



Addressing Food Insecurity in Leeds, Grenville & Lanark 2023 Report

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Food Insecurity

Food insecurity is the inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints.¹

For many families in LGL, being unable to buy nutritious foods is a reality. For these families, food insecurity means:

- » worrying about running out of food or having limited food selection
- » compromising on the nutritious quality and/or amount of food
- » missing meals, eating less or going days without food

When money is tight, people are forced to cut into their food budget to pay for other non-negotiable living expenses, such as rent and utilities.

In LGL, 1 in 7 (14.9%) households are food insecure.²



Food Insecurity can affect anyone.

Single parent households³:

Single parent households with children are the most vulnerable to suffering from food insecurity in Canada.

42.6% of single mothers are food insecure

23.9% of single fathers are food insecure

Children⁴:

24.6% of children under 18 years are living in food insecure households in Ontario

Lone households³:

20.3% of individuals living alone are food insecure in Canada

Indigenous people³:

30.9% of Indigenous people that live off-reserve in Canadian provinces suffer from food insecurity

Renters¹:

25.9% of households living in rental housing are food insecure

Having a job isn't enough.

In Ontario, 48.2% of food insecure households relied on employment as their main source of income.¹ So while individuals may be employed, simply having a job is not enough to ensure adequate and secure income to meet basic needs. This highlights an issue with the type of employment, including jobs that are precarious, part time and/or low-paying.¹

Social assistance isn't enough.

In Ontario, 67.2% of households that rely on social assistance income were food insecure.¹ This highlights that current social assistance programs are inadequate to address food insecurity.

Households with income earners identifying as visible minority (Black, Indigenous, People of Colour) are more likely to experience food insecurity compared with White households. This difference reflects a deeper connection to societal issues of systemic racism and colonialism¹.

Food Insecurity is a Public Health Problem⁵

Food is a basic human right.

Not being able to afford nutritious food can seriously affect the health of individuals, families, and our communities.

Individuals experiencing food insecurity are more likely to experience:

- poor mental health, including depression, and mood and anxiety disorders
- increased stress
- poor physical health, including increased risk of:
 - » worse oral health
 - » infectious diseases and injuries
 - » chronic diseases such as diabetes, hypertension and heart disease
 - » chronic pain, arthritis and back problems
- shorter life expectancy

Children in food insecure homes are more likely to:

- have poor childhood mental health, including:
 - » hyperactivity and inattention
 - » anxiety disorders
 - » depression and suicidal ideation in adolescence and early adulthood
- develop asthma
- be at risk for poor nutrition, growth and development (infants)

Our healthcare system is impacted by household food insecurity.

- Healthcare costs among adults experiencing food insecurity are **more than double** that of food secure adults. **Why?** Because adults living with food insecurity are more likely to:
 - » be hospitalized, with longer hospital stays and a higher risk of being readmitted
 - » be forced to delay, reduce, or skip prescription medications because they can't afford them, which leads to worsening health and greater use of healthcare services
 - » have difficulty managing existing chronic health conditions due to financial constraints like affording prescribed medications or adhering to therapeutic diets.
- While 1 in 8 households in Ontario are food insecure, adults living in food insecure households account for **more than 1 in 3 hospitalizations due to mental health problems.**

The Cost of Healthy Eating in LGL

Since 1998, Public Health Units in Ontario have monitored the affordability of food using the Nutritious Food Basket (NFB). The NFB is a survey of grocery stores and includes 61 food items that together form a nutritious diet based on Canada's Food Guide.⁶ The NFB results provide the cost of eating a healthy diet with 5% added to account for miscellaneous foods used in meal preparation, such as spices, condiments and tea. Cultural foods and specialty foods for other dietary needs (e.g., infant foods, gluten-free foods) are not considered. Therefore, this data can underestimate the actual cost of food for some population groups.

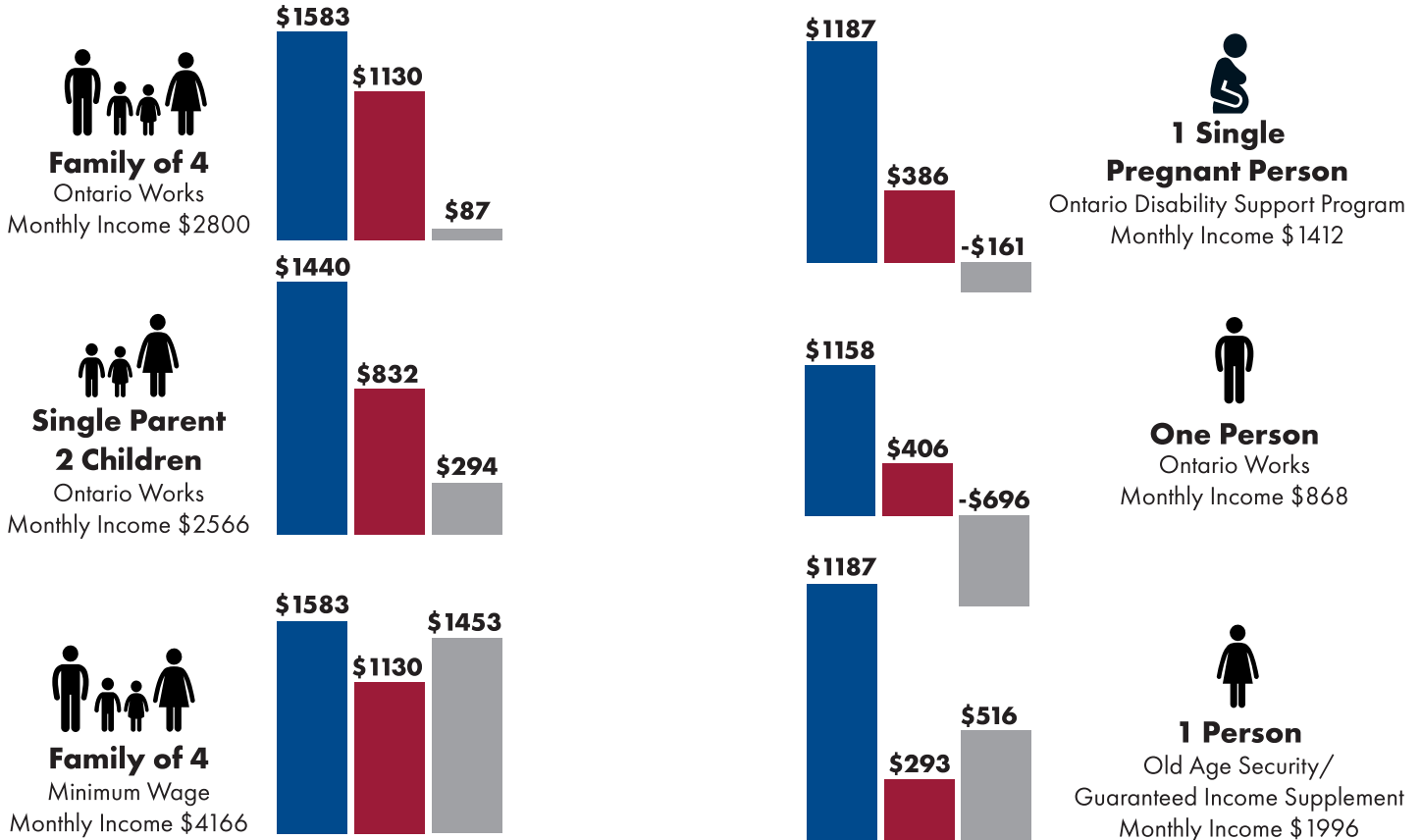
The NFB survey results are compared to individual and family incomes and expenses to assess food affordability for various scenarios. The main objective of the NFB results is to show that people with low incomes do not have enough money to buy food,⁷ and the increasing cost of food is only making this problem worse.⁸

NOTE: in 2022 the NFB costing processes and methodology were changed, so the data from the 2022 and 2023 NFB cannot be compared to previous years.

The cost to feed a family of 4* in LGL is **\$1130** per month



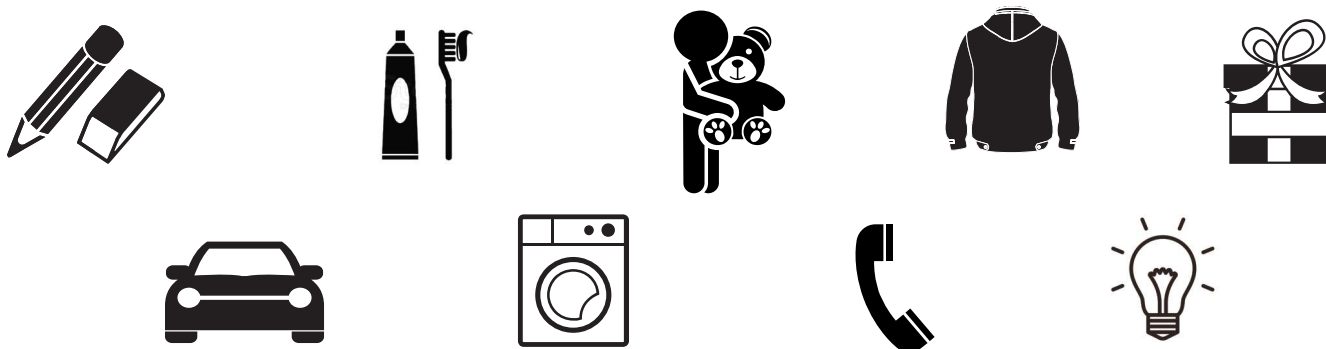
Household Income Scenarios in LGL



*family includes 1 female (aged 31-50 years), 1 male (aged 31-50 years), 1 boy (aged 14-18 years), 1 girl (aged 4-8 years)

After paying rent, if you had only \$1217 left to support your family until the end of the month, which would you choose? Heat or food?

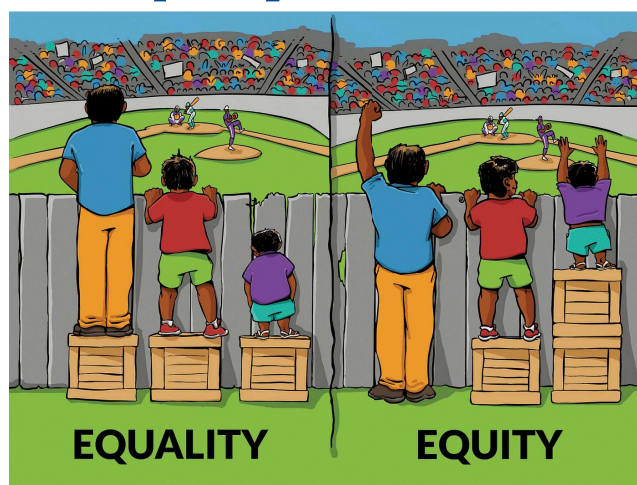
Money left over must cover all other basic necessities



After paying rent, many low-income individuals and families are forced to choose between paying for food or other basic necessities.

Food Insecurity is a Health Equity Issue

Health Equity is a standard that ensures all people can reach their full health potential and well-being, without being disadvantaged due to their race, gender identity, socioeconomic status or other predetermined factors.⁹ Equality is not the same as equity. When services are provided equally, some groups may have no need for the service while other groups require more or different services to reach their full health and well-being potential. Equity recognizes that services delivered equally do not always meet the needs of every individual, group, or community. Services or programs delivered equitably do. Certain groups of people are more affected by food security than others, and can be held back from reaching their full health potential because of factors beyond their control.



Credit: Interaction Institute for Social Change
Artist: Angus Maguire.

What can we do about the problem of food insecurity?

Community food programs like community kitchens, community and school gardens, and student nutrition programs provide people with opportunities to build food literacy (knowledge, skills, confidence, and decision making related to food and nutrition), and improve social connections.¹⁰ They do not address food insecurity.

Community food programs do not solve food insecurity. Food insecurity is not a food literacy problem, it is a problem of inadequate or insecure income. This is directly connected to poverty.

Nutrition education programs on budgeting and food literacy do not solve food insecurity.^{10,11} Research shows that food insecure families are more likely to shop on a budget compared to food secure families because they have limited funds.¹¹ Families who are food secure are more likely to read nutrition labels because they can afford to choose the more nutritious options. There is no difference between those who are food secure and food insecure when it comes to food skills.¹¹

Nutrition education programs do not solve food insecurity. Food insecurity is not a food literacy problem, it is a problem of inadequate or insecure income. This is directly connected to poverty.

Food charity programs, such as food banks, soup kitchens and food pantries, offer short-term relief to those who cannot afford to buy their own food. They are not long-term solutions to food insecurity.¹ Research from Canada shows the majority of food insecure households are not using food banks.¹ This is because food banks fail to meet an individual's personal and cultural needs, can increase the stigma associated with food insecurity, and are often seen as a last resort.^{12,13}

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Addressing the Root of Food Insecurity.....Poverty

To tackle the issue of food insecurity, we all need to advocate for income-based strategies that address poverty. Income responses can effectively resolve food insecurity and improve population health. Some of those strategies include:

- Increasing minimum wage
- Improving employment standards
- Increasing social assistance rates
- Providing a basic income

Increasing Minimum Wage:

Minimum wage is a government mandated amount of money employers must pay their workers per hour of work. The income scenarios in this report show that the current minimum wage rate of \$16.55/hour does not provide enough money to pay rent, buy groceries and support a family. Wages must allow households to pay for basic necessities such as housing, food, childcare and transportation, and provide for a decent quality of life.

Increasing minimum wage to the amount of a living wage¹⁴ would reduce food insecurity. A living wage would allow people to pay their bills and buy healthy, sufficient food. It would also allow people to become active, contributing members of their community. The 2023 living wage for the United Counties of Leeds and Grenville, and Lanark County is \$20.60.¹⁵

Improving Employment Standards:

Precarious employment describes jobs that are temporary, part-time, contract and on-call positions without benefits and without definite futures.¹⁶ People who work in precarious employment not only struggle with low wages but also the general unpredictability of their work. Such employment is growing in the low-wage sector workforce.¹⁷ Unfair wages and unjust employment standards perpetuate poverty and food insecurity. Workers deserve fair wages and fair working conditions that protect their dignity, health and well-being.

Increasing Social Assistance Rates:

In 2021-2022 there were over 561,000 cases in Ontario's social assistance program, which includes:

- 34% Ontario Works (OW) recipients,¹⁸ and
- 66% Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) recipients¹⁸

The scenarios in this report show that even with the maximum amount of tax credits and entitlements, social assistance rates are inadequate for households to be able to live with dignity and meet their basic needs, particularly for single adults without children. Advocates have long been calling on the government to raise social assistance rates to meet the soaring cost of living.^{19,20}

Providing a Basic Income:

Providing a basic income that is universal and unconditional allows everyone a chance to meet their basic needs, live with dignity and participate in society. An unconditional income transfer from the government is not tied to labour market participation,²¹ while a universal basic income does not have qualifying requirements and is available to everyone.²² Examples of basic income are Old Age Security (OAS) pension, Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS) and Basic Income Guarantee (BIG).

Research shows that the risk of food insecurity among low-income unattached seniors drops by 50% at the age of 65 years due to the OAS and GIS. This reduction in food insecurity is a result of both the amount and stability of income derived through these basic incomes.²² Participants in a pilot of BIG in Southern Ontario reported a better diet (86%), more frequent nutritious feedings (85%), lower meal skipping behaviour (69%) and less food bank usage (68%). Additionally, a significant number reported better overall wellbeing (79%), and better mental well-being (83%). Basic income has a positive impact for individuals, families, communities and society as a whole.^{21,22}

How YOU Can Make a DIFFERENCE	How our GOVERNMENT Can Make a DIFFERENCE
<p>Educate Yourself</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Learn more about the root causes of poverty and food insecurity. Understand that food charity programs cannot end food insecurity. Visit https://www.odph.ca/centsless to learn more. 	<p>All levels of government have influence over policy and other decisions that directly or indirectly increase the amount of money people have available for food and other necessities.²³</p> <p>The following are recommendations for how governments and community organizations can help reduce household food insecurity.</p>
<p>Support Income-Based Solutions to Food Insecurity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Write to your local Member of Parliament and Member of Provincial Parliament, and tell them that you support a basic income guarantee, and increases to minimum wage and social assistance rates. Find a sample letter here: https://www.odph.ca/what-can-you-do 	<p>Federal and Provincial Governments^{1,24}</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Establish targets for the reduction of household food insecurity and regularly report on progress. » Regularly report on provincial-level food insecurity data, including for Indigenous Peoples and racialized Canadians to inform the creation of targeted policies.
<p>Support Companies that Pay their Employees a Living Wage</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Talk to local businesses and choose to buy their products and services. 	<p>Federal Government^{1,24}</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Implement policy interventions that have been shown to effectively reduce food insecurity, such as a basic income guarantee. » Re-evaluate current income supports for very low income, working-aged Canadians and their families, such as the Canada Child Benefit and Canada Workers Benefit, to ensure all Canadians can afford to eat healthy food. » Support food security in Indigenous communities as part of the Food Policy for Canada, emphasising Indigenous food self-determination and reconciliations as guiding principles.
<p>Be Kind and Compassionate</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Everyone has their own story. Don't make judgments about people living in poverty. 	<p>Provincial Government^{1,24}</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Set a minimum wage rate that aligns with costs of living in Ontario. » Determine evidence-based social assistance rates in communities based on local/regional costs of living, including the cost of health eating. » Lower the income tax rate for the lowest-income households.
	<p>Municipal Governments and Local Community Partners^{1,24}</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Advocate for federal and provincial governments to implement income-based policies and programs to ensure all Canadians can afford to eat healthy food. » Facilitate local level initiatives that increase economic resilience for individuals and families living with very low incomes and for groups experiencing systemic racism, such as free income tax filing assistance, and targeted support for access to and training for jobs with livable wages and benefits.

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