

2023
REPORT

Food Affordability in Niagara

Nutritious Food Basket Survey





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Introduction

Niagara Region Public Health has re-introduced the annual Nutritious Food Basket (NFB) Survey to monitor the affordability and accessibility of food in Niagara. The results of the NFB will support advocacy efforts and can drive policy change related to nutritious eating. The goal of this report is to share the current cost of nutritious eating, highlight the financial impact of nutritious eating on various income scenarios, and describe the local food insecurity data.

Nutritious Food Basket Survey

The Nutritious Food Basket (NFB) is a survey tool used by various levels of government to monitor the cost and affordability of nutritious eating according to Canada’s Food Guideⁱ. The NFB survey is conducted in a sample of large chain grocery stores that consistently carry a full range of food items. The NFB includes a range of standard food items and is calculated by averaging the lowest cost of each food item and the quantity needed for various age and sex groups.

The NFB includes 61 food items that align with the 2019 Canada’s Food Guide and the eating and purchasing behaviours of Canadians.

The food items fall into the four categories:

- Vegetables and fruits
- Protein foods
- Whole grains
- Fats and oils



The NFB does not include personal care items (e.g., personal hygiene products, toilet paper, soap, diapers, etc.), processed or convenience foods (e.g., frozen meals and snack foods), religious or cultural foods, infant food, or special diet foods (e.g., gluten-free).

Although the NFB is aligned with Canada’s Food Guide, it is not intended to be used as a proxy for the cost of Canada’s Food Guide as it only includes a small subset of foods and does not account for the variety of ways one may follow the guideⁱ. The NFB is also not intended to be used as a dietary guide or for meal planning as it does not reflect the variety of ways that food can be consumed. Further, the NFB does not consider special or infant (children under the age of two) diet requirementsⁱⁱ.



Data Collection

For the 2023 collection of the NFB, the Ontario Monitoring Food Affordability Reference Documentⁱⁱⁱ, 2019 National Nutritious Food Basket tool provided by Health Canada, and previous NFB surveys conducted in Niagara were used to guide the development of data collection methods.

Niagara has 52 grocery stores that are classified as large stores consistently offering a full range of grocery items. A sample of nine grocery stores was selected for the 2023 NFB collection. To ensure representation across the region, population centre size, urban versus rural population distribution, and other geographical considerations of interest to staff, contributed to store selection. Eight stores were in small, medium, and large population centres, and one was in a rural community. The NFB was conducted from May 17 to May 30, 2023. Four stores were surveyed in person and five were surveyed using online storefront platforms. Where in-person surveys were required, stores were contacted ahead of time to obtain permission.

For all 61 food items, the lowest-priced item was recorded in accordance with the NFB survey collection guidelines. For example, for sodium-free canned chickpeas, the lowest cost of that item was recorded, even if it was priced higher than a non-sodium-free can of chickpeas. When an item was not available, a pre-determined alternative was costed. In cases when an item was not in stock, no price was recorded. To reduce any errors and inconsistencies, two individuals conducted the survey at the same time. Once the survey was completed, results were compared, and any differences were resolved. For in-person surveys, comparisons were completed prior to leaving the store.

Results of the Niagara NFB

The food item costs across the nine stores were averaged and input into a costing spreadsheet tool provided by Health Canada. The tool calculates the cost of each food item required for 22 different groups based on age, sex and life stage (e.g., women who are breastfeeding). Table 1 presents the weekly and monthly cost of the NFB for different age and sex groups in Niagara.

Table 1: Weekly and monthly cost of the NFB for different age and sex groups in Niagara

Group	Age	Weekly cost of the NFB	Monthly cost of the NFB
Boys	2 to 3	\$42	\$181
Boys	4 to 8	\$47	\$206
Males	9 to 13	\$61	\$267
Males	14 to 18	\$74	\$322
Males	19 to 30	\$84	\$365
Males	31 to 50	\$79	\$344
Males	51 to 70	\$70	\$304
Males	Over 70	\$65	\$285
Girls	2 to 3	\$42	\$181
Girls	4 to 8	\$47	\$204
Females	9 to 13	\$61	\$264
Females	14 to 18	\$61	\$264
Females	19 to 30	\$66	\$286
Females	31 to 50	\$65	\$282
Females	51 to 70	\$60	\$260
Females	Over 70	\$57	\$249
Pregnant	18 and younger	\$71	\$308
Pregnant	19-30	\$75	\$328
Pregnant	31-50	\$74	\$322
Breastfeeding	18 and younger	\$70	\$306
Breastfeeding	19-30	\$75	\$324
Breastfeeding	31-50	\$74	\$322

NOTE:

An additional 5% is added to the total cost of the NFB to account for meal preparation and cooking needs (e.g., spices, condiments).

All costs are rounded to the nearest whole number.

The monthly cost is equal to the weekly cost multiplied by 4.345.

The Cost of Nutritious Eating in Niagara

What is the monthly cost of nutritious eating in Niagara?

One-person household	One-person household (senior)	Single-parent household
\$414	\$299	\$848
Married couple	Family of four	
\$689	\$1212	

The weekly and monthly cost of the NFB for different household unit types in Niagara is provided in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Weekly and monthly cost of the NFB by household unit type

Household Unit Type	Weekly cost of NFB	Monthly cost of NFB
Family of Four		
• 2 adults (male and female) ages 31-50	\$279	\$1212
• 2 children (male age 14, female age 8)		
Single Parent Household		
• 1 adult (female) aged 31-50	\$186	\$848
• 2 children (male age 14, female age 8)		
Married Couple		
• 2 adults (male and female) ages 31-50	\$144	\$689
One Person Household		
• Male aged 31-50	\$79	\$414
One Person Household (Senior)		
• Female over age 70	\$57	\$299

NOTE:

An additional 5% is added to the total cost of the NFB to account for meal preparation and cooking needs (i.e., spices, condiments).

All costs are rounded to the nearest whole number.

The monthly cost is equal to the weekly cost multiplied by 4.345.

To calculate food expenses for a family of three, 5% is added to the monthly NFB

To calculate food expenses for two people living together, 10% is added to the monthly NFB

To calculate food expenses for a person living alone, 20% is added to the monthly NFB



NFB Income Scenarios

The cost of nutritious eating, in addition to the average cost of rent per month, can be compared with household income from both employment and social assistance to demonstrate the adequacy of incomes in covering the cost of basic living needs in Niagara. Eight income scenarios were developed and include income from employment or social assistance, as well as applicable federal/provincial income supports available to those eligible who have filed their taxes (i.e., Canada Child Benefit, Ontario Child Benefit, GST/HST Credit etc.).

Both individuals and families in Niagara face challenges in covering the costs of living and have very few funds, if any, remaining after paying for rent and food per month. These results demonstrate that both income from minimum wage employment and social assistance rates provided by Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program are inadequate in covering the costs of living.

Table 3 below presents the total monthly income of eight income scenarios, average monthly rent, the cost of nutritious eating, the percentage of income required for rent and food, and the funds remaining for other living necessities (e.g., utilities, transportation, child-care, cell phone, clothing etc.) in Niagara. Note that it is recommended that a maximum of 30% of your income should be attributed to housing costs.

Table 3. Income Scenarios and funds remaining after rent and food

Income Scenario	Monthly income	Average monthly rent (% of income required for rent)	Cost of nutritious eating (% of income required for food)	Remaining Funds
Family of Four, Ontario Works	\$2873	\$1366 (48%)	\$1212 (42%)	\$295
Family of Four, Full-time minimum wage earner	\$4218	\$1366 (32%)	\$1212 (29%)	\$1640
Family of Four, Median after-tax income	\$9329	\$1366 (15%)	\$1212 (13%)	\$6751
Single Parent Household, with two children, Ontario Works	\$2636	\$1258 (48%)	\$848 (32%)	\$530
Married Couple, Ontario Disability Support Program	\$1792	\$1070 (60%)	\$689 (38%)	\$33
One Person Household, Ontario Works	\$851	\$833 (98%)	\$414 (49%)	-\$396
One Person Household, Ontario Disability Support Program	\$1387	\$1070 (77%)	\$414 (30%)	-\$97
One Person Household, Old age Security/ Guaranteed Income	\$2035	\$1070 (53%)	\$299 (15%)	\$666

Note:

All costs are rounded to the nearest whole number.

To calculate food expenses for a family of three, 5% is added to the monthly NFB

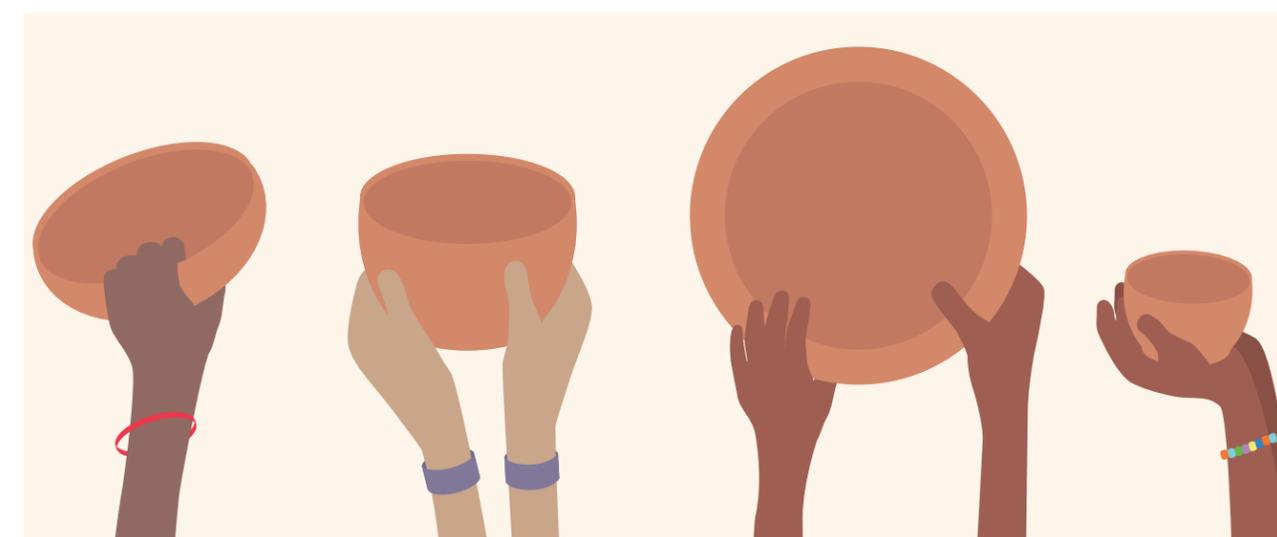
To calculate food expenses for two people living together, 10% is added to the monthly NFB

To calculate food expenses for a person living alone, 20% is added to the monthly NFB

Note: Data for income scenarios is based on the 2022 tax year and is current as of June 2023. The total income across income scenarios does not reflect the more recent increases to the Canada Child Benefit or the introduction of the one-time doubling of the HST/GST credit in the form of the Grocery Rebate for 2023. It should also be noted that the rental costs reflect the average rent paid for occupied units in Niagara and do not reflect the current asking price of vacant units.

Trends Over Time

Prior to 2023, the most recent collection of the NFB was in 2017. Since then, the food items, household unit types, protocol, and data collection tools used to conduct the survey have changed. As such, the 2023 results cannot accurately be compared to past years. However, in the subsequent annual collection of the NFB survey moving forward, time trends will be presented.



Food Insecurity

Food Insecurity Defined

Food insecurity is defined as ‘inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints’ and can range from worrying about running out of food, to going days without food^{iv}.

Marginal food insecurity: worrying about running out of food and/or having access to a limited selection of food due to financial constraints^{iv}.

Moderate food insecurity: compromise in the quality or quantity of food due to financial constraints^{iv}.

Severe food insecurity: not eating enough food and in extreme cases to go a day(s) without food due to financial constraints^{iv}.

Food Insecurity Myth vs. Fact

MYTH:

Households are food insecure because they lack the skills to meal plan, budget, and cook meals.

FACT:

Compared to adults in food secure households, more adults in food insecure households shop with a budget. Meal planning and food preparation skills do not differ between food insecure and food secure adults^v.

MYTH:

Households are food insecure because they spend money on other things.

FACT:

Food insecure households spend significantly less on everything compared to food secure households and prioritize spending on basic needs above all else^{vi}.

MYTH:

People who are food insecure do not work.

FACT:

While individuals who receive social assistance are at a greater risk for insecurity, the majority of households in Canada who report being food insecure are employed, receiving income from wages and salaries^{vii}.

MYTH:

Food insecurity is a problem solved by food.

FACT:

Food insecurity is an income problem requiring income solutions. Research consistently shows that food insecurity is reduced by policies and interventions that improve the financial situation of individuals and families. Charitable programs are a temporary solution and while food literacy education and alternative food retail contribute to other positive health and social outcomes, they do not address the root cause of food insecurity^{viii}.

Food insecurity in Ontario and Niagara

The Canadian Income Survey (CIS) and the Canadian Survey of Children and Youth (CHSCY) use the Household Food Security Module to assess the level of food insecurity among adults and children^{ix}.

Recent Ontario data from the CIS suggests that household food insecurity has significantly increased from 2021 to 2022. This increase is among the proportion of households that are marginally and moderately food insecure. In 2022, 18.7% of households in Ontario are food insecure^{ix}.

Local estimates from the CIS suggest that in 2022 one in five households (20.7%) in Niagara are food insecure^{ix}. It is important to note that this may be an underestimation of food insecurity in Niagara as participation in the CIS is limited to residents who are living in households, therefore residents who are homeless, incarcerated or hospitalized at the time of the survey, are not able to participate^{ix}. There are no significant differences between Niagara and Ontario.

“Everything costs more. I used to be able to save a little from month to month, not any more. People on a fixed income haven’t seen a decent increase ever, surely not a “living wage”. It’s hard to make ends meet. Now I can’t save for my final expenses. That worries me.” -Anonymous

From 2019 to 2021:

4.7%

of Niagara households are marginally food insecure^{ix}

7.9%

of Niagara households are moderately food insecure^{ix}

4.4%

of Niagara households are severely food insecure^{ix}

In 2019, 18.3% of Niagara children and youth one to 17 years of age lived in food insecure households^{xiii}. There are no significant differences between Niagara and Ontario.

Approximately **one in five** households in Niagara (20.7%) are food insecure.



Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to unprecedented challenges for Niagara residents in covering the cost of living. In 2022, 26.2% of Niagara residents 18 years or older reported that the COVID-19 pandemic made it harder to pay for enough food to feed themselves and members of their household^x. In 2022, 31.7% of Niagara residents 18 years or older reported that the COVID-19 pandemic made it harder to pay for the quality or variety of food they wanted^x.

Additionally, the record-high increase in inflation post-pandemic increased the cost of living by raising prices of food, shelter, energy, and other necessities. Considering food insecurity is impacted by income and a household's financial ability to afford all basic needs, we may see an increase in household food insecurity in the coming years.

Who is most affected by food insecurity?

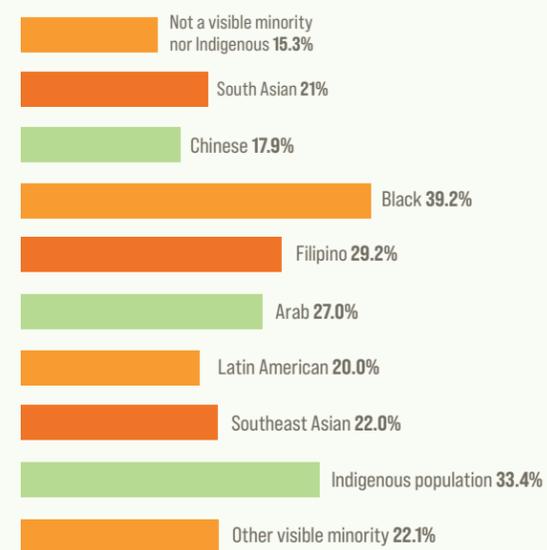
Food insecurity and racial/cultural identity

The most recent data from PROOF, the leading research unit for food insecurity policy research, shows that food insecurity is significantly higher among racialized populations. In 2022, compared to people living in food insecure households that are not a visible minority nor Indigenous (**15.3%**), the highest percentage of people living in food insecure households in Canada are Black people (**39.2%**) and Indigenous Peoples (**33.4%**)^{xii}.

In 2019, the CHSCY observed the highest prevalence of household food insecurity among Ontario children who identify as Black and a higher prevalence of household food insecurity among Ontario children who identify as Indigenous compared to those who do not^{xiii}.

Food insecurity among Indigenous Peoples is likely underestimated due to the lack of representation of Indigenous Peoples in national surveys that monitor food insecurity and lack of data on food insecurity within the territories due to the timing of data collection and reporting^{xii}.

The percentage of people living in food insecure households by racial/cultural identity & Indigenous status (provinces only) is as follows:



Food insecurity and income

Food insecurity is strongly connected to income. As can be shown through the Nutritious Food Basket income scenarios, not having enough money impacts the ability of individuals and families to purchase nutritious food. This is especially true for individuals who rely on social assistance^{vii}. In 2021, 63.1% of households in Canada who reported social assistance as their main source of income were food insecure^{vii}. In 2019, the CHSCY reported that the prevalence of household food insecurity among children decreased as household income increased in Ontario^{xii}.

'As household income declines, the risk of food insecurity increases'

- PROOF^{vii}

While those relying on social assistance are at a greater risk for food insecurity, in 2021 the majority (51.9%) of food insecure households in Canada report wages, salaries, and self-employment as their main source of income^{vii}. As evidenced by the Nutritious Food Basket income scenarios, current wages and having a job are not enough to protect households from food insecurity. Individuals employed in low-wage, short-term or precarious jobs, racialized workers, and those working multiple jobs and providing for multiple people are more likely to be food insecure^{vii}.

Food insecurity and homeownership

Individuals who rent their homes are more likely to be food insecure than individuals who own their homes^{vii}. Homes are considered an asset that can be leveraged for funds in case of emergency or other needs however homeownership does not fully protect individuals from food insecurity^{vii}. Housing debt as well as home value has an impact on the risk of food insecurity^{vii}.

Food insecurity and households with children

In 2021, 1.4 million children under the age of 18 in Canada lived in a food insecure household (either marginally, moderately, or severely food insecure)^{vii}. Households with a lone female parent are more likely to be food insecure^{vii}.

In 2021,

25.9%

of renter households in Canada were food insecure^{vii}

13.9%

of homeowners with a mortgage in Canada were food insecure^{vii}

7.2%

of mortgage-free homeowners in Canada were food insecure^{vii}

Food insecurity is a public health issue

Individuals experiencing food insecurity may sacrifice the quality and quantity of food needed for optimal health and the prevention of chronic disease. Therefore, food insecurity can lead to a poorer diet and is associated with diet-related disease such as diabetes among both adults and children^{xiv}. Adults in food insecure households are also more at risk for other diet-related disease such as heart disease and hypertension^{xiv}. Negative health impacts associated with food insecurity go beyond diet and nutrition. Adults in food insecure households are more at risk for infectious disease, poor oral health, arthritis, chronic pain, and injury^{xiv}. Adults living in severely food insecure households are more likely to die prematurely of all causes except cancer^{xiv}.

'Negative implications for health are greatest for those living in severely food insecure households'
- PROOF^{xiv}

There is a strong relationship between food insecurity and poor mental health for both adults and children^{xiv}. For adults, as the severity of food insecurity increases, the risk of depression, anxiety disorders, mood disorders and suicidal thoughts also increases^{xiv}. Experiencing food insecurity in childhood is associated with hyperactivity, inattention and a greater risk for depression and suicidal ideation later in adolescence and adulthood^{xiv}. The negative health impacts association with food insecurity result in increased healthcare utilization and drive-up healthcare costs^{xiv}. Addressing food insecurity can improve the financial situations of individuals and families while also reducing the strain being put on the healthcare system.

How does food insecurity impact health?

Food Insecurity is associated with:



Chronic disease and conditions



Poor mental health



Injury



Infectious disease



Poor oral health

Leading to premature death and higher healthcare costs.

Take Action: What can you do?

No person or family should need to choose between putting food on the table, paying for rent, or paying for any other needs such as electricity, child-care, transportation, medicine, or clothing. Addressing food insecurity requires income solutions such as tax benefits, increasing social assistance rates, raising minimum wage to a living wage, and further study of a basic income guarantee and its impact on improving financial circumstances of individuals and families.

1. Be informed - Learn more about the root causes of food insecurity

[Niagara Region Public Health - Household Food Insecurity](#)

[PROOF - Food Insecurity Policy Research](#)

2. Join forces - Are you an individual or an organization passionate about addressing food insecurity in Niagara? Seek or form opportunities for coordination and collaboration on advocacy, service provision, or other programs that strive to improve food access for individuals and families in Niagara.

[Join the Niagara Food Security Network](#)

3. Advocate for income-based solutions to food insecurity - Write a letter to your MP/MPP to call for solutions that help to improve the financial circumstances of individuals and families including:

- a. Provision of social assistance programs that are adequate in helping to cover the cost of living and necessities
- b. Provision of a basic income guarantee
- c. Increase in minimum wage or jobs that pay a living wage
- d. Attainable and affordable housing
- e. Income filing tax support or reducing income taxes for low-income households

[Learn more about what can be done to address food insecurity](#)

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