

FOOD INSECURITY IN YORK REGION

MONITORING FOOD
AFFORDABILITY 2024

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York Region

Table of contents

Food insecurity is increasing in York Region.....3

**The Nutritious Food Basket is used to monitor food
affordability.....3**

**Social assistance is not enough to pay for rent and a nutritious
diet in York Region.....4**

**Households living on minimum wage are unlikely to be able to
afford basic needs6**

Food insecurity is an urgent and serious public health issue.....7

Food programs won’t solve food insecurity.....7

**Addressing food insecurity effectively requires policies that
provide adequate incomes.....8**

Everyone has a role to play9

For more information10

References.....10

Food insecurity is increasing in York Region

Food insecurity is the inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints or, put simply, not having enough money to buy food.¹

People experiencing food insecurity range from worrying about affording food, to eating less nutritious meals, to even going whole days without eating.² According to the most recent Canadian Income Survey, in 2023, 19.4 per cent of York Region households experienced food insecurity in the past year.³ This is up from 2019, when 11.1 per cent of York Region households experienced food insecurity.³ Between 2019 and 2023, the number of households experiencing food insecurity increased from 1 in 9 households to almost 1 in 5 households, which translated into 79,300 York Region households in 2023.⁴

Unfortunately, struggling to put food on the table is a reality for an increasing number of York Region residents.



The Nutritious Food Basket is used to monitor food affordability

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 nutritious diet. The NFB calculates the cost of healthy eating for families and individuals and provides a snapshot of the important role income plays in food insecurity.

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, both in-person and online. The foods in the NFB reflect Canada's Food Guide and do not include convenience foods, snack foods, household products (such as toilet paper), infant formula or foods from all religious and cultural groups.^{5,6} The NFB is not meant to be used for diet advice or as a menu-planning tool.⁷

After the cost the NFB is calculated, it is added to local rental rates and compared to 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 costs for different sizes of apartments in York Region are obtained from the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation.⁷ The various scenarios found in the NFB assume that the household has filed its taxes and has received provincial and federal benefits that contribute to its total income. 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 total income for each scenario includes the GST/HST credit, the Ontario Trillium Benefit, and the Canada Carbon Rebate 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.



Social assistance is not enough to pay for rent and a nutritious diet in York Region

The 2024 NFB highlights that 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 \$1,268. This means that a family of four, whose main income is from Ontario Works, would have to spend 43 per cent of their income to buy food alone. As Figure 1 shows, the cost of both rent and food is more than the income available, leaving the family of four whose main income is from Ontario Works in a \$373 deficit every month.

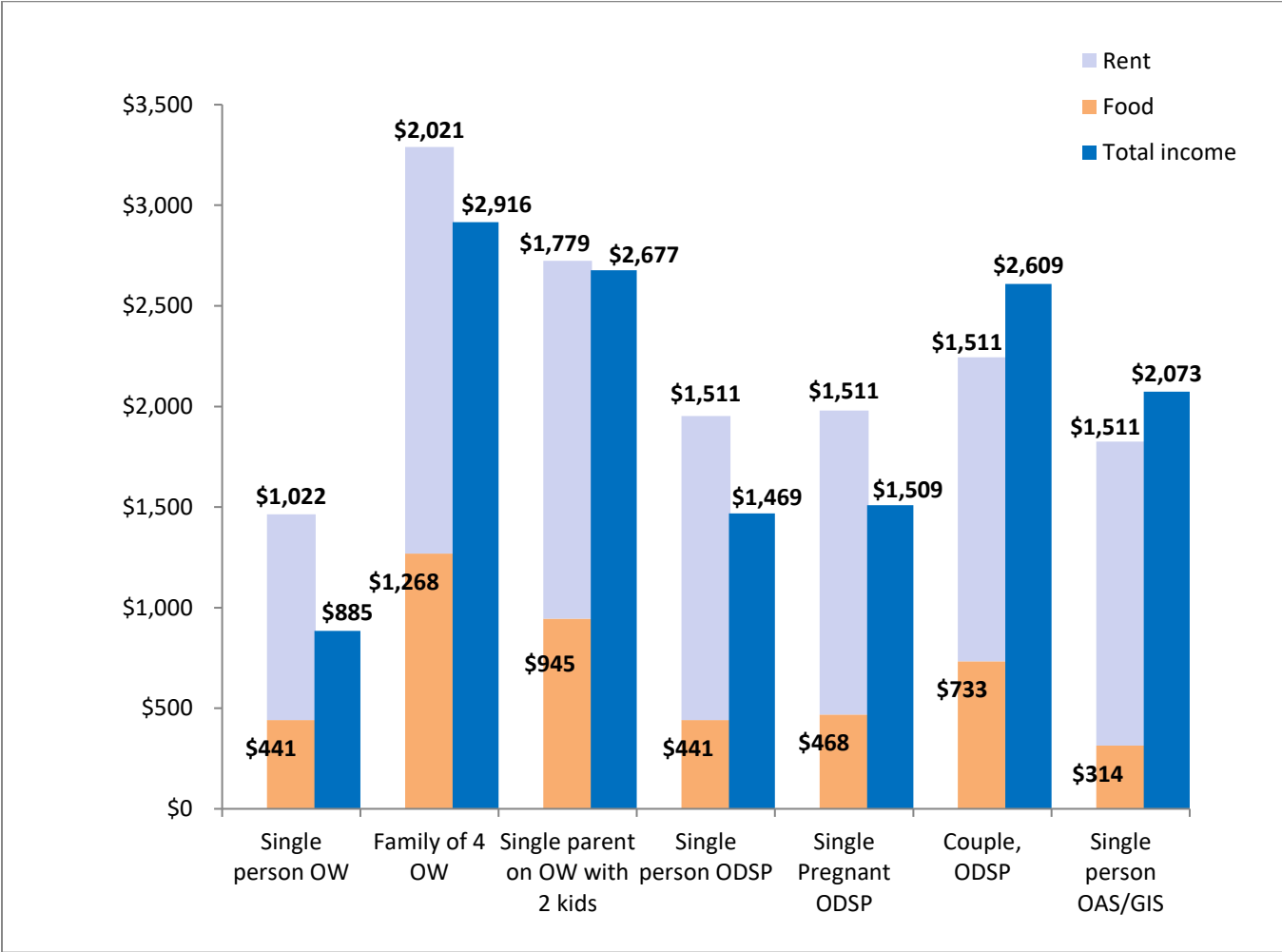
A single parent living on Ontario Works with two children over 6 years of age would have a \$47 deficit each month after paying for food and rent. Similarly, a one-person household receiving assistance from the Ontario Disability Support Program or Ontario Works cannot cover the cost of rent and food.

A senior receiving Old Age Security/Guaranteed Income Supplement would have to spend 88 per cent of their social assistance income on rent and food, leaving only \$248 left over every month. In this scenario, the senior person is not eligible for the Canadian Pension Plan.

When there is not enough money coming into the household, there is pressure for families and individuals to go without other costly living expenses such as childcare, internet, a 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 (OW), Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP), and Old Age Security/Guaranteed Income Supplement (OAS/GIS) Monthly Income Scenarios



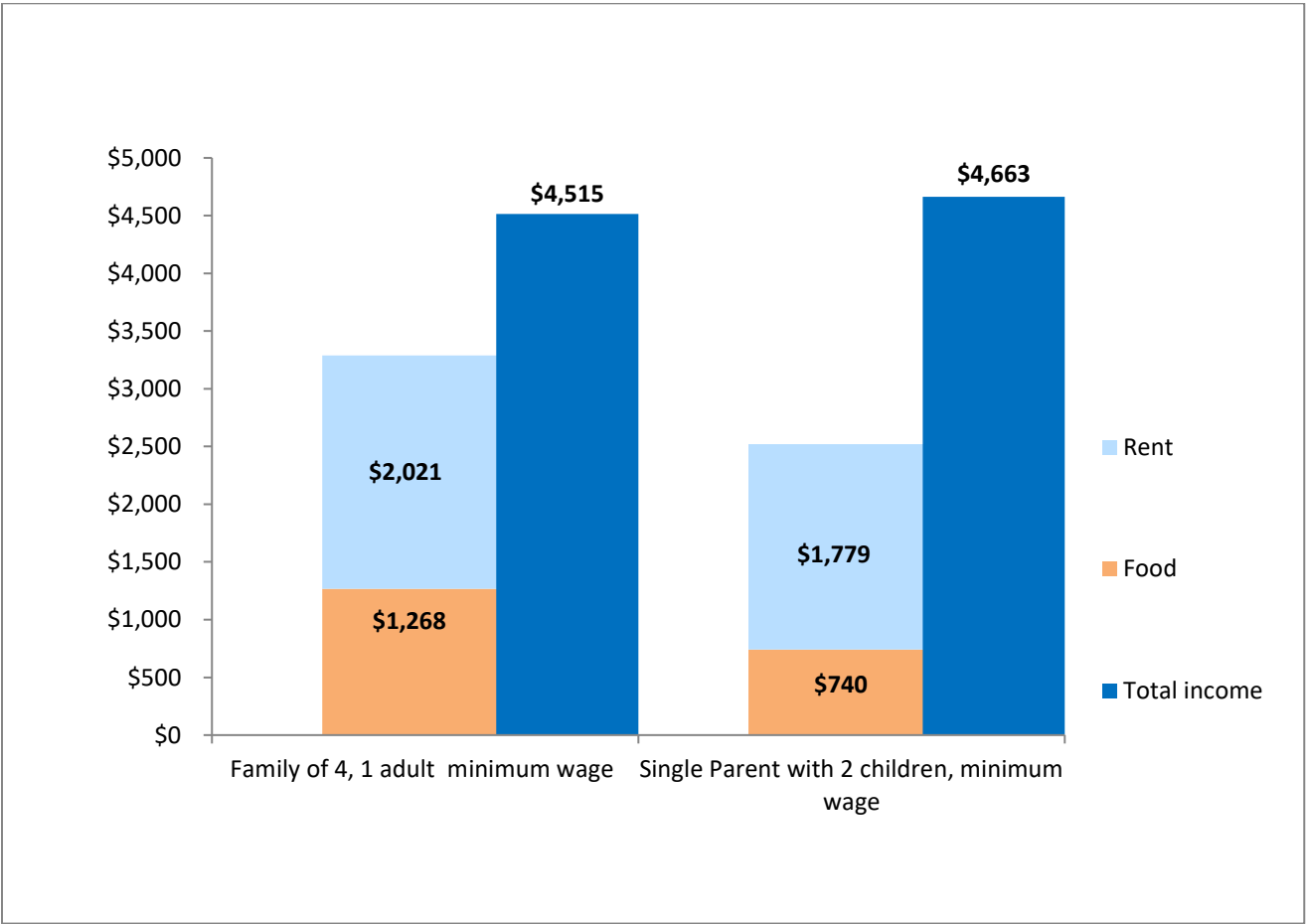
Households living on minimum wage are unlikely to be able to afford basic needs

When working full-time at minimum wage barely covers the costs of rent and food, minimum wage is proven to be inadequate to meet a family’s basic needs.

Figure 2 shows income and expenses for two family scenarios living on minimum wage. One family is 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. The other scenario is a family of four, with one parent working fulltime, 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.

Figure 2. Minimum Wage Monthly Income Scenarios



Food insecurity is an urgent and serious public health issue

From a public health perspective, 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 including:^{8,9}

- Heart disease
- High blood pressure
- Poor dental health
- Depression
- Mood and anxiety disorders

Children and youth living in food-insecure households are more likely to have hyperactivity, asthma, and depression later in life.^{10,11} According to a recent systematic review, food insecurity is directly linked to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and may be a source of toxic stress, which can affect brain development in the early years and have negative implications on children.¹² Toxic stresses can have long term consequences for learning, behaviour, and both physical and mental health. Similarly, a 2024 meta review of child and adolescent experiences and consequences of food insecurity concluded that food insecurity affects growth, diet, psychological development and mental health.¹³

Severe food insecurity is related to poor diet quality and a greater risk of being hospitalized.^{14,15} Food insecurity also makes it difficult to self-manage health conditions such as diabetes and HIV.^{16,17} Individuals living in severely food insecure households are more likely to delay or avoid filling drug prescriptions because of medication costs.¹⁸

While food insecurity can affect anyone, 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.¹⁹ These groups reflect many of the households that are represented 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.¹⁹ 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.^{20,21} Reducing food insecurity of Indigenous peoples must be done alongside self-determination and with an understanding of the impacts of colonialism.²²⁻²⁴ 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 meal programs are popular responses to food insecurity. These programs are important initiatives that meet urgent needs, but they are not long-term solutions that address the root cause of the problem. Many food banks recognize that food insecurity is tied to poverty and other underlying issues, such as low wages and lack of

affordable housing.^{25,26} Providing food to people who face food insecurity does not address the root cause of the problem, which is low income.

Household food insecurity is not a measure of hunger – it is a marker of inadequate income.

In 2023, 8.7 million people lived in food-insecure households within Canada's 10 provinces, yet there were only 1.9 million food bank visits, as reported by Food Banks Canada in March, 2023.^{27,28} This indicates that the scale of food insecurity is over four times the rate of food bank visits.

Food education programs are another common response to food insecurity. There is a misconception that teaching budgeting and food skills to people experiencing low-income can lessen the impact of food insecurity. However, research shows that people in food insecure households already apply many resourceful strategies to stretch their food supply while on a limited budget.^{29,30} 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.³¹ 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.³¹

Addressing food insecurity effectively requires policies that provide adequate incomes

Food insecurity is not about a lack of food – it's about a lack of income. Therefore, income is the key factor in addressing food insecurity. Improving the economic and social conditions of families and individuals is essential to reducing food insecurity.

Research about food insecurity actively supports policies that improve income such as basic income, increasing social assistance rates and jobs with living wages.⁸ That is why organizations such as the [Daily Bread Food Bank \(advocacy\)](#), [Food Banks Canada \(Policy recommendations\)](#) and the [National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health](#) support advocacy efforts to reduce food insecurity.^{25,32,33} Many food bank clients rely on fixed incomes, primarily from Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program. Food banks call on closing the gaps in our social safety net so that every person living in Canada has sufficient income to afford their basic [needs](#).²⁵

The Food Bank of York Region, Ontario Dietitians in Public Health, PROOF and Public Health Ontario all 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.^{8,34-36}

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 per cent of income on housing. The CCPA's

study examined the gap between the minimum wage and the rental cost of an apartment in Canada and found that the rental wage is considerably higher than minimum wage in every single province.³⁷ For Ontario in October 2023, the rental wage for a one-bedroom apartment was \$28.50 per hour, and for a two-bedroom apartment it was \$32.63, compared to the minimum wage, which was \$16.55 in 2023.³⁷

York Region is committed to supporting policies that improve incomes. For example, in its 2024 Ontario Budget Consultation report, The Regional Municipality of York stated that the Ontario Works benefits amounts have not kept pace with growing costs. The Region requested that the Province increase and index Ontario Works rates with inflation, similar to Ontario Disability Support Program.³⁸ Similarly, the [York Region Health and Well-being Review](#)³⁹ draws attention to the fact that decreasing income security impacts residents' ability to afford basic needs. The Review recommends that the provincial government implement living wage and basic income policies, increase and index Ontario Works rates with inflation to meet life's basic needs, and include the reduction of food insecurity as a component of all appropriate government policies.⁴⁰

Everyone has a role to play in addressing food insecurity

Actions that individuals can take include:



Learn more about food insecurity:

- [Food Insecurity in Ontario: Public Health Ontario](#)³⁶
- [Data on Food Insecurity in Canada: PROOF](#)²⁷
- [Video: Household Food Insecurity in Canada, 2021 – PROOF](#)⁴¹
- [Indigenous Food Insecurity - PROOF](#)⁴²
- [Fact Sheet Race and Food Insecurity – PROOF and FoodShare](#)⁴³
- [Position Statement and Recommendations on Responses to Food Insecurity - Ontario Dietitians in Public Health](#)⁴⁴



Spread the word and advocate:

- Talk to your family and friends about the link between income and food insecurity.
- Share what you have learned on social media.
- Advocate to members of senior levels of government about the importance of the following:
 - living wage and basic income policies
 - an increase and indexation of Ontario Works rates with inflation to meet life's basic needs
 - the inclusion of food insecurity as a component of all appropriate government policies



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](#).⁴⁵

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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