

Board of Health Briefing Note

To: Chair and Members of the Board of Health
Date: April 5, 2023
Topic: Household Food Insecurity: A Serious Issue in Timiskaming, Ontario, and Canada
Submitted by: Dr. Glenn Corneil, (a)Medical Officer of Health/CEO
Prepared by: Rim Mouhaffel, Public Health Dietitian, and Mackenzie Clarke, NODIP Dietetic Intern
Reviewed by: Amanda Mongeon, Cristina Benea, Erin Smith, and Randy Winters

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the Timiskaming Health Unit (THU) Board of Health (BOH):

1. Review updated information on *“Household Food Insecurity: A Serious Issue in Timiskaming, Ontario, and Canada”* and the following **report** and **infographic** on Monitoring Food Affordability in Timiskaming;
2. Endorse the Ontario Dietitians in Public Health’s letter (Appendix A) and send copies of this endorsement calling for the adoption of income-based policy solutions along with a summary of this briefing note to:

Hon. Doug Ford, Premier of Ontario via email: doug.fordco@pc.ola.org

Hon. Sylvia Jones, Deputy Premier and Minister of Health via email: sylvia.jones@pc.ola.org

Hon. Michael Parsa, Minister of Children, Community and Social Services via email:

michael.parsaco@pc.ola.org

cc: John Vanthof, MPP – Timiskaming-Cochrane
Anthony Rota, MP – Timiskaming-Nipissing
Charlie Angus, MP – Timmins-James Bay
Association of Local Public Health Agencies (alPHA)
Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO)
Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM)
Ontario Public Health Association (OPHA)
Ontario Dietitians in Public Health (ODPH)
Health Unit Member Municipalities

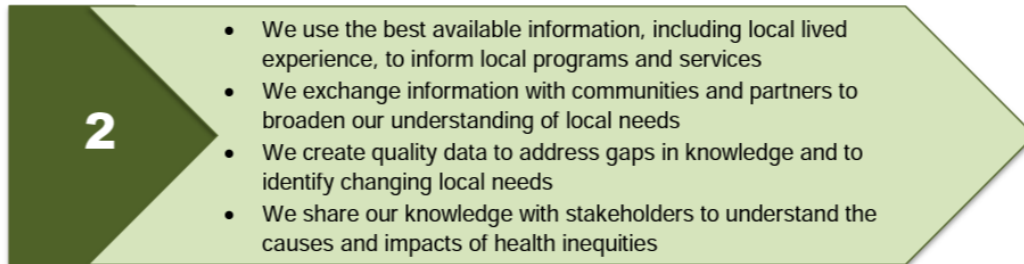
Overview

In Ontario, the Nutritious Food Basket (NFB) survey is conducted by Public Health Units (PHUs) to monitor food affordability, which involves measuring and monitoring the cost of foods that reflect healthy eating recommendations to ensure access to nutritious, safe, and acceptable foods.¹ In 2020, the Ontario Dietitians in Public Health Monitoring Food Affordability in Ontario working group (MFAO) began adapting the NFB survey from the 2019 Health Canada’s National Nutritious Food Basket (NNFB). Between May 16 and June 24, 2022, the NFB survey was pilot-tested by 27 PHUs using a hybrid of in-store and online data collection methods. The results showed that in Timiskaming, a family of four must spend \$266 per week to eat well, which is a challenge for low-income households, contributing to Household Food Insecurity (HFI).

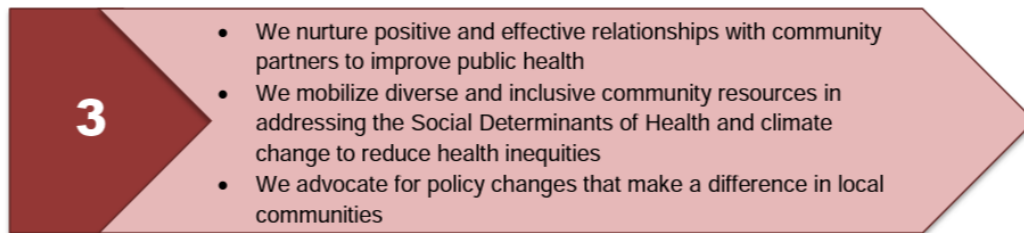
Ontario Public Health Standards (OPHS) 2021 and THU Strategic Plan 2019-2023

Monitoring of food affordability directly contributes to meeting requirements and expected outcomes in the Health Equity Foundational Standard of the OPHS 2018 and supports THU 2019-2023 strategic directions 2 and 3 to create, share, exchange knowledge, and collaborate with partners to make a difference in our communities.

We create, share and exchange knowledge



We collaborate with partners to make a difference in our communities



Background

HFI is defined as “the inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints.”¹² Those who face financial hardships struggle to afford food; after paying for rent, utilities, childcare, and medications, little money is left to buy food leading to compromising the quality and quantity of the diet. Food insecurity is a significant issue experienced by 16% of Ontarians and almost 21% of children under 18 years old.^{2, 16} In Timiskaming, 15% of the population lives in low-income,²⁵ and 1 in 5 households experience food insecurity.²⁶ Almost 18% of children in Timiskaming are food insecure.⁴ These figures should be cautiously approached due to the small sample size.

The risk of HFI is highest among low-income, lone-parent households, especially female-led ones with children under 18 years old, precarious workers, and households with employment insurance, workers’ compensation or social assistance programs (Ontario Works (OW) or Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP)) as the primary source of income, in addition to home renters, and specific cultural/racial groups, most notably those identifying as Indigenous, Black, and Arab/West Asians.¹⁶

Food insecurity has profound impacts on physical and mental health, increasing the risk of chronic and infectious diseases, nutritional deficiencies, and early mortality.^{6,7,9} Food-insecure individuals are more likely to be admitted to acute care, stay longer, and be readmitted. This impacts healthcare costs, which are 121% higher for adults living in severely food-insecure households than in food-secure households.^{12,23}

Nutritious Food Basket (NFB)

The THU monitors food affordability every two years using the NFB tool. In May 2022, THU measured the cost of eating well in Timiskaming. The prices of 61 food items were collected from ten local grocery stores through a hybrid data collection model that included six in-store and four online stores. Stores from Timiskaming's northern, middle, and southern parts were included. Food prices were collected by two surveyors, among which

one was a Registered Dietitian, over two consecutive weeks from May 16 to 27th, 2022. The data was pooled to derive an average cost for individual food items, which were then adjusted based on gender and age to calculate the monthly cost of food. Incomes were calculated for May/June 2022, considering the highest possible entitlements based on income tax data from 2020 and assuming residents had filed their taxes and had applied for all applicable tax benefits and credits. Monthly rent costs were also collected from local sources, and food and rent data were compared to eight household income scenarios.

Results showed the average cost of food for a family of four in Timiskaming to be \$1,152 per month. See the following [report](#) and the [infographic](#) for examples of eight income scenarios. Caution should be exercised when interpreting the 2022 NFB data, as it was collected during a pilot test of an updated process to monitor food affordability in Ontario. Due to changes in costing processes and methodology, the 2022 NFB data is not comparable to previous years; however, it still provides high-quality data that can be used as an advocacy tool to address the issue of food insecurity.

Discussion

Food charity has been the primary response for government funding to address the issue of HFI in Canada. Research indicates that only a small percentage (20.6%) of severely food insecure households use these programs and that most prefer to ask family members for money instead.^{20, 21} The frequency of use by those who are marginally or moderately food insecure is even lower.²¹ Noting that food banks and community-food programs provide only short-term relief and fail to address the root cause of HFI due to multiple limitations.²¹ These include the inability to meet specific preferences and dietary or religious needs.¹⁶ Additionally, accessing food banks can be challenging due to transportation issues, long wait times, limited hours of operation and the potential to negatively impact people's dignity.¹⁶

In Canada, having a job or relying on social assistance is not sufficient to avoid HFI, as more than half of those experiencing food insecurity rely on income from employment.² Additionally, the minimum wage has not kept pace with inflation, which places households dependent on minimum wage income at an elevated risk of HFI. In Ontario, the 2022 living wage rate in the North should be \$19.70 an hour.²⁴ However, the Ontario minimum wage is even lower, which exacerbates financial hardships for many.²⁴ As such, it is crucial to ensure that jobs pay a living wage and provide benefits. Furthermore, in 2020, 67% of Ontario households receiving social assistance were food insecure.^{2, 16} Therefore, increasing the income of households on social assistance programs is crucial to reduce the risk of HFI.¹⁷

Implementing a Basic Income Guarantee (BIG) effectively addresses poverty and food insecurity.¹⁸ Research shows that the risk of food insecurity among low-income unattached seniors drops by 50% at the age of 65 due to the Older Age Security (OAS) and Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS).¹⁷ Additionally, participants who received a BIG in a 2017-2018 Ontario pilot study showed a decrease in rates of HFI and made healthier food choices.¹⁶ Another 2006 pilot study in Newfoundland and Labrador demonstrated that income-based interventions significantly reduced HFI.¹⁶ Accordingly, income-based solutions, such as a Basic Income Guarantee policy, increasing social assistance rates, affordable housing, affordable childcare, and ensuring local jobs pay a living wage that reflect the true costs of living and offer benefits and employment stability, are effective strategies to address poverty, the root cause of HFI.¹⁶

To address the problem of HFI and its impact on health and well-being, the Ontario Dietitians in Public Health recommends THU:

- Monitor food affordability and report on the prevalence and severity of HFI, its root cause, its impact on the health and well-being of the local population; and effective interventions to build awareness and understanding of food insecurity and build support for action.¹⁶
- Support ongoing awareness-raising, education, and training opportunities for staff, community partners, and the public about HFI to dismantle racist systems and reduce health inequities.¹⁶

- Strengthen relationships and engage in meaningful dialogue with local Indigenous communities to better understand what food security and sovereignty mean to them to prioritize support for and collaboration around Indigenous-led food-related initiatives while respecting the self-determination of each community and organization.¹⁶
- Support Indigenous cultural safety training for all staff to foster continuous awareness-raising, self-reflection, and learning.¹⁶
- Collaborate with community partners from various sectors, particularly racialized communities and organizations working to address oppression and systemic racism and determine local priorities for action to address HFI and poverty.¹⁶
- Promote and/or support free income tax clinics for those living in low-income households.¹⁶
- Advocate for municipalities, local businesses, and organizations to become Certified Living Wage Employers and recertify annually.¹⁶
- Call on the Provincial government to:
 - Legislate targets for the reduction of food insecurity as part of the Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy.¹⁶
 - Increase social assistance rates to reflect the costs of living and index Ontario Works rates to inflation going forward.¹⁶
 - Set a minimum wage that aligns with Ontario's living costs and supports employment stability.¹⁶
 - Resume investigating the feasibility of creating a guaranteed living wage (basic income) in Ontario.¹⁶
- Call on the Federal government to implement income-based policies (e.g., increasing the income tax credits for low-income households or lowering the income tax rate for the lowest-income households) and programs to ensure an adequate income for all in Canada, such as implementing a BIG for those aged 18-64 years, and expanding the Canada Child Benefit.¹⁶

Local Public Health Action Related to HFI

THU staff continue to take multiple initiatives to address HFI, which include monitoring food affordability, raising public awareness, knowledge translation, and collaborating with local partners to support policies and programs to promote income security, food literacy, and social well-being. These initiatives include advocating for income-based solutions to tackle poverty, conducting research to gather qualitative data to inform public health actions, and partnering with the Community Food Action Network (CFAN) on planning, implementing, and evaluating food security projects.

Timiskaming BOH History Related to HFI

- **March 2021:** Position Statement and Recommendations on Responses to Food Insecurity
- **June 2020:** MOTION #26R-2020 Basic Income for Income Security during Covid-19 Pandemic and Beyond
- **April 2020:** Motion #18R-2020 response to the Ontario Government as part of their consultation on the Poverty Reduction Strategy
- **March 2020:** Receive 2019 Nutritious Food basket Costing Results and Household Food Insecurity Action and motion #8R-2002 to support KFLA January 28, 2002, motion Monitoring of food insecurity and affordability.
- **April 2019:** Motion #23R-2019. Northern Fruit & Vegetable Program Funding Letter.
- **September 2019:** Motion #44R-2019 Federal Election Campaign.
- **April 2019:** Motion #23R-2019 Northern Fruit and Vegetable Program.
- **Q3 Report (2018).** Letter to the Government of Ontario advocating for reconsideration of basic income pilot cancellation, maintaining the planned social assistance rate increases, and acting on the recommendations from the Income Security Roadmap.
- **April 2018:** Information re. 2017 Nutritious Food Basket Results and Addressing Household Food Insecurity and THU's participation in the Cent\$less campaign.
- **September 2018:** Presentation re. Public Health Policy Priorities for Consideration – 2018 Municipal Election.

- **September 2015:** Resolution #01-2015: Support for a Basic Income Guarantee.
- **January 2012:** Resolution #01-2012. Social assistance funding freeze.
- **December 2008:** Resolution #09-2008. Nutritious Food Basket and Poverty Reduction Strategy

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Appendix A



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October 27, 2022

Hon. Doug Ford, Premier of Ontario via email: doug.fordco@pc.ola.org

Hon. Sylvia Jones, Deputy Premier and Minister of Health via email: sylvia.jones@pc.ola.org

Hon. Merrilee Fullerton, Minister of Children, Community and Social Services via email: Merrilee.Fullertonco@pc.ola.org

Dear Premier Ford, Deputy Premier and Minister Jones, and Minister Fullerton:

[Ontario Dietitians in Public Health](#) (ODPH) is the independent and official voice of Registered Dietitians working in Ontario's public health system. We are writing to you, as newly re-elected leaders of the Province of Ontario, to express serious concern about the 2.34 million Ontarians who experienced household food insecurity in 2021.¹ The situation has undoubtedly worsened in 2022 with an extraordinary rate of food inflation. In Ontario, the price of food purchased from stores in September 2022 was 11.5% higher than in September 2021², rising at a rate not seen since the early 1980s.

Household food insecurity (HFI) is inadequate or insecure access to food due to household financial constraints. **HFI is an urgent public health, human rights, and social justice problem that, if not addressed, will continue to have serious consequences to Ontario's economic progress as well as the health and well-being of citizens.** We strongly urge the Ontario government to adopt policies, as outlined in *Provincial Policy Levers to Reduce Household Food Insecurity*³, proven to effectively reduce HFI:

- Higher minimum wage rates
- Increasing social assistance rates
- Reducing income tax rates for the lowest income households.

The health consequences of food insecurity are a large burden on our province's healthcare system. Not being able to afford food has serious adverse effects on people's physical and mental health and the ability to lead productive lives. Ontarians living with food insecurity are at greater risk for numerous chronic conditions including mental health disorders, non-communicable diseases (e.g., diabetes, hypertension and cardiovascular disease), and infections.¹ People who have chronic conditions and are food insecure are more likely to have negative disease outcomes, be hospitalized, or die prematurely.¹ Policies that effectively reduce food insecurity could offset considerable public expenditures on healthcare in Ontario.

Ontarians receiving social assistance have an extremely high risk for food insecurity. In 2021, 67.2% of Ontario households reliant on social assistance were food insecure.¹ Benefits are inadequate to meet recipients' basic needs. **When people are not able to meet their basic needs, they cannot achieve the physical, mental and social well-being needed to sustain long-term employment.** In a province as wealthy as Ontario, it is unacceptable and unjust that Ontario Works (OW) rates are not based on the actual costs of living, are not indexed to inflation, and do not protect vulnerable citizens from living in dire situations without the money they need to buy food. While Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) rates have increased by 5% and are now indexed to inflation, this is no where near enough to protect ODSP recipients from food insecurity.

Having a job is not necessarily protective against food insecurity. In 2021, 48.2% of food insecure households in Ontario reported wages, salaries, or self-employment as their household's main source of income.¹ The high prevalence of food insecurity among those in the workforce reflects precarious and low-paying jobs and multi-person households with a single income-earner.⁴

Food charity is NOT a solution to the problem of HFI. Food banks may provide temporary food relief but do not address the persistent problem of inadequate income.⁵ Only about one-quarter of households experiencing food insecurity go to food banks and for those who do use them, food insecurity does not go away.⁶

Individuals and families struggling to put food on the table also struggle to afford other basic needs. HFI is a sign of deprivation, rooted in inadequate and unstable incomes that have not kept pace with the costs of living. ODPH strongly encourages the Government of Ontario to adopt income-based policy solutions that effectively reduce food insecurity. You have the power to make our province a better place for all Ontarians to lead healthier and happier lives.

Sincerely,



Elizabeth Smith
Co-Chair ODPH Executive



Erin Reyce, RD
Co-Chair, Food Insecurity Workgroup

cc.

Peter Tabuns, MPP Toronto–Danforth, Leader, Official Opposition and Leader, New Democratic Party of Ontario via email tabunsp-qp@ndp.on.ca

France Gélinas, MPP Nickel Belt, Health Critic via email: gélinas-qp@ndp.on.ca

Chandra Pasma, MPP Ottawa-West Nepean, Poverty and Homelessness Reduction Critic via email: CPasma-CO@ndp.on.ca

Laura Mae Lindo, MPP Kitchener-Centre, Anti-Racism and Equity Critic via email: LLindo-QP@ndp.on.ca

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