

Monitoring Food Affordability

in Lambton County

The **2023** Nutritious Food
Basket Report



PURPOSE

The [Ontario Public Health Standards](#) require health units to monitor local food affordability as part of the [Population Health Assessment and Surveillance Protocol, 2018](#). Registered Dietitians with Lambton Public Health utilize the Nutritious Food Basket (NFB) to evaluate the affordability of food. This involves comparing average food and rent expenses in Lambton with different household income scenarios to illustrate the impacts of income disparity on food affordability.

NUTRITIOUS FOOD BASKET SURVEY

The NFB survey results were collected from eight grocery stores through a hybrid data collection model that included five brick-and-mortar and three online stores. A total of three rural (Corunna, Forest, and Petrolia) and five urban areas (Sarnia) were included to have a 60% urban and 40% rural representation. Food prices were collected by Registered Dietitians from May 23 to May 30, 2023.

The NFB survey measures the cost of 61 food items and their quantities needed for individuals in various groups, based on age and sex, to follow nutritious eating based on [Canada's Food Guide](#). Canada's Food Guide does not reflect the food practices of all religious and cultural groups and does not acknowledge traditional Indigenous foods and food procurement practices, which is a limitation of this data collection. Costing also does not include convenience foods, snack foods, infant foods or formula and food for special diets, such as gluten-free products. Therefore, this data can underestimate the actual costs of food for some populations.

The NFB results do include the cost of eating with 5% added to account for miscellaneous foods used in meal preparation and cooking needs such as spices, seasonings, condiments, baking supplies, coffee, and tea and it assumes that people:

- Always buy according to the lowest price and not according to need or preference.
- Have time, ability, food skills, and equipment to prepare meals from scratch.
- Have access to a grocery store; and
- Grocery shop regularly (every 1 to 2 weeks).

In 2022, the NFB costing tool was updated to align with the 2019 [National Nutritious Food Basket](#) (NNFB). An updated methodology also created a new hybrid model for data collection that includes both in-store and online food costing from grocery retailers. As such, the results from the 2023 NFB will create a new baseline and should not be compared to previous years due to the changes in the survey tool and methodology. Moving forward the annual collection of the NFB time trends will be presented.

In Lambton, the local cost to feed a family* of four is \$1,139 per month (\$263 per week).

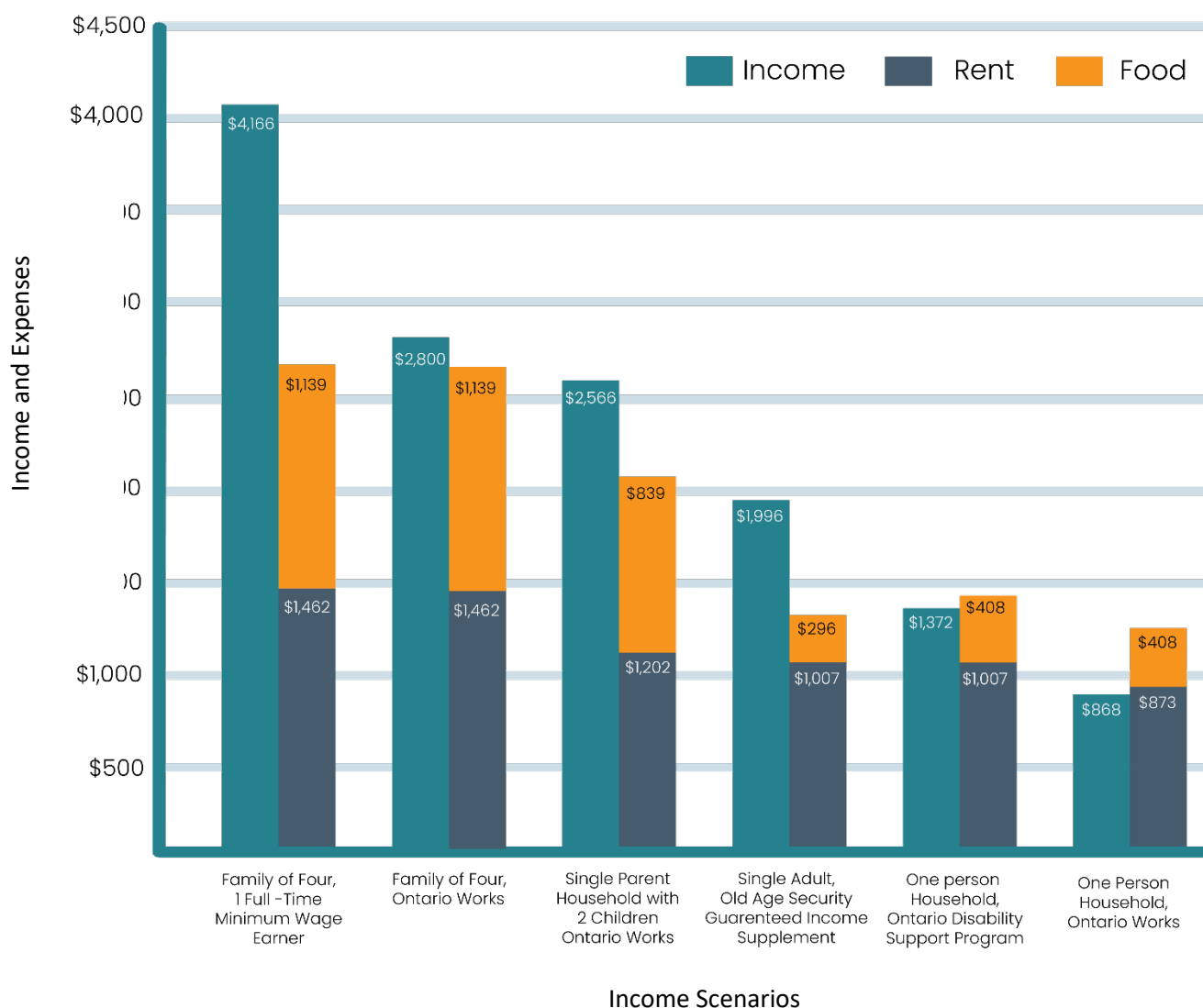
*Family includes 1 female (aged 31-50), 1 male (aged 31-50), 1 boy (aged 14-18 years), 1 girl (aged 4-8 years).

FOOD AFFORDABILITY AND INCOME

Whether or not food is affordable depends on a person's income and other expenses, including housing. When income does not match the cost of food and other basic needs, there are serious negative impacts on physical health, mental health, the healthcare system, and overall social wellbeing.¹

The local monthly food and average rental costs are compared to a variety of household and income scenarios including households receiving social assistance, minimum wage, and median incomes (Figure 1). These scenarios include food and rent only and are not inclusive of other needs (i.e. internet, phone, personal care products, clothing, transportation, household operations and supplies, etc.) (Table 1).

Figure 1. Income Scenarios + Appendix (Table 1)



The largest expense for most low-income residents is housing. Housing is considered affordable, according to the [CMHC](#), when rent costs are no more than 30% of income. Income spent on rent is much higher than 30% in almost all the scenarios in this report indicating that housing is not affordable.

Figure 2. Money remaining to pay other living expenses.



Based on the CMHC's affordability metrics, an income scenario that leaves an adequate amount of money for food and other basic needs would be that of a family of four, whose median income after tax is \$9,290 per month. This scenario assumes an average monthly rent of \$1,462 for a three-bedroom apartment, which accounts for 16% of the monthly household income, and leaves \$6,689 left over for other basic needs, once 12% of the income is allocated for food.

In contrast, a single adult person whose monthly income consists of Ontario Works, spends 101% of their income on rent, with the cost of food accounting for 47% of their available income; leaving them with a net loss of \$413 per month before other basic needs are met. This is just one of the number of scenarios that illustrates the impact of income disparity on food affordability, which contributes to Household Food Insecurity (HFI).

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Household Food Insecurity refers to inadequate to insecure access to food due to financial constraints. It is known as a sensitive measure of material deprivation and is tightly linked to other indicators of social and economic disadvantage.²

Food insecurity is described on a scale ranging from marginal to severe including:

- Marginal - worry about running out of food and/or limiting food selection.

- Moderate - compromise in quality and/or quantity of food consumed.
- Severe - skipping meals, reducing food intake, or going day(s) without food.

Research shows that adults in food insecure households are more likely to experience mental health disorders, adverse mental health outcomes, and negative health impacts, including risk of chronic diseases like heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, poor oral health, increased risk of infectious disease, and injury.¹

Studies show that children living in food insecure households are more likely to experience mental health conditions such as depression, social anxiety, suicidal ideation, hyperactivity and inattentiveness, asthma, and impacted growth and development from poor nutrition.¹

Higher mortality rates are also a risk for those experiencing severe food insecurity.^{3,4}

Negative health impacts associated with food insecurity also contributes to greater use of the healthcare system. Annual health care costs are 121% higher for adults living in severely food insecure households; 49% higher for adults living in moderately food insecure households and 23% higher for adults living in marginally food insecure households compared to food secure households.⁶

WHO DOES IT IMPACT?

Food insecurity disproportionately impacts marginalized communities.

Single parent households with children are the most vulnerable to food insecurity in Canada, with female lone-parent households have the highest rate of food insecurity at 41.2%, followed by male lone-parent households at 22.6%.⁷

Households with income earners identifying as BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of colour) are more likely to experience food insecurity as compared with non-visible minority households. The highest percentage of individuals living in food-insecure households in 2022 was found among black people at 39.2% and Indigenous Peoples at 33.4%.² This difference reflects a deeper connection to societal issues of systemic racism and colonialism.

In 2021, just over half (51.9%) of Canadians living with food insecurity reported employment as their main source of income.⁷ Low wage jobs and inconsistent work contribute to households not having enough money to buy food. This highlights an issue with the type of employment, including jobs that are precarious, part time, and/or low-paying.

From 2020 – 2022, nearly 16% of households in Lambton were considered food insecure, compared to 18.7% of households in Ontario and 17.8% of households in the 10 provinces across Canada. Provincial and national data is from 2022 and 2021, respectively.^{2, 2, 5}

Among Ontarians who receive social assistance, approximately two-thirds (67.2%) experienced food insecurity in 2021.⁷ Current social assistance rates in Ontario are deeply inadequate for recipients to meet their basic needs.

Renters are also more likely to experience food insecurity than homeowners. In 2022, 28% of Canadian households who rented experienced food insecurity.²

While people who are in a long-term rental may be paying lower than current rental rates according to CMHC, they may experience increased rental costs when they move. In addition, the current CMHC rates identified may be less than actual rental amounts meaning the financial impact reflected in these scenarios may be worse.

ADDRESSING THE ROOT OF FOOD INSECURITY

Food charity has been the primary response for government funding to address the issue of HFI in Canada, however community food programs and food charity programs were not created to address food insecurity.

Systemic measures that implement long-term, income-based strategies that address poverty and improve population health are needed to keep food affordable. Examples of these strategies include improving social assistance rates, raising minimum wage, improving employment standards, and providing a basic income.

Lambton Public Health is committed to working with partners, stakeholders, and all levels of government to identify and work towards implementing policies that address the root cause of food insecurity, allow people to choose what food they want, ensure basic rights to food, and preserve dignity.^{7,8}

REFERENCES

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APPENDIX

Table 1: 2023 Income scenarios in Lambton^a

Income Scenarios	Total monthly income ^b	Average monthly rent ^c	Cost of food ^d	Money remaining (for other basic needs)	Percent income for housing	Percent income for food
Family of Four, Median Income (after tax) Two adults (male and female age 31 to 50) Two children (girl aged 8, boy aged 14)	\$9,290	\$1,462 3BDR	\$1,139	\$6,689	16%	12%
Single Parent with 2 children, Full-Time Minimum Wage Earner One adult (female age 31 to 50) Two children (girl aged 3, boy aged 4)	\$4,308	\$1,202 2BDR	\$694	\$2,412	28%	16%
Family of Four, 1 Full-Time Minimum Wage Earner Two adults (male and female age 31 to 50) Two children (girl aged 8, boy aged 14)	\$4,166	\$1,462 3BDR	\$1,139	\$1,565	35%	27%
Family of Four, Ontario Works Two adults (male and female age 31 to 50) Two children (girl aged 8, boy aged 14)	\$2800	\$1,462 3BDR	\$1,139	\$199	52%	41%
Single Parent with 2 Children, Ontario Works One adult (female age 31 to 50) Two children (girl aged 8, boy aged 14)	\$2,566	\$1,202 2BDR	\$839	\$525	47%	33%
Married Couple, Ontario Disability Support Program Two adults (male and female age 31 to 50)	\$2,437	\$1,007 1BDR	\$680	\$750	41%	28%
Single Adult, Old Age Security/Guaranteed Income Supplement One adult (female aged 70 and over)	\$1,996	\$1,007 1BDR	\$296	\$693	50%	15%
Single Pregnant Person, Ontario Disability Support Program One adult (female age 19 to 30)	\$1,412	\$1,007 1BDR	\$387	\$18	71%	27%
Single Adult, Ontario Disability Support Program One adult (male age 31 to 50)	\$1,372	\$1,007 1BDR	\$408	-\$43	73%	30%
Single Adult, Ontario Works One adult (male age 31 to 50)	\$868	\$873 Bachelor	\$408	-\$413	101%	47%

a Information from the table is derived from 2023 – Monitoring Food Affordability in Ontario (MFAO) Income Scenarios Spreadsheet, Lambton Public Health, 2023. Spreadsheet, including a complete list of references is available from Lambton Public Health, upon request.

b Income can be from the following sources, as applicable: Employment, federal and provincial tax credits and benefits, social assistance

c Rental Market Report. Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, October 2022. Utilities may not be included.

d Ontario Nutritious Food Basket data 2023 for Lambton Public Health – Includes family size adjustment factors.