
Subject: Food Affordability in Niagara: Results of the 2023 Nutritious Food Basket Survey

Report to: Public Health and Social Services Committee

Report date: Tuesday, October 10, 2023

Recommendations

1. That Regional Council, as the Board of Health, **ACKNOWLEDGE** food insecurity as an income problem requiring income solutions; and
2. That Regional Council, as the Board of Health, **BE DIRECTED** to send a letter to the federal and provincial governments, advocating for the implementation of evidence-based policy solutions to reduce food insecurity including: increasing social assistance rates, increasing minimum wage to a living wage, and implementing a study of a basic income guarantee project in Niagara to reduce poverty in a sustainable way.

Key Facts

- The Nutritious Food Basket Survey was conducted in May of 2023 and demonstrates that income from employment and social assistance do not always cover the cost of food and shelter in Niagara.
- A significant proportion of income is required to pay for rent and food for individuals and families.
- In 2022, 20.7% or one in five households in Niagara were food insecure.
- Food insecurity is associated with numerous negative health impacts including chronic disease, infectious disease, poor oral health, and mental health issues.
- Improving the financial circumstances of individuals and families is associated with a decline in food insecurity and positive health outcomes.

Financial Considerations

There are no immediate financial considerations for Council to consider for this report.

Analysis

Nutritious Food Basket Survey

The Nutritious Food Basket (NFB) is a survey tool used to monitor the cost and affordability of nutritious eating according to Canada's Food Guide ⁱ. Included in the survey are a select number of large chain grocery stores that consistently carry a full range of food items. The NFB includes 61 food items that fall into four categories: vegetables and fruit; protein foods; whole grains; and fats and oils. The NFB provides an average cost of each food item for various age and sex groups and the monthly cost of nutritious eating for different family/household unit types are calculated.

The NFB does not include personal care items, processed or convenience foods, religious or cultural foods, infant food, special diet foods, personal hygiene products, toilet paper, or laundry detergent.

The NFB was conducted in May of 2023, in nine grocery stores across Niagara region. Eight stores were in small, medium, and large population centres and one store was in a rural community. Four stores were surveyed in-person and five were surveyed online.

Adequacy of income and social assistance in covering the cost of living

The NFB helps to determine if residents' income from employment or social assistance is enough to buy nutritious food and other necessities. Results often show that those living in poverty also experience food insecurity. Total monthly income, average monthly rent, monthly cost of nutritious eating, and funds remaining after rent and food are calculated for six income scenarios. Income from other applicable federal/provincial income supports available to those eligible upon filing taxes (i.e., Canada Child Benefit, Ontario Child Benefit, GST/HST Credit) is included in the total income.

Income scenarios do not include other living necessities (e.g., utilities, transportation, child-care, cell phone, clothing etc.). Further, rental costs are likely an underestimation of true costs due to a gap between the asking price and average rent paid for occupied units.ⁱⁱ

Income Scenario 1: Family of four, Ontario Works

- Total income is \$2873
- Cost of food is \$1212 (42% of income)

- Cost of rent (three bedroom) is \$1366 (48% of income)
- \$295 is left after rent and food for other necessities

Income Scenario 2: Family of four, Minimum Wage full-time earner

- Total income is \$4218
- Cost of food is \$1212 (29% of income)
- Cost of rent (three bedroom) is \$1366 (32% of income)
- \$1640 is left after rent and food for other necessities

Income Scenario 3: Single parent household (2 children), Ontario Works

- Total income is \$2636
- Cost of food is \$848 (32% of income)
- Cost of rent (two bedroom) is \$1258 (48% of income)
- \$530 is left after rent and food for necessities

Income Scenario 4: One-person household, Ontario Works

- Total income is \$851
- Cost of food is \$414 (49% of income)
- Cost of rent (bachelor) is \$833 (98% of income)
- \$-396 is left after rent and food for necessities

Income Scenario 5: One-person household, Ontario Disability Support Program

- Total income is \$1387
- Cost of food is \$414 (30% of income)
- Cost of rent (one bedroom) is \$1070 (77% of income)
- \$-97 is left after rent and food for other necessities

Income Scenario 6: One-person household, Old Age Security/Guaranteed Income

- Total income is \$2035
- Cost of food is \$299 (15% of income)
- Cost of rent (one bedroom) is \$1070 (53% of income)
- \$666 is left after rent and food for other necessities

Household food insecurity in Niagara

Household food insecurity (HFI) is defined as, “inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints” ⁱⁱⁱ. Food insecure households may be forced to choose between purchasing food or paying other bills, often leading to sacrifice in the quality and quantity food ⁱⁱⁱ. In 2022, 20.7% or approximately one in five households in Niagara were food insecure ^{iv} and in 2019, 18.3% of Niagara children and youth one to 17 years of age lived in food insecure households ^v.

The Niagara Poverty Reduction Strategy Interim report identified food security as one of the seven pillars of poverty. Residents have noted that their greatest challenge is that their low income means they cannot afford the high cost of nutritious food.

Household food insecurity is a public health issue

HFI can lead to less nutritious diets and is associated with chronic diseases including diabetes, heart disease and hypertension ^{vi}. Adults experiencing HFI are at increased risk for infectious disease, poor oral health, and injury and there is a strong relationship between HFI and mental health issues for both adults and children ^{Error! Bookmark not defined.}. As the severity of HFI increases, the risk of depression, anxiety, mood disorders, and suicidal thoughts also increases ^{Error! Bookmark not defined.}. Adults experiencing severe HFI are more likely to die prematurely of all causes except cancer ^{Error! Bookmark not defined.}.

Household food insecurity is an income problem requiring income solutions

Charitable food programs, including food banks, are a valued and socially accepted response to food insecurity; however, they are only a temporary solution and do not address the root cause of food insecurity. Research shows that food insecurity is best improved by income ^{vii}.

Federal and provincial policies that improve the financial circumstances of low-income and low/mid-income households are associated with a decline in HFI rates ^{vii}. Households receiving SA experience an elevated risk of food insecurity, with over 60% of recipients in Canada reporting some level of HFI ^{vi}. Policies associated with reduced HFI include increasing SA rates, lowering/eliminating provincial taxes for the lowest income tax bracket, introducing/improving child benefits and increasing exemptions are associated with reduced HFI ^{vii,viii}.

Most households experiencing HFI in Canada are in the workforce and rely on wages, salaries or self employment as their main source of income ^{vi}. Often those reporting HFI have lower wages and engage in precarious work ^{vii}. Increasing provincial minimum wage to a living wage can reduce HFI among this group ^{ix}. In addition, preliminary results of a study of the 2017 Ontario Basic Income Pilot showed that many participants were able to purchase food that they could not previously afford and were able to make healthier food choices ^{ix}. Individuals saw a positive impact on their health, and some were able to manage other health related conditions ^{ix}.

Alternatives Reviewed

Council could choose not to write an advocacy letter; however, there would be a missed opportunity to advocate for individuals and families in Niagara who live in poverty and experience food insecurity.

Relationship to Council Strategic Priorities

This report supports the Council Strategic Priority of an Equitable Region. Equity, inclusion, and advocacy for a social determinant of health demonstrates listening and responding to priority populations within our community, in need of income and food security.

Other Pertinent Reports

- PHD 6-2020 Basic Income for Income Security
- PHD 1-2021 Collaborative Action to Prevent COVID-19 Transmission and Improve Healthy Equity by Increasing Access to Paid Sick Days
- PHD 14-2021 Collaborative Action to Support the Need for Permanent Paid Sick Days
- PHD 11-2022 A Renewed Call for Paid Sick Leave in Ontario

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Sources

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- ⁱⁱ Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation. (2023). Rental Market Report January 2023 Edition.
- ⁱⁱⁱ PROOF Food Insecurity Policy Research. (nd). Understanding household food insecurity. Retrieved from: (<https://proof.utoronto.ca/food-insecurity/>)
- ^{iv} Ontario Agency for Health Protection and Promotion (Public Health Ontario). Snapshots: household food insecurity snapshot, 2021-2022. Toronto, ON: King's Printer for Ontario. Available from: (<https://www.publichealthontario.ca/en/data-and-analysis/healthy-equity/household-food-insecurity>)
- ^v Canadian Health Survey of Children and Youth, 2019.
- ^{vi} Tarasuk, V., & Fafard St- Germain, A.A. (2002). Household Food Insecurity in Canada, 2021. Toronto: Research to identify policy options to reduce food insecurity (PROOF). Retrieved from (<https://proof.utoronto.ca/>)
- ^{vii} PROOF (Food Insecurity Policy Research). (nd). What can be done to reduce food insecurity in Canada? Accessed August 17, 2023. Retrieved from: (<https://proof.utoronto.ca/food-insecurity/what-can-be-done-to-reduce-food-insecurity-in-canada/#4>)
- ^{viii} Men, F., Uriquia, M.L., Tarasuk, V. (2021). The role of provincial social policies and economic environments in shaping food insecurity among Canadian families with children. *Preventative Medicine*, 148.
- ^{ix} Ontario Basic Income Network. (2019). Signposts to Success: Report of a BCIN Survey of Ontario Basic Income Recipients.