

BRIEF REPORT ON FOOD SECURITY

Based on the *Link* Program Evaluation Study



Link Evaluation - Overview and Methodology

For the past 25 years, Aunt Leah's Place has been providing programs for youth in foster care, teen moms, and those transitioning out of foster care.

The *Link* Program - designed for former foster youth aged 19 and older - provides: housing-related support, life skills workshops, help with resumes, job searches and applications, drop-in, emergency food and clothing, outreach and one-to-one support tailored to issues identified by each youth.

In 2012-2014, researchers from the University of Victoria School of Social Work conducted and evaluation of the *Link*. A total of 53 people were interviewed twice at 6-9 month intervals.

- 21 *Link* program participants
- 22 youth from care who had not accessed the *Link* program (comparison group)
- 6 program staff; and
- 4 support people (of the youths)

This brief report offers a summary of findings related to food security based on interviews with a total of 43 youth from foster care at Time 1 and 31 at Time 2.

WHAT WERE YOUTHS' SOURCES OF SUFFICIENT AND NUTRITIOUS FOOD?

Highlights of the Findings

- 52% (11/21) of *Link* participants accessed emergency food support from the *Link* program in Time 1 and 44% (7/16) accessed emergency food support at Time 2.
- 121 people from Aunt Leah's *Link* and Thresholds programs, including young people, their children, and their families participated in 126 group meals in 2013/14.
- A sizeable proportion of youth participants from both Aunt Leah's programs relied on supplementary sources of food, including: food banks or emergency food; friends or family; or communal meals offered via programs or with roommates.

According to the World Health Organization, *food security* means: that adequate amounts of nutritious and safe foods are available; having the necessary resources to obtain the foods that form the basis for a healthy diet; and, knowing how to prepare food in accordance with principles of basic nutrition and sanitation. People who are homeless or marginally housed are the most dependent upon free or low cost food providers¹.

¹ Miewald, C. (2009). Food Security and Housing in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Available from www.vch.ca/media/FoodSecurityandHousingonDTES.pdf.

Table 1: Supplementary Sources of Food, Link and Comparison Group Participants

SUPPLEMENTARY SOURCES OF FOOD	Time 1 n = 43	Time 2 n = 31
Food banks or emergency food	37%	35%
Weekly group meal preparation	2%	6%
Soup kitchens	5%	3%
Family or friends	28%	19%
Other sources of food, e.g., church meals, meals with roommates, meals provided by residential program	21%	32%

HOW OFTEN DID YOUTH USE FOOD BANKS?

- Over half of participants at Time 1 and roughly 60% of participants at Time 2 did not report using food banks.
- Nevertheless, at both Time 1 and Time 2, more than one in three participants (36%) said they used food banks from 1 to 5 times per month.

Table 2: Frequency of Use of Food Banks

FREQUENCY OF USE OF FOOD BANKS	Time 1 n = 43	Time 2 n = 31
Not applicable	51%	61%
1-4 x per month	28%	26%
5+ per month	9%	10%
4 or 5 x per year	0%	3%

WHAT WERE YOUTHS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE CHALLENGES WITH FOOD SECURITY?

Highlights of the Findings

- Food security is closely linked to income security.

"I buy healthy food for my baby. As long as she eats well I am happy. I don't care about me; I'll starve out one meal everyday. I can't afford to eat healthy."

"I would go to the food bank but I can't get there - no transportation - and then I don't have ID, which is required in order to use the food bank."

"I eat at youth shelters and drop-in centres three times a day every day. It's cheaper and easier."

"We shop when we get our welfare cheque and at the food bank. We also get food from our grandparents."

- Eating disorders were identified by at least two youth.

"It is challenging (to follow a healthy diet) due to my eating disorder. My eating disorder got worse and was diagnosed while I was in care."

"In the last foster home I was in, the family's daughter wouldn't let me eat the regular food. As a result, I think I developed very strange eating habits. I eat lots of pre-packaged food. It's only now, years after aging out of care, that I am actively making an effort to eat healthy foods. At first, after aging out of care, I didn't have enough money for healthy foods. I hoarded food. I think that a lot of my food behaviours and habits now are the result of living in care.."

WHAT DIFFERENCE DID YOUTH PROGRAMS MAKE IN RELATION TO FOOD SECURITY?

- At Time 2, study informants were asked what difference their involvement in support programs (e.g., the *Link*) had made for them. A number of youths reported that in addition to receiving food from these programs, they also received practical support, learning how to access healthy food, plan meals, budget, and shop. In the words of the youths:

“They gave me food when I was starving.”

“At the Moms’ and Babies group we also get food – the basics, which really helps.”

“Program helps with budgeting for food, rent, bills, and that helps to reduce stress.”



Paintings (“The Things We Remember” and “Toy Soldier”) by Cori Creed

A full report of the evaluation can be accessed at: <http://www.uvic.ca/hsd/socialwork/research/home/projects/index.php>

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