items, as well as fresh fruit and vegetables.

FREE MEAL SERVICES

Just over half of survey respondents with care experience (51%) reported accessing free meal services, and most commonly from BYRC (26%). Youth also accessed free meals from Aunt Leah's, BGC, Covenant House, and Directions (percentages were too small to report).

Reasons youth listed for getting their meals from certain places included the location being close to their home, they were accommodating of allergies, there was a good selection, their friends went there, it was easy to transit there, there were events and activities to do before/after, health resources were available there, they liked the food options available, convenient times (e.g., open 24/7), out of convenience so they did not need to cook for one person, and they were easily accessible.

All in-person engagement participants accessed meal services at Aunt Leah's, BGC, BYRC, Covenant House, and Milieu Children and Family Services. Most did not attend Directions' meals because these are hosted late in the evening. When asked why they accessed services at certain places, their responses were similar to the survey. Most accessed meal services that were convenient (close to home, location, accessible), offered bigger portions and variety, had mealtimes that worked with their schedule, and because they had friends that attended. More than half accessed meal services for the social aspect and to connect with their friends. The majority travelled for up to 40 minutes each way to access services where they felt safe, connected and supported by staff.

Autonomy Over Food Choices

Around half of youth in and from care (51%) who completed a survey reported that they chose what they had eaten that day. Also, 29% felt like they had some choice/autonomy when accessing food pantries or free meals (vs. 89% of youth never in care).

During the first in-person session, most young people avoided the poster because they didn't understand the meaning of the word 'autonomy'. After that, the word 'autonomy' was replaced with 'choice' for in-person sessions. Most participants felt they not only had choice in their food, but they also liked the meals and food that were provided. Many expressed gratitude for the food and staff. Dietary restrictions were the main concern of the few who did not like the food.

For the benefit of the session host organizations, several in-person events asked participants about favourite meals. There were few repeated options affirming that food choice is personal.

Time Spent Accessing Food

Youth who completed the survey most commonly spent 1 hour to less than 2 hours a week (including transit time) accessing food. Rates were similar among youth with care experience and those never in care.

Most in-person attendees spent at least 40 minutes accessing food every day. Some travelled upwards of 90 minutes one-way to access pantries once a week.

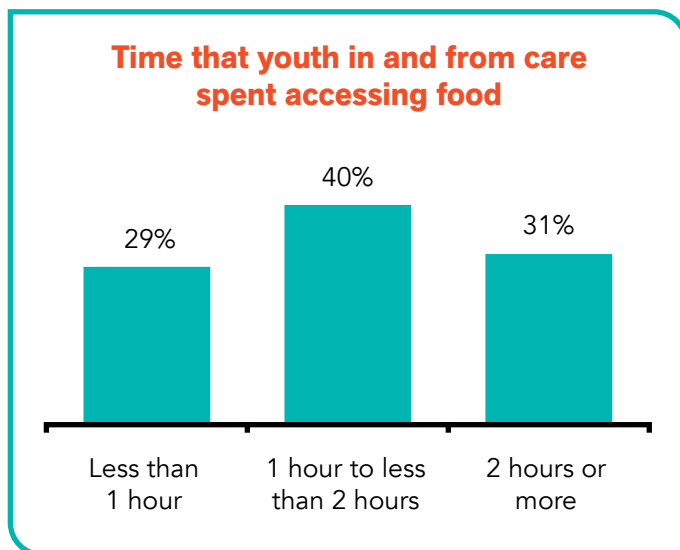


Figure 6.

Barriers to Accessing Free Food/Meals

Among youth in and from care who completed a survey, the majority (89%) experienced at least one barrier to accessing free food/meals, including 31% who experienced three or more barriers. Common barriers included mental health and transportation-related challenges.

Barriers that youth in and from care experienced to accessing free food pantries and free meals

Mental health	43%
Transportation	40%
Cannot get there	31%
Times don't work for them	29%
Don't know where to go	24%
They do not believe they qualify	23%
Not eligible	14%

Note: youth could mark all that applied.

Youth with care experience were more likely than those never in care to identify mental health as a barrier to accessing free food pantries and free meals (43% vs. 0%) and were less likely to report that nothing got in their way to accessing these services (11% vs. 56%). Among youth with care experience, those aged 24 or older were more likely than younger youth to report not being eligible for food programs (25% vs. 0%) and being unable to get there.

In-person participants were asked to identify the challenges they experienced in terms of accessing food. The most commonly reported challenges were:

- 🍷 Finances—financial situation
- 🍷 Transportation
- 🍷 Accessibility—location and time of access
- 🍷 Availability and dietary restrictions
- 🍷 Age restrictions
- 🍷 Mental health

Many youth-serving organizations only serve youth up to age 24. For young adults aged 25 and above who are dependent on these programs, it represents the loss of multiple services, including free food and access to transportation, as well as an abrupt transition to adult services. Considering the mental health challenges and barriers to accessing needed resources faced by young people with care experience, more support may be needed to ease the anxiety related to this transition.

The following questions were posed in the survey only and were not incorporated in the in-person engagements, as many of the young people in attendance were precariously housed, staying in shelters, or experiencing homelessness.

Barriers to Cooking

Common barriers to cooking meals included being on a strict budget and not being able to afford ingredients. Barriers to cooking were similar among youth with care experience and those never in care.

Reasons youth with care experience did not cook	
On a strict budget	46%
Couldn't afford the ingredients	40%
Couldn't afford spices	26%
Don't have pots and pans	23%
Did not know what to do with the food they got from a food pantry/food bank	20%
Only had a hotplate	17%
Don't have a stove	14%
Don't have cooking utensils	14%
Don't know how to cook	11%
Other	14%
Nothing stops them from cooking	26%

Note: youth could mark all that applied.

Fourteen percent of youth with care experience indicated a barrier not among the list of options. These included not having the energy to cook meals for themselves; mental health challenges; physical disabilities such as chronic pain; failing or insufficient equipment; and food they received from a food bank being freezer-burned, rotten, or comprised of items they would not use. Among youth with care experience, those aged 24 or older were more likely than younger youth to report being unable to cook because they did not have a stove (25% vs. 0%) and because they did not have pots and pans.

Cooking Skills

When asked about their cooking skills, 11% of youth with care experience reported that they could boil water or prepare basic foods (e.g., warm up soup, make noodles). Another 23% felt they could prepare various meals (e.g., scrambled eggs, grilled cheese, meats); 43% liked to cook and explore different ways of cooking; and 17% described themselves as an adventurous and good cook who cooked meals for themselves and others on a regular basis. The remaining few youths added comments that they were unable to cook at all, including due to not having access to food. Findings were similar among youth never in care and those with care experience.

Food Sources in the Past Week

Youth with care experience reported eating food from various sources in the past week. These included foods they made or cooked themselves (89% vs. 44% of those never in care), food they bought from a grocery store (71%), food they ordered online/take out (66%), from a food pantry or food bank (57%), and from a free meal service (54%).

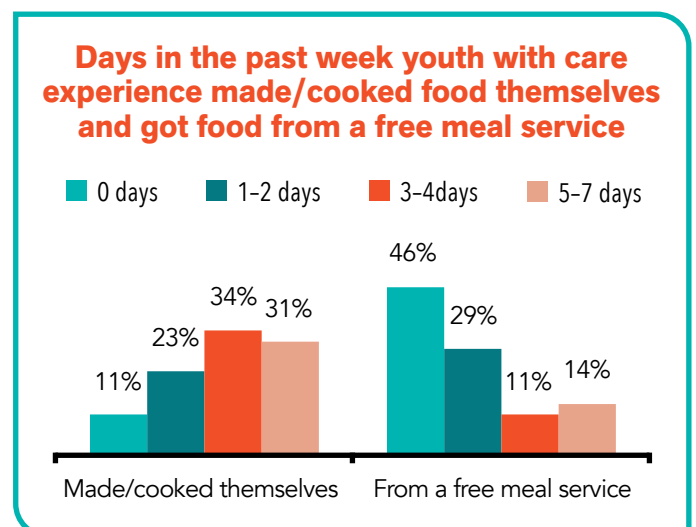


Figure 7.

Summary

This engagement project provides evidence of the deeply entrenched inequities that shape the experiences of youth transitioning out of care in the Vancouver area. Nationally, there are close to 1 in 4 Canadians aged 18 to 24 who lived in food-insecure households (Statistics Canada, 2025). Across this engagement project, 94% of youth with care experience faced moderate to severe food insecurity, that's more than 3 in 4.

Food insecurity is not only a marker of insufficient access to nutritious food but also a predictor of chronic physical and mental health challenges, including anxiety, depression, and increased healthcare needs. Youth with care experience identified mental health as their **TOP** barrier to accessing free meals and pantries. Research completed by McCreary's YRA has demonstrated that youth with care experience are more likely than those not in care to experience challenges related to mental health and physical health. The additional stress created by food insecurity only adds to the inequities.

Recommendations

Level 1—Immediate Supports

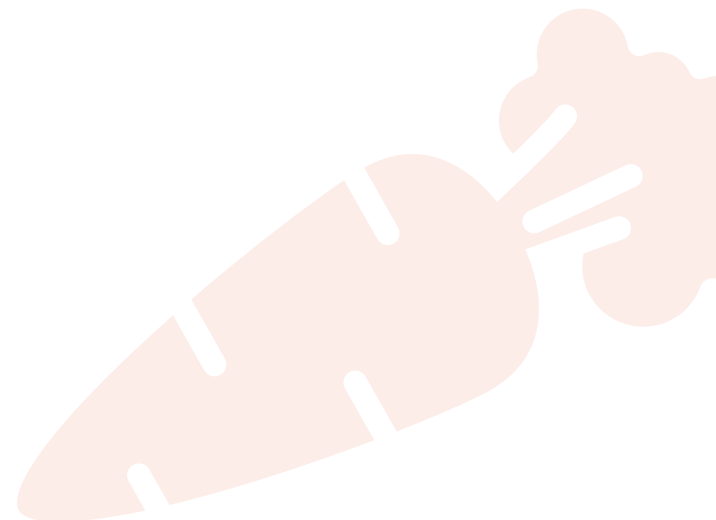
1. EXPAND THE ACCESSIBILITY OF FOOD PROGRAMS

Transportation was identified as the second most common barrier to accessing food (after mental health), with some youth travelling up to 90 minutes one way to reach a pantry. To address this, TRRUST can continue to support organizations who are advocating for reduced fares or free transit for young people who have left care. Service providers are encouraged to think of innovative ways they can support grocery or pantry shopping, possibly through volunteer programs or ride shares.

Program eligibility needs to be clearly communicated and shared. TRRUST developed a *food map/calendar* specific to youth and young people. Although the food map lists eligibility criteria for each provider, TRRUST will add age eligibility for clarity. The food map information is also available on the *Vancouver Food Asset Map—Vancouver Neighbourhood Food Networks*, under Youth & Young Adult Food Programs. TRRUST will develop a second food map/calendar for young people ages 25 to 30 to help the transition to adult services. This information should be distributed through SAJE workers, transition workers, and other community and health service providers.



Scan the QR code to access the Vancouver Food Asset Map-Vancouver Neighbourhood Food Networks.



2. IMPROVE THE QUALITY AND VARIETY OF FOOD OFFERED

Pantries predominantly stock dry goods, but youth clearly expressed a preference for fresh produce, unprocessed protein, dairy, culturally appropriate foods, and snacks. Where possible, partnerships should be developed to expand perishable, refrigerated, and frozen options. Youth also identified olive oil and spices as significant gaps. A coordinated, collective effort to source, prepare, and distribute individual portions of oils, spices, and other sauces to youth-specific food pantries programs could reduce these barriers and reduce food waste.

The current farmers' market coupon program is limited and difficult to access. TRRUST could seek to partner with Vancouver Farmers' Markets to explore and expand this coupon program to youth with care experience.

3. REDUCE STIGMA AND BUILD COMMUNITY THROUGH SHARED MEALS

More than half of youth attend free meal programs for the social connection and sense of belonging. Existing programs could further support connectedness by hosting community meals where service providers and youth share a meal together. Community meals provide an opportunity to reduce stigma and address anxieties related to first visits. Shared meals could also bring together other groups, such as Elders, older adults, and other community members, to support intergenerational and community-wide connections.

Level 2–Support Advocacy

1. INCOME AND ECONOMIC SUPPORTS

Insufficient income was identified as the top reason for food insecurity among youth transitioning out of care, with 66% who consider themselves moderately or severely food insecure. TRRUST will research and support existing organizations | coalitions that are advocating for sufficient basic income. In addition, youth with lived experience are more likely to rely on social supports as sources of income. TRRUST will support organizations that are advocating for increases to income assistance and disability assistance rates in BC.

TRRUST will provide resources and data on food insecurity to enable providers to advocate for further resources based on needs.

Level 3–Supports that Require Funding

1. FOOD ACCESS

For the 31% of young people who almost always go to bed hungry, TRRUST will seek to establish a fund to provide immediate relief for those facing severe food insecurity. A partnership with the Rent Bank will be explored.

In addition to community shared meals and for those who prefer not to leave their homes, TRRUST will seek to create partnerships with 'ready to make' meal companies to organize home delivery and the making of a meal together on zoom.

Given that mental health, and specifically anxiety, is mentioned as one of the top barriers to accessing food, consider creating a youth friendly video of all spaces in the Vancouver area where meals and pantries are available.

2. SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Expand and support food related life skills programs that include budgeting, meal planning, grocery shopping, and cooking. Give youth actual real-life practice at meal making and grocery shopping. Groups make meals together and possibly take home 2 to 3 to freeze or for the week.

Through a partnership with [agedout.com](https://www.agedout.com), TRRUST has secured up to 300 culinary kits from La tablee des chefs. 50 of these will be distributed to youth serving organizations in July 2026. The kits include a meal planner, a cookbook, measuring spoons, measuring cups, a spatula and a small fry pan.

In conclusion, none of these recommendations are extraordinary, and yet, as a collective, all actions towards the goal of food security for young people transitioning out of care is worth taking!

Here's a wrap up of the report from a young person's perspective!

WHAT THIS IS ABOUT

This report shares what young people with experience in government care are going through when it comes to food. It's based on conversations and a survey with youth in the Vancouver area.

The goal is simple: to understand what's working, what's not, and what needs to change so young people can actually afford to eat.

THE REALITY

Many young people leaving care are struggling to meet basic needs—and food is one of the biggest challenges.

- 🎯 **94%** of youth in this project experienced moderate to severe food insecurity.
- 🎯 **83%** said they go to bed hungry at least sometimes.
- 🎯 **66%** skip meals regularly because they don't have enough money.

This isn't about budgeting better or making different choices. It's about not having enough money to live.

WHY THIS IS HAPPENING

Youth shared that food insecurity is connected to bigger issues:

- 🎯 **Low income**—even with support, it's not enough to cover food and rent.
- 🎯 **Housing instability**—makes cooking and storing food difficult.
- 🎯 **Mental health challenges**—the #1 barrier to accessing food programs.
- 🎯 **Transportation**—getting to food programs can take up to 90 minutes one way.
- 🎯 **Aging out of youth services**—many supports end at age 24.

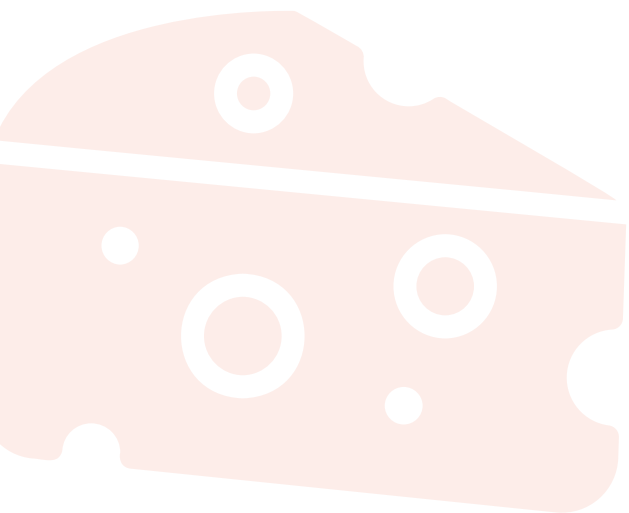
Some youth need multiple sources of income just to survive—and still can't afford to eat regularly.

WHAT YOUTH ARE DOING TO GET FOOD

Young people are working hard to find food wherever they can:

- 🎯 Using food banks and pantries.
- 🎯 Attending free meal programs.
- 🎯 Skipping meals or eating less.
- 🎯 Traveling long distances to places where they feel safe.

Food programs matter—but they're not enough.



WHAT MATTERS TO YOUTH

Youth shared what makes a difference when accessing food:

- 🗨️ Feeling safe and welcomed.
- 🗨️ Being able to choose what they eat.
- 🗨️ Having food that meets their cultural and dietary needs.
- 🗨️ Access to fresh, healthy food—not just canned goods.
- 🗨️ Opportunities to connect with others (not just grab food and leave).

For many, meal programs are not just about food—they're about community and belonging.

BIG TAKEAWAY

Food insecurity is not just about food. It's about income, housing, mental health, and support systems. Right now, the system relies too much on food banks and charity. But youth are clear:

- 🗨️ Short-term food programs don't fix the problem—people need enough money and support to live with dignity.

WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE

Right now (immediate support):

- 🗨️ Make food programs easier to get to (transportation support).
- 🗨️ Improve food quality (more fresh, culturally appropriate options).
- 🗨️ Create welcoming, stigma-free spaces where people can connect.

Next (advocacy supports):

- 🗨️ Increase income supports so youth can actually afford food.
- 🗨️ Push for policies that address poverty—not just food access.

FINAL MESSAGE

Young people leaving care are doing everything they can to survive. But they shouldn't have to struggle this hard just to eat. Going to bed hungry should never be normal.



Appendix A–Survey Instrument

Food Security Input

Please take a few minutes to tell us more about you and your experience accessing food in the Metro Vancouver area. IF YOU DO NOT live in the Metro Vancouver area, we ask that you do NOT complete this survey. PLEASE DO NOT complete this survey more than once! DUPLICATE gift card entries will be removed. TRRUST is a collective impact initiative that represents over 45 organizations in the Metro Vancouver area. Our overall goal is to improve young peoples' transitions from government care so they can thrive. Food security is a growing concern for young people and TRRUST needs your help to determine where we should focus to make the biggest difference in your life. For more about TRRUST please visit www.mcs.bc.ca/TRRUST.

What is your age?

- 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24+

Have you ever been in government care?

- No
 Yes, currently
 Yes, but not anymore
 Other _____

What gender do you identify as:

What are your current sources of income. Check ALL that apply.

- SAJE/AYA
 Employment
 Bursary/scholarship
 Income Assistance (IA)
 Persons With Disability Assistance (PWD)
 Employment Insurance (EI)
 Other _____

The following scale is used to describe food insecurity. What best describes your current situation?

- Food Secure: I never run out of money for food and eat mostly what I want.
 Marginal Food Insecurity: I worry about running out of food and/or limit my food selection due to a lack of money for food.
 Moderate Food Insecurity: I compromise quality and quantify of food due to a lack of money for food.
 Severe Food Insecurity: I miss meals, reduce food intake, and at the most extreme go day(s) without food.

How often do you go to bed hungry because there is not enough money for food?

- Never
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always

Are you skipping meals on a regular basis because you don't have enough money for food?

- Yes
- No

Where are you accessing free food pantries/food banks? Check ALL that apply.

- I do not access food pantries and/or food banks
- BGC
- Broadway Youth Resource Centre (BYRC)
- Covenant House—Covey's Cupboard
- Family Services of Greater Vancouver—Directions
- Food Bank
- Aunt Leah's
- Other _____

Is there a reason why you access food at certain places? (ie. close to home, accessible by public transit, hours more flexible, better selection, etc.)

Where are you accessing free meals? Check ALL that apply.

- I do not access free meals
- Broadway Youth Resource Centre (BYRC)
- Covenant House—Drop In
- Family Services of Greater Vancouver—Directions
- BGC
- Milieu
- Aunt Leah's
- Other _____

Is there a reason why you access free meals at certain places? (ie. close to home, accessible by public transit, its where my friends go, I like the food best, etc.)

Did you choose what you ate today?

- Yes
- No

Do you feel you have choice/autonomy when accessing either free food pantries or free meals?

- Yes
- No

How much time per week do you spend accessing food? (Please include your transit time)

- Less than 1 hour
- 1 hour to less than 2 hours
- 2 hours to less than 4 hours
- 4 hours or more

What gets in the way of accessing free meals and free pantries? Check ALL that apply.

- Cannot get there
- Mental health
- Times don't work for me
- Transportation
- I am not eligible
- I don't believe I qualify
- I don't know where to access free meals
- I don't know where to access free pantries/food banks
- I don't need to
- Nothing gets in the way
- Other _____

How often did you eat meals with others growing up?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always

Select the one option that best describes your current level of cooking skills:

- I can boil water
- I can make basic meals, warm up soup, and make noodles
- I can figure out most things like scrambled eggs, bacon, grilled cheese and cook some meats
- I like to cook and explore different ways of cooking
- I am adventurous and cook meals for myself and others on a regular basis. I think I'm a pretty good cook.
- Other _____

How many days in the past week did you eat food:

	1 day	2 days	3 days	4 days	5 days	6 days	7 days	Not applicable
You bought at a grocery store	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Made/cooked yourself	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Ordered online or take out	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
From a food pantry or food bank	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
At a free meal service	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

What stops you from cooking? Check ALL that apply.

- I do not have a stove
- I only have a hot plate
- I don't have pots and pans
- I don't have cooking utensils (spatula, knife, cutting board, etc.)
- I don't know how to cook
- I can't afford spices
- I can't afford the ingredients
- I am on a strict budget
- I don't know what to do with the food I get from pantries and food banks
- Nothing stops me from cooking
- Other _____

COLLECTIVE
 IMPACT

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