

BACKGROUND: Monitoring Food Affordability in Ontario and Inadequacy of Social Assistance Rates

SPONSOR: Ontario Dietitians in Public Health

Food insecurity, inadequate or insecure access to food due to household financial constraints, continues to be a serious and pervasive public health problem. Physical and mental health are tightly linked to individuals' household food security status.¹ The health consequences of food insecurity are a large burden on our healthcare system and are costly for public health care budgets.¹ The most current data indicate approximately one in six households in Ontario experience some level of food insecurity.²

Social assistance recipients, including those reliant on Ontario Works (OW) and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP), are at extremely high risk of food insecurity. In 2021, approximately 67% of households in Ontario receiving social assistance experienced food insecurity.² The situation has undoubtedly worsened since then with extraordinary food inflation over the past year. The price of food purchased from stores from February 2022 to February 2023 increased by 10.6%, rising at a rate not seen since the early 1980s.³

Food affordability monitoring conducted by local Public Health Units (PHUs) in May/June 2022 substantiates that individuals receiving social assistance experience extremely dire financial situations, particularly single adults without children. Table 1 illustrates that for a sample of PHUs across all Ontario regions, monthly OW rates in addition to all potential tax credits (assuming individuals file income tax returns) fall short of covering only the cost of a bachelor apartment and food by a range of **-\$132** in Chatham-Kent to **-\$752** in Toronto. Other basic costs of living (e.g., clothing, personal care, transportation, phone, etc.) are not included. These data clearly indicate the extreme inadequacy of OW rates which have been frozen since 2018.⁴

Table 1: Single Adult receiving ONTARIO WORKS (OW)

Public Health Unit	Monthly income (OW ^a + tax credits ^b)	Monthly cost of food ^c	Monthly cost of a bachelor apartment ^d	Remainder/ Shortfall
Chatham-Kent	\$863	\$381	\$614	-\$132
North Bay Parry Sound District	\$876	\$404	\$650	-\$178
Northwestern	\$876	\$466	\$602	-\$192
Ottawa	\$863	\$392	\$1059	-\$588
Peterborough	\$863	\$381	\$805	-\$323
Toronto	\$865	\$392	\$1225	-\$752
Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph	\$863	\$425	\$936	-\$498

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

^b includes GST/HST tax credit, Ontario Trillium Benefit, and Climate Action Incentive Payment

^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

Table 2 shows the monthly funds remaining or shortfall of ODSP and available tax credits after rent for a one-bedroom apartment and cost of food are deducted. Again, other basic costs of living are not included. The monthly funds remaining for ODSP recipients range from \$121 in Chatham-Kent to a shortfall of **-\$525** in Toronto. Despite an increase of 5% to ODSP in September 2022, an increase from \$200 per month to \$1000 per month on employment earning cap, and an adjustment for inflation beginning in July 2023^{4,5,6}, ODSP falls well below the actual costs of living.

Table 2: Single Adult receiving ONTARIO DISABILITY SUPPORT PROGRAM (ODSP)

Public Health Unit	Monthly income (ODSP ^a + tax credits ^b)	Monthly cost of food ^c	Monthly cost of a 1 bedroom apartment ^d	Remainder/ Shortfall
Chatham-Kent	\$1309	\$381	\$807	\$121
North Bay Parry Sound District	\$1322	\$404	\$862	\$56
Northwestern	\$1322	\$466	\$814	\$42
Ottawa	\$1309	\$392	\$1280	- \$363
Peterborough	\$1309	\$381	\$1049	-\$121
Toronto	\$1313	\$392	\$1446	- \$525
Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph	\$1309	\$425	\$1277	-\$393

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

^b includes GST/HST tax credit, Ontario Trillium Benefit, and Climate Action Incentive Payment

^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

Ontario's poverty reduction plan, [Building a Strong Foundation for Success: Reducing Poverty in Ontario \(2020-2025\)](#) includes various indicators (e.g., poverty rate, employment rate, graduation rate); however, it does not include an indicator or provincial targets for the reduction of household food insecurity (HFI). HFI is a highly sensitive measure of material deprivation that is strongly associated with health outcomes and health care utilization. Food insecurity data collected in the Canadian Community Health Survey and the Canadian Income Survey should be utilized to implement and evaluate effective policy interventions for alleviating food insecurity.⁷

References

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