

A photograph of a person's hands holding an empty, black, textured wallet. The background is a blurred grocery store aisle with shelves of produce and other items. The image is overlaid with a blue and purple geometric shape in the bottom left corner.

Food Insecurity in York Region: **The 2023 Nutritious Food Basket**

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What is the Nutritious Food Basket?

Each year, York Region Public Health conducts the Nutritious Food Basket (NFB) survey to determine whether people living on social assistance or minimum wage can afford to pay for rent and a healthy diet. The NFB is a tool that calculates the cost of healthy eating for families and individuals. It provides a snapshot of the important role income plays in food insecurity.

How food costs are measured

To calculate the cost of healthy eating, the lowest prices for a month's worth of food are collected from nine grocery stores across York Region. The foods¹ in the NFB reflect Canada's Food Guide² and do not include convenience foods, snack foods, or infant formula. In 2023, the prices of foods were collected in person and online as part of a pilot study. The NFB is not meant to be used for diet advice or as a menu-planning tool.³

After the cost of healthy eating is calculated, it is compared to local rental rates and income from social assistance or minimum wage in several family scenarios. This provides real-world context to the cost of food because housing and food are basic needs that make up a large part of a household's monthly expenses. The average rental cost for different types of homes in York Region is obtained from the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation.⁴ Social assistance programs included in the income scenarios are Ontario Works, the Ontario Disability Support Program, and the Old Age Security/Guaranteed Income Supplement. The scenarios assume that the household has filed its taxes and has received benefits that contribute to its total income. The total income for each scenario includes the GST/HST credit, Ontario Trillium Benefit, and the Climate Action Incentive payment. For minimum wage earners, the Canada Worker Benefits is included, and amounts paid for Employment Insurance and Canada Pension Plan are deducted. For scenarios with children, the Canada and Ontario Child Benefits are also included.

Food and housing costs compared to social assistance and minimum wage in York Region

Many low-income households in York Region cannot afford a nutritious diet. The scenarios in Figure 1 show that social assistance is not enough to pay for rent and food, let alone any other expenses.

For a family of four, the monthly cost of food is \$1,219. This means a family of four, whose main income is from Ontario Works, would have to spend 44 per cent of their income to buy food alone. However, as Figure 1 shows, the cost of rent and food is more than income available, leaving the household \$308 in debt each month.

A senior receiving Old Age Security/Guaranteed Income Supplement would have to spend 85 per cent of their social assistance income on rent and food, leaving \$295 left over. In this scenario, the senior person is not eligible for the Canadian Pension Plan. Limited income, lack of affordable housing, and potential mobility and transportation challenges would make it difficult for a senior to pay for other living expenses.

A single parent living on Ontario Works with two children would only have \$125 remaining after paying for food and rent. Similarly, for a one-person household receiving assistance from the Ontario Disability Support Program or Ontario Works, income cannot cover the cost of rent and food.

When there is not enough money, there is pressure to go without other costly living expenses such as childcare, internet, phone, and transportation. These scenarios demonstrate that food insecurity is largely tied to the amount of income available to a household.

Figure 1. Ontario Works, Ontario Disability Support Program, and Old Age Security/Guaranteed Income Supplement Income Scenarios

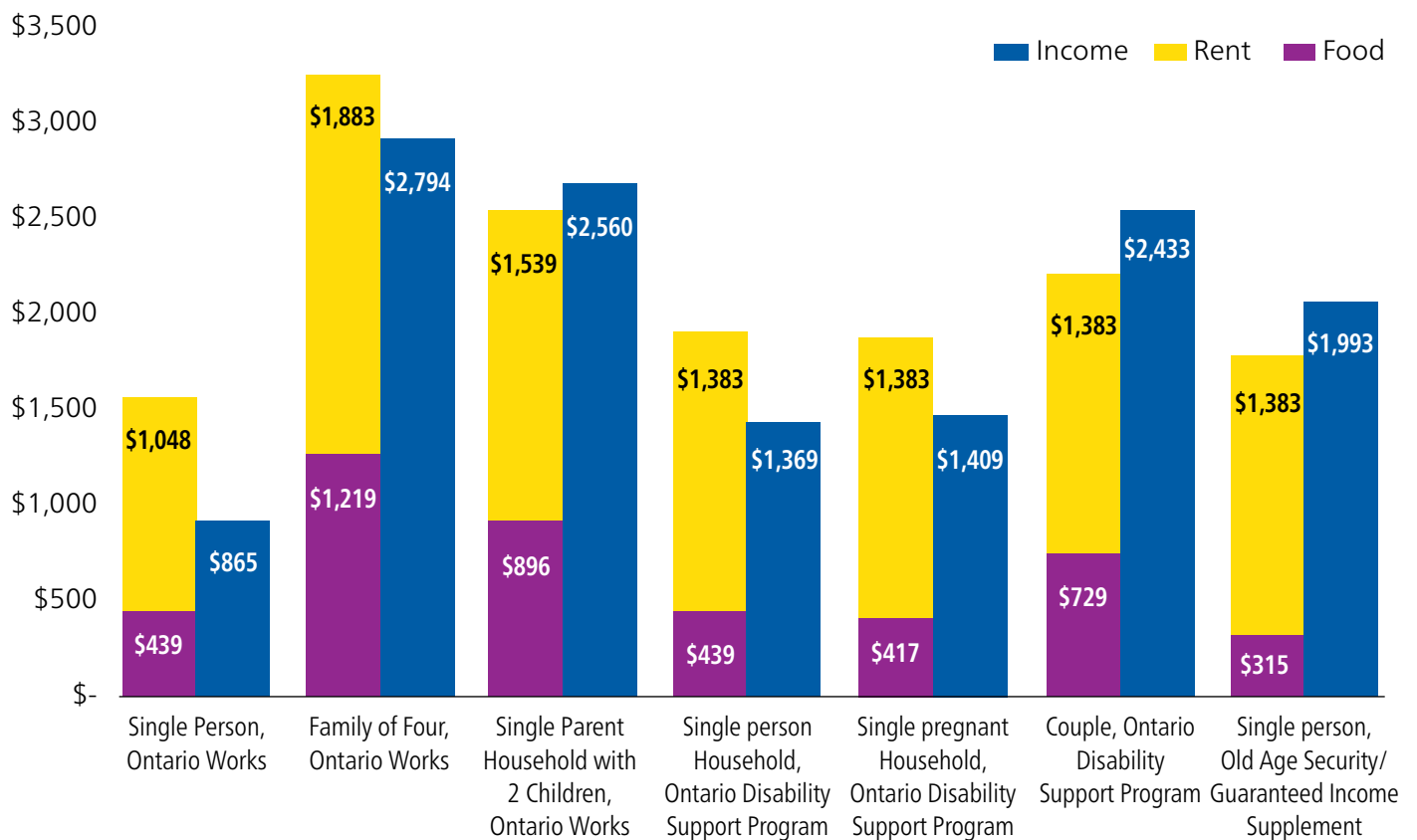
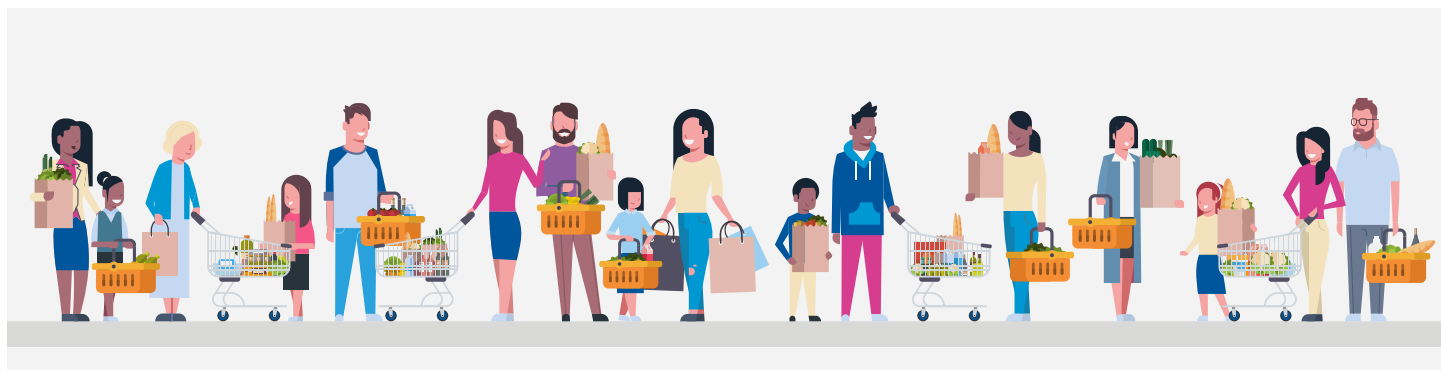
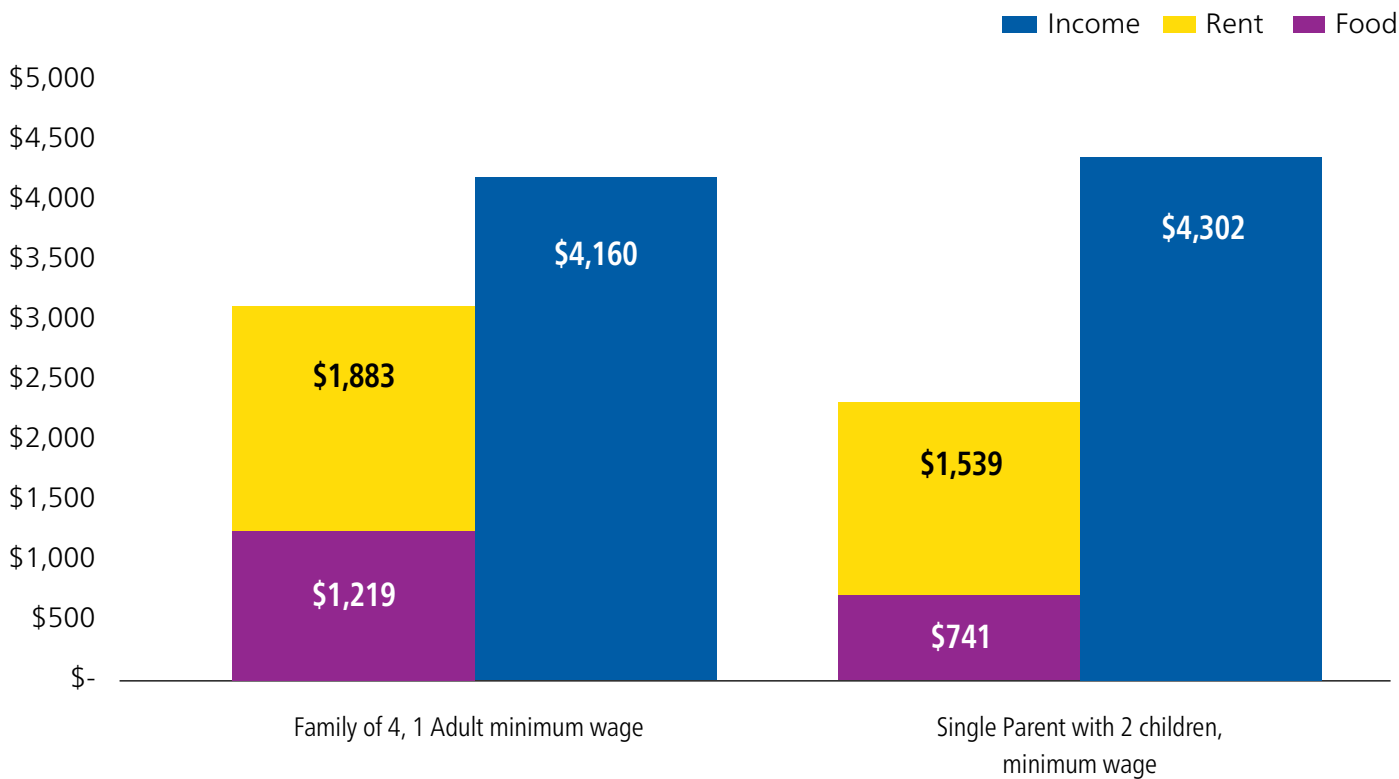


Figure 2 shows two families living on minimum wage: a single female parent working 40 hours a week with a 3-year-old girl and a 4-year-old boy, renting a 2-bedroom apartment, and a family of four, with one parent working fulltime, with a 14-year-old boy and an 8-year-old girl, renting a 3-bedroom apartment. After paying for rent and food, there are limited funds remaining to pay for other family-related necessities such as childcare, transportation, extracurricular activities, and medications. Individuals living in severely food-insecure households are more likely to delay or not fill drug prescriptions because of medication costs.⁵ When working fulltime does not provide enough income to be able to meet basic needs, minimum wage is shown to be inadequate.

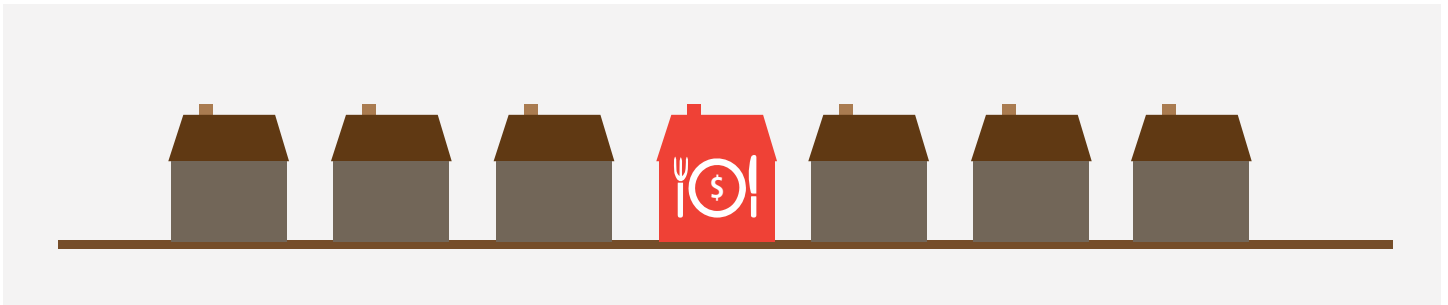
In a recent report, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) presented the concept of a “rental wage,” which is the hourly wage required to afford rent while working a standard 40-hour week and spending no more than 30% of income on housing. CCPA’s study examining the gap between the minimum wage and what it costs to rent an apartment in Canada found the rental wage is considerably higher than minimum wage in every single province.⁶ The Food Bank of York Region,⁷ Ontario Dietitians in Public Health,⁸ PROOF⁹ and Public Health Ontario¹⁰ recommend that the provincial government increase the minimum wage rate to help reduce food insecurity among workers, who make up the majority of food insecure people in Canada.

Figure 2. Minimum Wage Income Scenarios



Food insecurity in York Region

Food insecurity is the inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints¹¹ or, put simply, not having enough money to buy food. People experiencing food insecurity range from worrying about affording food to eating less nutritious meals to going whole days without food.¹² According to the most recent Canadian Income Survey, in 2021-2022 15.5 per cent of York Region households, which is about 1 in 7 households, experienced food insecurity in the past year.¹³ In another survey about children and youth (ages 1 to 17), in 2019 11 per cent of children (approximately 23,500 children) lived in a food-insecure household in York Region.¹⁴ Struggling to put food on the table is a reality for many York Region residents.



Food insecurity is a public health issue

From a public health viewpoint, food insecurity stands in the way of people reaching their full health potential. Food insecurity is linked to poor mental and physical health. Adults living in food-insecure households have a greater risk of adverse health effects^{8,15} including:



Heart disease



Poor dental health



Mood and anxiety disorders



High blood pressure



Depression

Children and youth living in food-insecure households are more likely to have hyperactivity (can't sit still), asthma, and depression later in life.^{16,17} Severe food insecurity is related to poor diet quality¹⁸ and greater risk of being hospitalized.¹⁹ Food insecurity also makes it difficult to self-manage health conditions such as diabetes and HIV.^{20, 21}

While food insecurity can affect people of all ages, many groups of people are unevenly impacted by food insecurity. These groups include low-income households, renters, families with children, social assistance recipients, and single female parents.²² These groups reflect many of the households that cannot afford to eat healthy in Figures 1 and 2. Another group unevenly impacted by food insecurity is people in Indigenous households, who are more likely to experience food insecurity than other racial or cultural groups.²² The food insecurity of Indigenous peoples can be traced back to colonial policies that disrupted Indigenous food systems by restricting access to traditional lands and waterways and banning hunting and gathering practices.^{23,24} Supporting the food security of Indigenous peoples must be done alongside self-determination and with an understanding of the impacts of colonialism.^{25, 26, 27} All people should be able to reach their full health potential without disadvantage due to income, race, or any other socially constructed circumstance.

Food programs won't solve food insecurity

Programs such as food banks and soup kitchens are popular responses to food insecurity. However, providing food to people who face food insecurity does not address the root cause which is low income. While food banks relieve hunger for a short time, people living in food-insecure households may or may not experience hunger. Household food insecurity is not a measure of hunger; it is a marker of inadequate income. In Canada's ten provinces, 6,906,000 people lived in food-insecure households, while there were 1,462,795 food bank visits as reported by Food Banks Canada in 2022. This indicates the scale of food insecurity far exceeds that of food bank usage.²⁸ Many food banks recognize that food insecurity is tied to poverty and other underlying issues such as low wages and lack of affordable housing.^{29,30}

Food education programs are another response to food insecurity. There is a misconception that teaching budgeting and food skills to low-income residents can lessen the impact of food insecurity. However, research shows that people experiencing food insecurity already apply many resourceful strategies to stretch their food supply while on a limited budget.^{31,32} In fact, adults in food-insecure households are more likely to use budgets when shopping than people in households that don't experience food insecurity.³³ Research also shows that adults living in food-insecure households have the same level of food skills, such as cooking and adjusting recipes, as those living in households that don't experience food insecurity.³³

Addressing food insecurity

Food insecurity is not about a lack of food; it's about a lack of income. Likewise, income is a key factor in food affordability. Improving the economic and social conditions of families and individuals is essential to reducing food insecurity. Research supports policies that improve income such as jobs with living wages, basic income and increasing social assistance rates.⁸

Everyone has a role to play in addressing food insecurity. Actions that individuals can take include:



Learn more about food insecurity

- [Video: Household Food Insecurity in Canada, 2021 – PROOF](#)
- [It's Not Just About Food – York Region Food Network](#)
- [Indigenous Food Insecurity - PROOF](#)
- [Fact Sheet Race and Food Insecurity – PROOF and FoodShare](#)
- [Position Statement and Recommendations on Responses to Food Insecurity - Ontario Dietitians in Public Health](#)



Spread the word

- Talk to your family and friends about the link between income and food insecurity.
- Share what you have learned on social media.



Volunteer or host a free tax clinic

Without filing for income tax, many eligible people won't receive government benefits and aren't eligible for social assistance programs. Support your community by volunteering your time and skills at a [Free Tax Clinic](#).

For More Information

Visit [York.ca/foodinsecurity](https://york.ca/foodinsecurity)

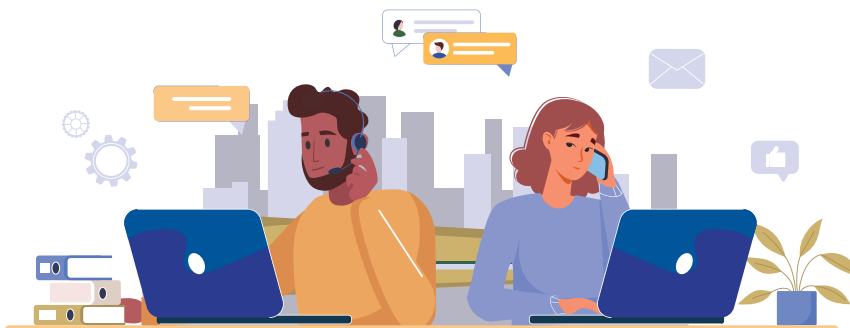
Or contact Access York

Phone: 1-877-464-9675

TTY 1-866-512-6228 or 905-895-4293

Email: accessyork@york.ca

Accessible formats or communication supports are available upon request.



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