

Ontario Budget 2023: ODPH Pre-Budget Submission

Situation

In 2021, 2.34 million Ontarians experienced household food insecurity.¹ The situation has undoubtedly worsened since then with extraordinary food inflation over the past year. The price of food purchased from stores in 2022 increased by 9.8%, rising at a rate not seen since the early 1980s.²

The health consequences of food insecurity are a huge 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.³

Background

[Ontario Dietitians in Public Health](http://www.odph.ca) (ODPH) is the independent and official voice of Registered Dietitians (RDs) working in Ontario's public health system. ODPH urges all levels of government to support policies that enhance incomes as the most effective responses to the pervasive and prevalent problem of household food insecurity.⁴

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 Ontarians.

Social assistance recipients in Ontario have an extremely high risk for food insecurity. Almost 7 in 10 of Ontario households receiving social assistance were food insecure in 2021.¹

As stipulated in the Population Health Assessment and Surveillance Protocol⁵ of the Ontario Public Health Standards (2018), public health units (PHUs) are required to conduct surveillance and periodic reporting to the Ministry of Health on food affordability.

Assessment

The table below illustrates results of monitoring of food affordability by ODPH members, specifically among single adults receiving Ontario Works (OW), from six selected PHUs in May/June 2022. The data clearly indicate the deep inadequacy of current OW rates, with the shortfall ranging from \$192 in North Western to \$752 in Toronto.

	Monthly income (Ontario Works ^a + tax credits ^b)	Monthly cost of nutritious food ^c	Monthly cost of bachelor apartment ^d	Shortfall
Huron-Perth	\$863	\$386	\$742	-\$265
Ottawa	\$863	\$392	\$1059	-\$588
North Western	\$876	\$466	\$602	-\$192
Peterborough	\$863	\$381	\$805	-\$323
Simcoe-Muskoka	\$863	\$419	\$963	-\$519
Toronto	\$865	\$392	\$1,225	-\$752

^a includes Basic Allowance (\$343) + Maximum Shelter Allowance (\$390)

^b includes GST/HST tax credit (\$25), Ontario Trillium Benefit (\$74 or \$87 in northern regions), and Climate Action Incentive Payment (\$31)

^c cost of the Ontario Nutritious Food Basket, collected by Public Health Unit in May/June 2022

^d cost of market rental rates obtained from CMHC data tables (October 2021) or from municipal housing authorities; may or may not include utilities

Recipients of OW across the province do not have enough money to afford the two most basic living expenses: housing and food. The inadequacy of OW for single adults as exemplified by these results requires urgent policy action to increase benefit rates.

OW recipients experience a state of poverty which has become progressively exacerbated by rates that have been frozen since 2018⁶ coupled with extraordinary inflation. The effects of deep poverty have made it difficult for OW recipients to focus on anything but basic day-to-day survival that necessarily takes time and energy away from job searching. Prolonged periods receiving OW, with its dangerously inadequate benefits levels, often result in a severe decline in mental and physical health. Unaddressed, declining health can lead to serious disability, making gainful employment unlikely or impossible.⁷

Recommendation

As a priority for the 2023 Ontario budget, ODPH strongly urges the Ontario Government to increase OW to reflect basic costs of living and index the rate to inflation, as will be done for the Ontario Disability Support Program beginning in July 2023.

References:

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