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# Food Bank Use Prior to Homelessness

Ali Jadidzadeh and Ron Kneebone  
Data That Makes A Difference Conference  
May 29, 2025



## Our Partners in this Project

- The Calgary Homeless Foundation provided funding support, data, and data support
- Thanks to Sam Elliot and the CHF team
- The Calgary Food Bank provided data and data support for this project
- Special thanks to Lucy Harry and Robert Janikowski




## What are we doing?

- Problems such as homelessness, food insecurity, material deprivation, ill health, and the lack of savings are rarely experienced in isolation from one another
- They are all elements of the same experience that comes from poverty
- The goal of this presentation is to report on an investigation into the nature of the relationship between two social problems that have garnered a great deal of attention lately, namely, homelessness and the use of food banks

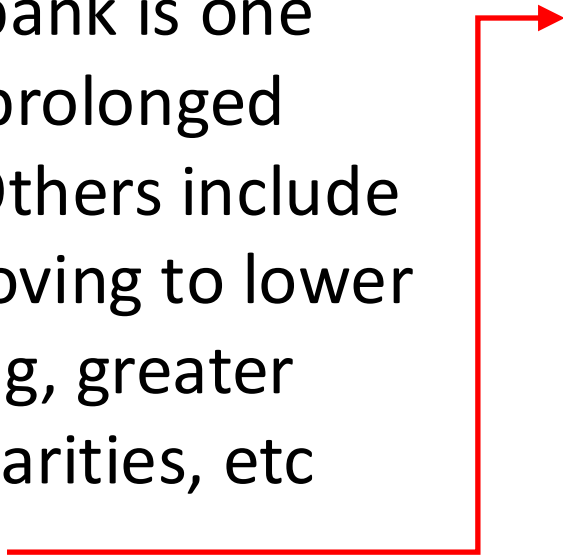


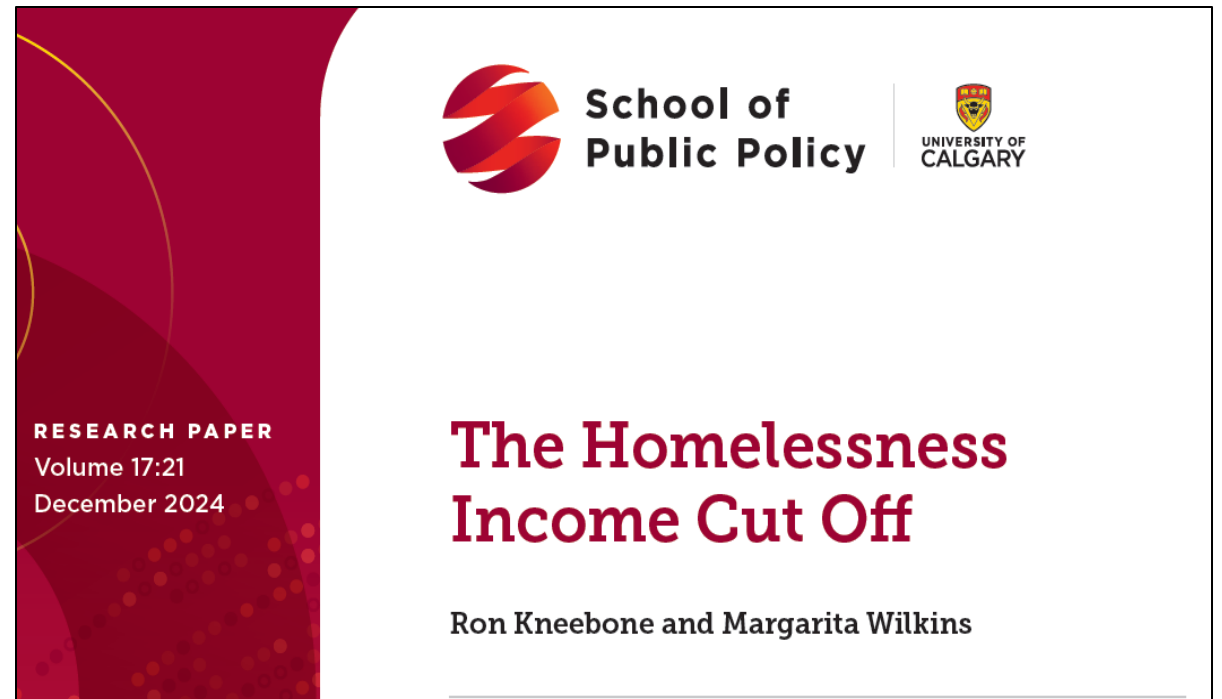
## Why should we expect Homelessness and Food Bank use to be related?

- Losing housing is a catastrophic loss. To lose housing means suffering ill health, the loss of employment opportunities, and lessened possibilities available to one's children
- The number of *new* entrants into sheltered homelessness is not contemporaneously correlated with increases in rent. See 

*Emergency Homeless Shelter Flows by Age and Ethnicity and their Sensitivity to Rent in Calgary, Alberta*

Ron Kneebone, Ali Jadidzadeh, and Margarita Wilkins  
*Social Sciences Research Network*  
May 2024

- This suggests homelessness is not always a sudden event but rather the end of a prolonged period of struggle and adjustment aimed at minimizing expenditures on non-housing necessities
- Using a food bank is one element of a prolonged adjustment. Others include ‘crowding’, moving to lower quality housing, greater reliance on charities, etc
- For more, see 





## An Implication

- Observations of food bank use may provide the opportunity to predict or anticipate the loss of housing
- Appropriately targeted and timed interventions may prevent homelessness from happening
- Keeping individuals and families in their homes is by far and away the most cost-effective solution to homelessness
- The analysis of food bank data may signal when intervention is required



## Background

- In the twelve months ended August 31, 2023, a total of 88,399 uniquely identified individuals received food hampers from the Calgary Food Bank (CFB)
- In 2019, over 4,200 people enter the Calgary shelter system who had never done so previously



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How are these connected?

# The Data

**Table 1.** Original Sample Information for Calgary Shelters and Food Bank Data

	Shelters		Food Bank	
	Single Adult	Families	Single Adult	Families
Number of UIDs	57,361	4,890	78,163	267,916
Number of observations	6,389,943	380,313	407,085	2,077,248
Gender:				
Male	44,338	1,648	46,130	129,963
Female	13,023	3,242	31,806	137,458
Unknown			227	495
Sample period	Jan. 1, 2009 – Jan. 14, 2024	Jan. 1, 2009 – Jan. 14, 2024	Jan. 5, 2009 – Sep. 29, 2023	Jan. 5, 2009 – Sep. 29, 2023

*Note:* Single adult and family shelter data provided by the Calgary Homeless Foundation. Food bank data provided by the Calgary Food Bank.

# The Data

To match time periods and to deal with the need to left censor the data to identify first time shelter use, the final sample was reduced to 1 Jan 2012 to 29 Sept 2023

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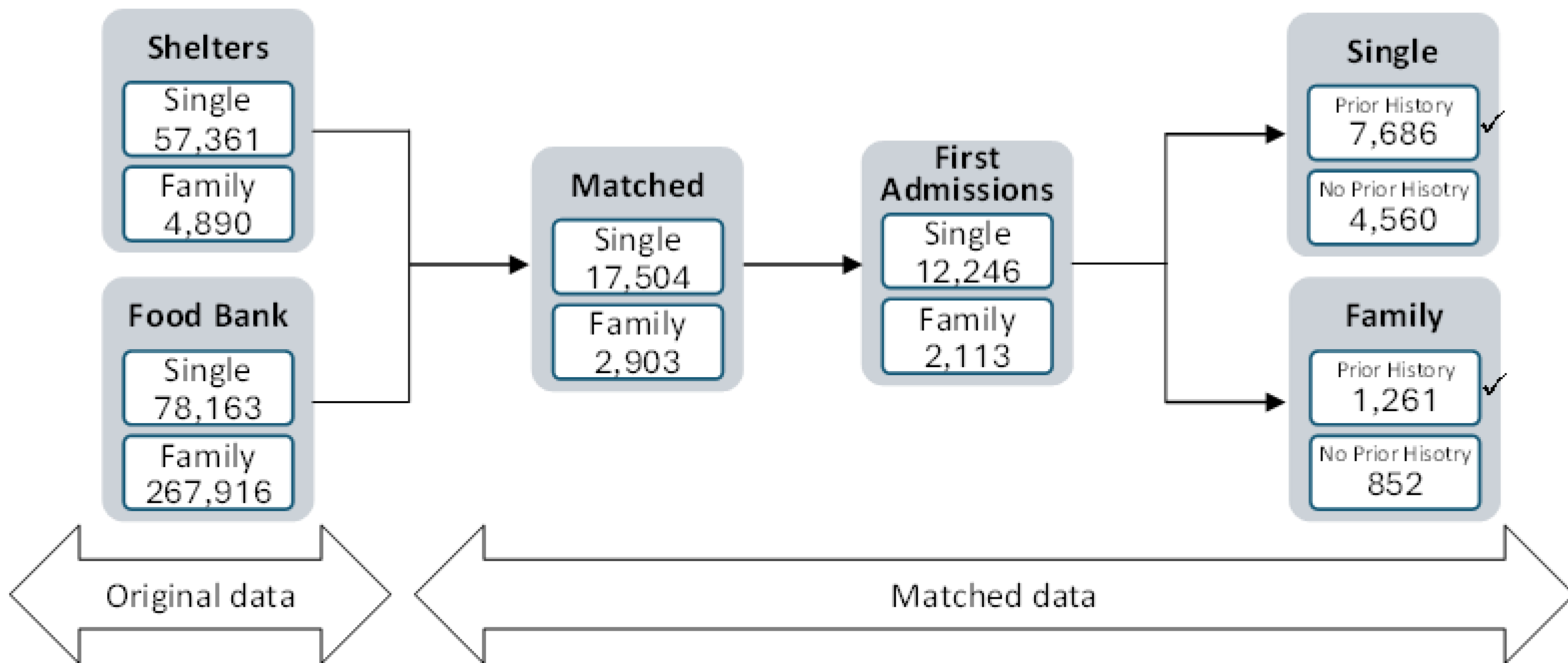
## Preliminary Observations ...

- For individuals and families who would eventually lose housing, the number of visits to the food bank was 41% higher than for those in our sample who would not lose housing
- So, we are focusing on people already in straitened circumstances
- 59% of families and 31% of single people using homeless shelters also rely on the Calgary Food Bank
  - Families and singles use both services because relatively few people using shelters do so every day
  - During those times away from shelter, they are relying on the food bank to make housing possible



## ... Preliminary Observations

- Over 60% of individuals and families entering a homeless shelter for the first time made use of the food bank prior to doing so
  - This means 40% did not
  - For this 40%, either the need to use shelter for the first time came suddenly or they were reliant on ways other than using the food bank to minimizing non-housing expenditures
- Our focus is on how food bank use changes during the period leading up to the loss of housing



# The Final Sample

**Table 1.** Demographics of Single Adults and Family Heads Using Shelters for the First Time With and Without a Prior History of Food Bank Use

	Single adult		Heads of Family	
	History of Food Bank Use	No History of Food Bank Use	History of Food Bank Use	No History of Food Bank Use
Gender:				
Male	5,007 (65.1%)	3,325 (72.9%)	371 (29.4%)	284 (33.3%)
Female	2,679 (34.9%)	1,235 (27.1%)	890 (70.6%)	568 (66.7%)
Average Age:	38.1 [12.5]	37.9 [12.9]	32.3 [9.4]	32.5 [8.8]
Age Category:				
Youth (18-24)	1,185 (15.4%)	755 (16.7%)	296 (23.5%)	166 (19.5%)
Adult (25+)	6,501 (84.6%)	3,805 (83.4%)	965 (76.5%)	686 (80.5%)
Sample size	7,686	4,560	1,261	852

Note: Numbers in parentheses measure the size of each category as a percentage of the relevant sample; numbers in brackets represent standard deviations. Someone is identified as a youth based on their age on first entry into a homeless shelter.

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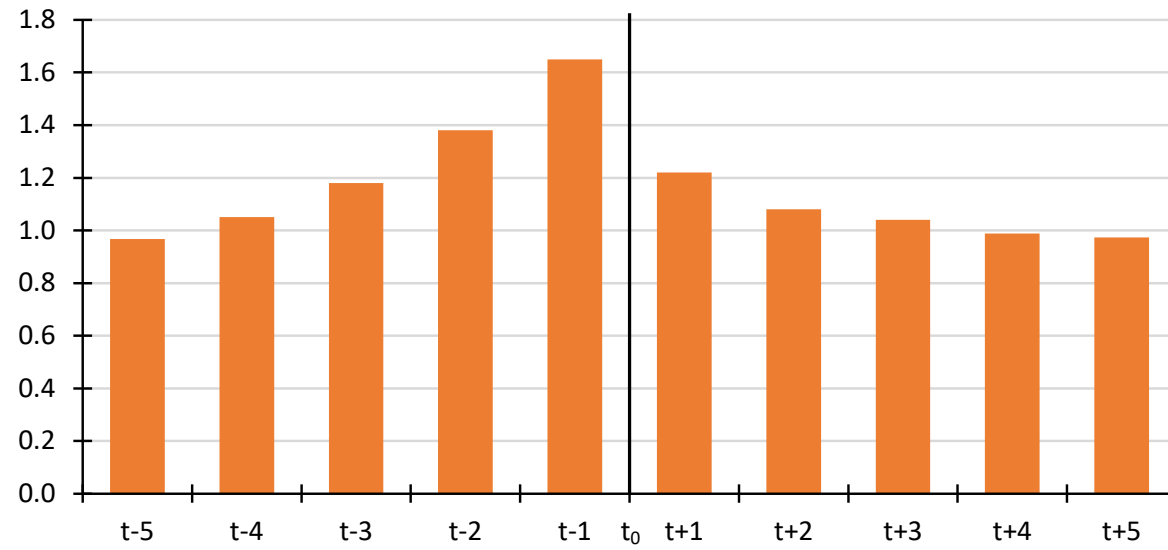
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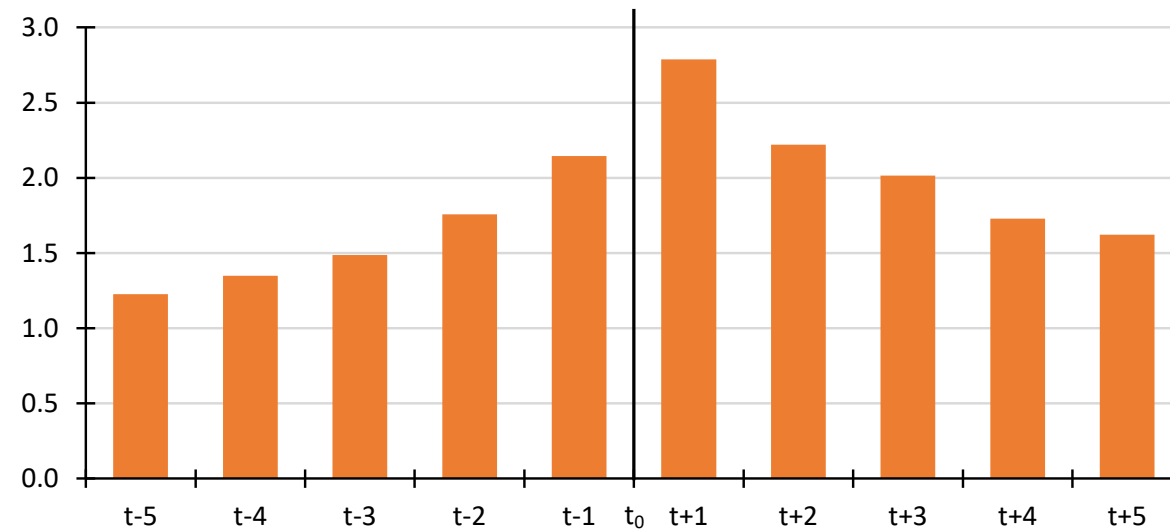
## The Results

- Our focus is on how food bank use changes during the period leading up to the loss of housing
- In the figures that follow, we report the number of food bank hampers taken by an individual or a family in the 12-month period prior to losing housing (period t-1), in the 12 months prior to that (period t-2), etc
- The figures also report the number of food bank hampers taken by an individual or family in 12-month periods following the loss of housing

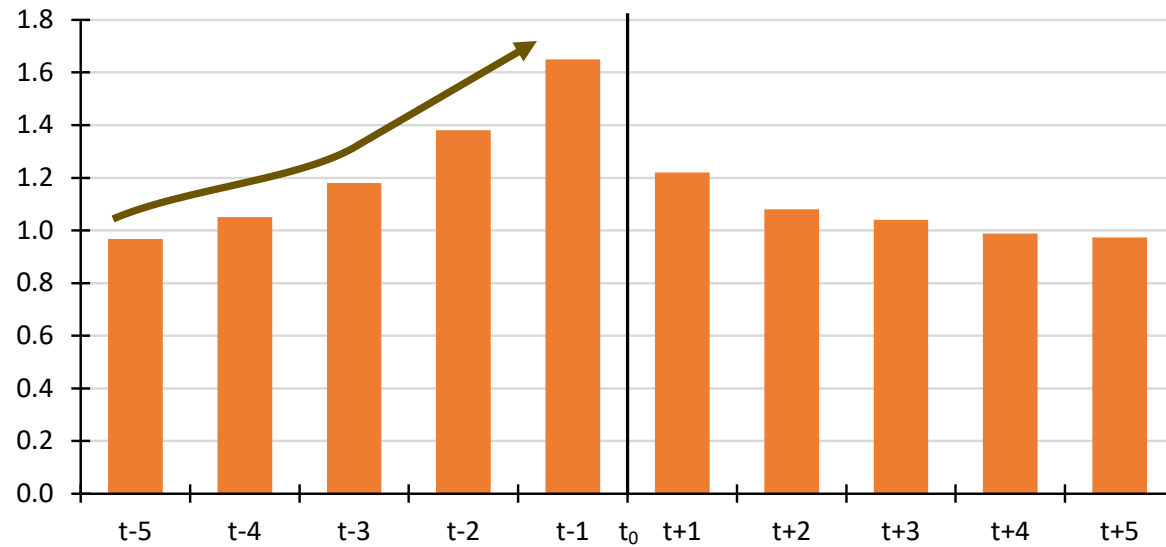
a) Single adults (n=7,686)



b) Families (n=1,261)

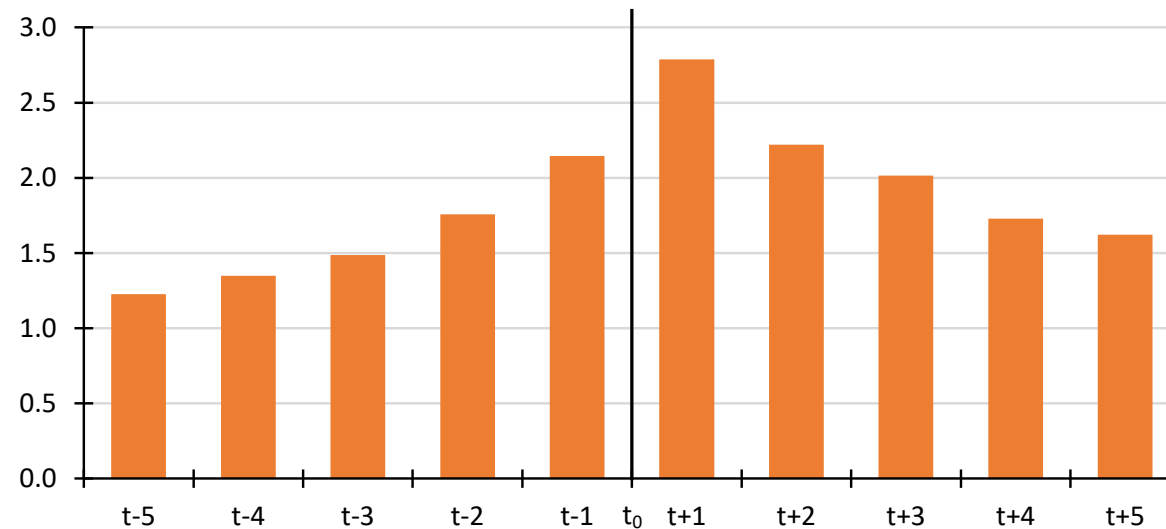


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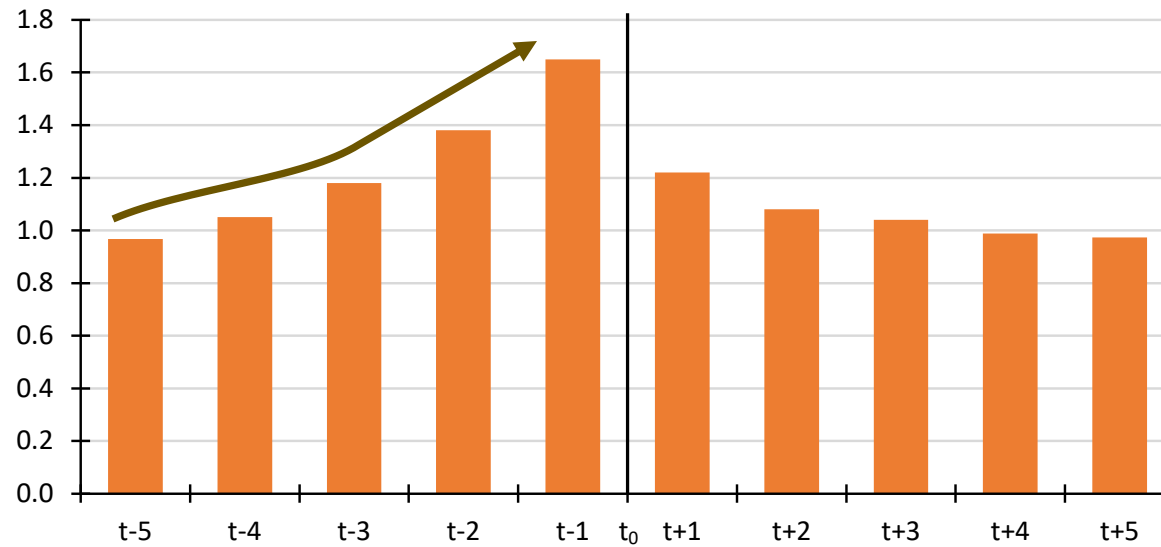


The average single adult entering shelter for the first time increased food bank use by 70% during the previous 5 years

b) Families (n=1,261)

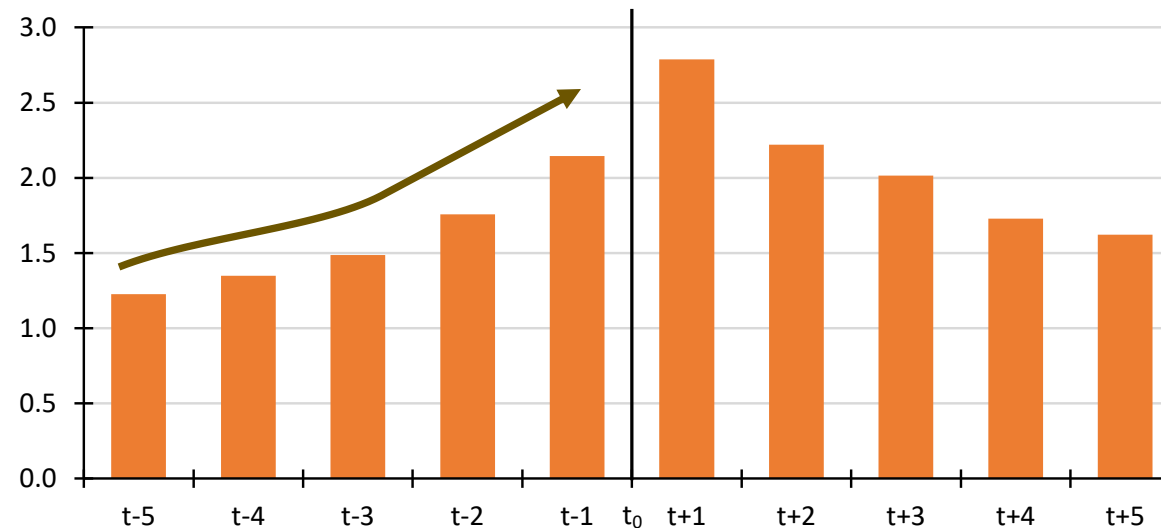


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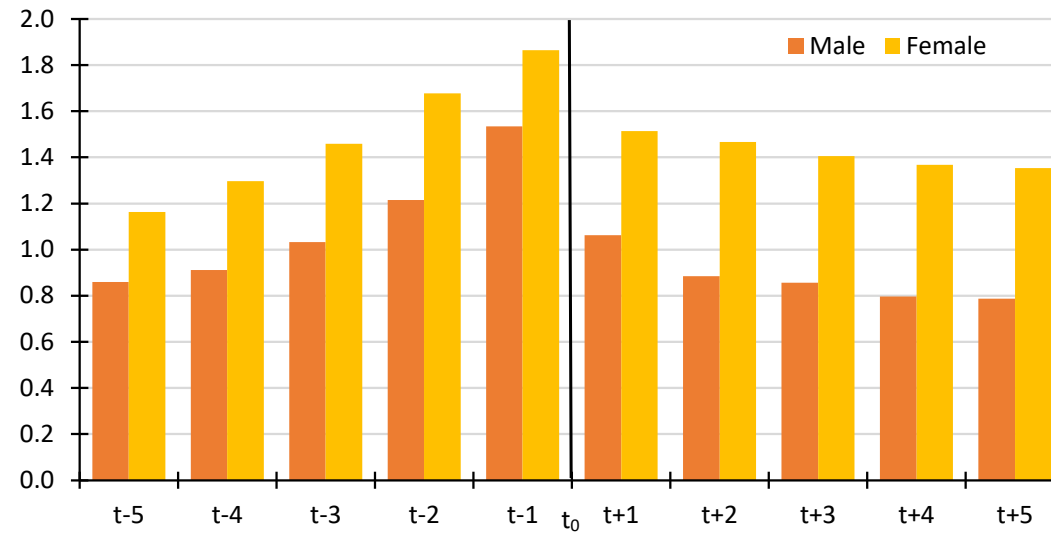
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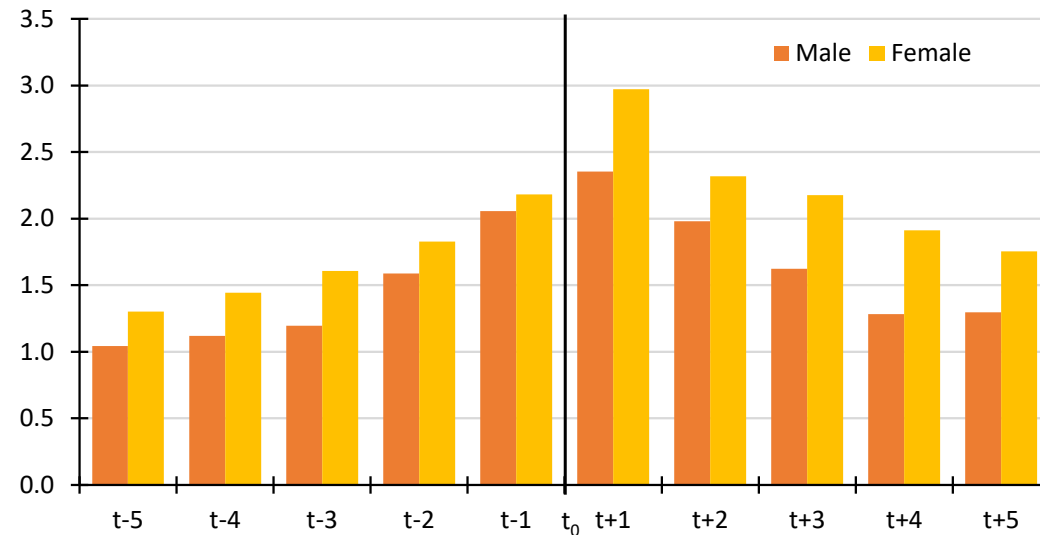
The average family entering shelter for the first time increased food bank use by 74% during the previous 5 years

a) Single adult



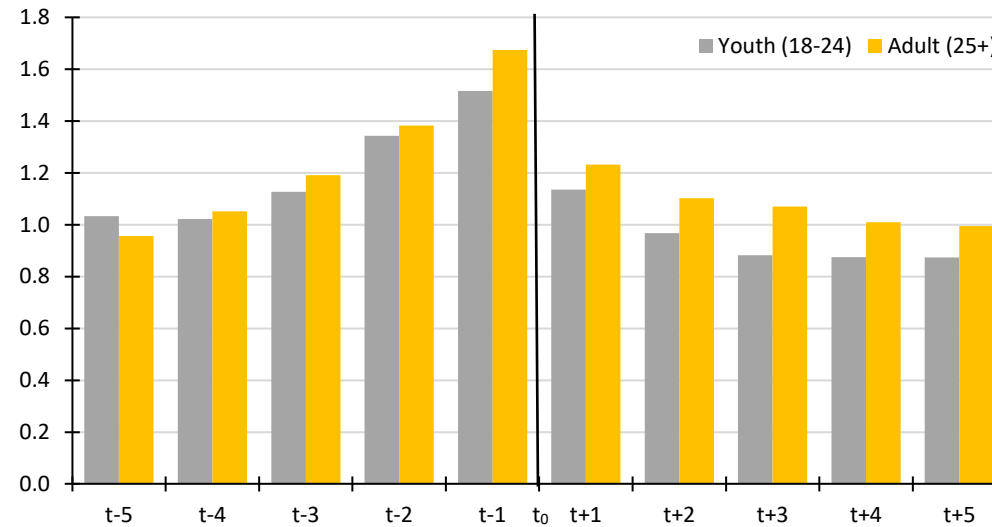
Single females who enter shelter for the first time make greater use of the food bank than single males but the pattern of use is similar

b) Families



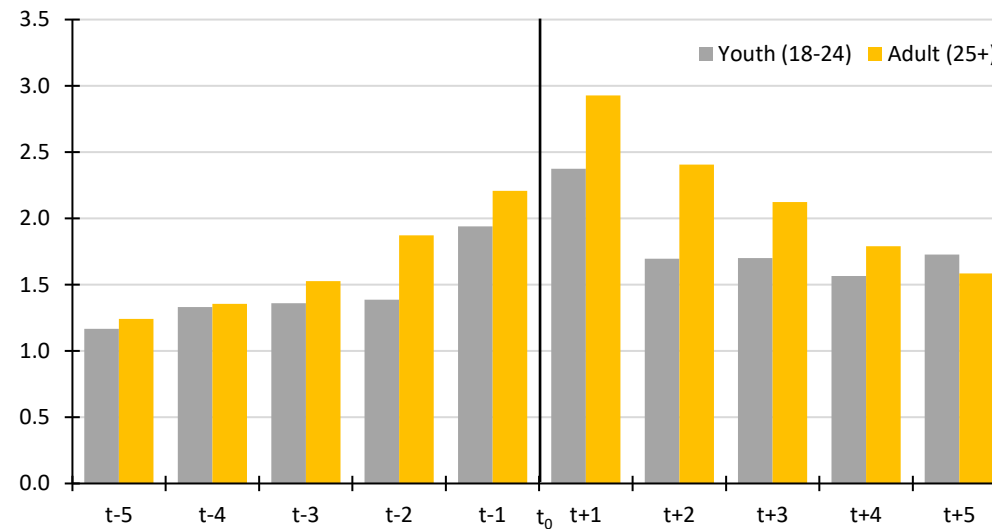
Families who enter shelter for the first time and are headed by females make greater use of the food bank than single males

a) Single adults



Not a great deal  
of difference  
when  
comparing  
young to older  
adults

b) Families



# Averages can hide important differences

**Table 3.** The Distribution of Food Bank Hampers Prior to Entry in a Homeless Shelter

	Time	Minimum	Mean	Maximum
Single adults	t-5	0	0.97	10
	t-4	0	1.05	11
	t-3	0	1.18	24
	t-2	0	1.38	23
	t-1	0	1.65	24
Families	t-5	0	1.23	11
	t-4	0	1.35	8
	t-3	0	1.49	16
	t-2	0	1.76	23
	t-1	0	2.14	20



## Concluding Comments ...

- The most cost-effective public policy for addressing homelessness is to enable people to remain housed
- But how do we know when to intervene and by how much?
- The results presented here confirm what Ali, Rita, and I have investigated in other work, namely, that for many individuals and households, homelessness is the result of a steady worsening of one's circumstances
- That steady worsening raises the possibility of intervening at an appropriate time in an appropriate way to possibly prevent homelessness from happening



## ... Concluding Comments

- Food bank data is an underappreciated source of information relevant to addressing the problem of homelessness
- We believe that further work in the direction we have taken in this study can answer the question of when to intervene and the size of the intervention that is required
- Our hope is that we can provide information useful for preventing homelessness from ever happening
- Thanks so much for listening!