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The Regional Municipality of Durham Information Report

From: Commissioner & Medical Officer of Health
Report: #2025-INFO-33
Date: May 2, 2025

Subject:

Food Insecurity and Food Affordability in Ontario

Recommendation:

Receive for information

Report:

1. Purpose

- 1.1 To provide an update on the report titled [Food Insecurity and Food Affordability in Ontario](#), released by Public Health Ontario (PHO) on April 9, 2025.

2. Background

- 2.1 This report was written in partnership by PHO and the Ontario Dietitians in Public Health (ODPH).
- a. PHO provides expert scientific and technical support to government, local public health units, and healthcare providers on various public health issues.
 - b. ODPH provides leadership in public health nutrition by promoting and supporting member collaboration to improve the health of Ontario residents.
- 2.2 Food security is a measure of health inequity and is monitored across Ontario.
- 2.3 In Ontario, food security is measured at the household level using the Household Food Security Survey Module. In this context, household food insecurity is defined as the insecure or inadequate access to food due to financial constraints.
- 2.4 PHO's report highlights the high levels and consequences of household food insecurity in Ontario, with a focus on households reliant on social assistance as their main source of income.

3. Report Findings

Household Food Insecurity in Ontario

- 3.1 In 2023, almost one in four (24.2 per cent) households in Ontario reported some level of food insecurity.
- 3.2 Household food insecurity rates have worsened over the past five years from 17 per cent in 2019 to 24 per cent in 2023. This translates to 3.65 million people in Ontario experiencing food insecurity in 2023, an increase from 1.24 million people in 2019.
- 3.3 The income-related group with the highest prevalence and severity of food insecurity is households reliant on social assistance.
- 3.4 Young people (under 18) in Ontario have a higher prevalence of household food insecurity. Comparatively, people over 65 have the lowest prevalence of household food insecurity. Households with children are at a higher risk of food insecurity and in 2023, female lone-parent families had the highest prevalence of all household types.
- 3.5 People with disabilities have a disproportionately high prevalence of household food insecurity.
- 3.6 Household food insecurity is widely recognized as racialized due to historical and ongoing racism and systemic barriers to wealth. In Ontario, Black and Indigenous Peoples have the highest prevalence of household food insecurity compared to other racialized groups.
- 3.7 Household food insecurity is independently linked to negative physical and mental health outcomes in children and adults in Ontario.
 - a. Adults living in food insecure households are more likely to experience a range of chronic conditions such as diabetes, pain, poor oral health, injury, infectious diseases, anxiety, and depression. These associations persist after adjusting for a range of other social determinants of health (SDOH) such as income, education, race and ethnic origin. There is also an association between household food insecurity and increased risk of mortality.
 - b. Children living in food insecure households are more likely to have diagnosed mental health conditions and greater mental healthcare use, after adjusting for other SDOH. These conditions are long lasting, with longitudinal studies showing an association with mental-ill health in early adulthood.
- 3.8 Both adults and children living in food insecure households have higher healthcare use, leading to significant costs to publicly funded healthcare systems.

The Cost of a Nutritious Diet in Ontario

- 3.9 Using the Ontario Nutritious Food Basket (ONFB) as an estimate, a family of four would spend \$1,299 per month to eat a relatively economical and basic nutritious diet in May 2024.
- a. Of note, ONFB costs do not include food or beverages purchased at restaurants or take-out, prepared snack or dessert foods, nor do they consider preferences for any item other than the lowest cost option available.
- 3.10 Costs for ONFB across Ontario were comparable, with slightly higher costs in northern regions.
- a. ONFB methodology and provincial averaging skew to more populated areas such as large and medium urban centres and therefore, ONFB estimates are less applicable to rural and remote areas.

Food Affordability in Ontario

- 3.11 To understand food affordability in Ontario, food costs need to be considered in the context of income and other basic costs of living. This report explores food affordability scenarios for households that use social assistance in Ontario as their main source of income (i.e., Ontario Works (OW), Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP), and Old Age Security and Guaranteed Income Supplement (OAS/GIS)).
- a. A family of four that relies on OW would need to spend 42 per cent of their take-home income on food to purchase a basic nutritious diet. This does not leave enough money to afford housing and other basic needs like transportation, clothing, and other things. It is unlikely that households on OW can allocate the money required to purchase a basic diet that meets the nutritional needs of all household members.
 - b. Other households reliant on social assistance and described in this report would need to spend between 25 to 48 per cent of their take-home income to purchase a basic nutritious diet.
 - c. A one-person household reliant on OAS/GIS would only need to spend 15 per cent of their take-home income on food. OAS/GIS are indexed to inflation, unlike OW and ODSP.
- 3.12 Households reliant on public pensions have much lower rates of household food insecurity compared to households reliant on social assistance.

Policy Solutions

- 3.13 Household food insecurity is a problem of inadequate and unstable financial resources. For the lowest income households, evidence shows that food insecurity is reduced when financial circumstances are improved.

3.14 PHO and ODPH reviewed Canadian and international research to compile the following policy solutions for reducing household food insecurity in Ontario:

- a. Child benefit programs can reduce the severity of food insecurity with the lowest-income families benefitting the most.
- b. Public pensions have shown to reduce food insecurity among low-income, unattached adults as they tend to be more generous than social assistance programs available to people under 65 years old.
- c. Social assistance enhancements. Examples of enhancements covered in the report are listed below.
 - In 2006, Newfoundland and Labrador implemented enhancements by increasing income supports by five per cent, annually indexing supports to inflation, increasing earnings exemptions, and increasing liquid asset limits. Between 2007 and 2012, the prevalence of food insecurity among social assistance recipients decreased by almost half, from 60 per cent to 34 per cent in 2012.
 - A study of provincial policies estimated that for every one dollar per hour increase in minimum wage, there is a five per cent lower odds of experiencing household food insecurity; for every \$1,000 per year increase in social assistance there is a five per cent lower odds of experiencing household food insecurity; and for every one per cent increase in the income tax rate for the lowest income bracket, there is a nine per cent increased odds of reporting household food insecurity.
 - Evidence from the Ontario Basic Income Pilot (OBIP) shows that pilot participants reported using food banks less often, skipping meals less often, and consuming nutritious food more often. International evidence from systematic reviews of basic income suggests positive impacts on health, well-being, and outcomes related to food security.

4. Local Initiatives

- 4.1 Durham Region Health Department (DRHD) uses the ONFB to monitor local food insecurity. DRHD found that in June 2024, the price of a basic healthy diet for a reference family of four in Durham Region was \$286 per week or \$1,232 per month. Additionally, in 2024, one in four households were food insecure. These statistics are similar to Ontario. Information about local food insecurity is available in the [Food Poverty in Durham](#) infographic.
- 4.2 DRHD also maintains a webpage on food insecurity on [durham.ca](https://www.durham.ca). The webpage includes information about what food insecurity is and who is most impacted, monitoring information, policy solutions, and other relevant resources.
- 4.3 Locally, Durham Region Social Services Department and DRHD, with the support of Davis Pier Consulting, are working on development of a Poverty Response Program (PRP). The PRP will outline actions to address poverty across the region. The PRP will be informed by and developed with the community, service providers,

community partners and individuals with lived experience. The PRP aims to better understand poverty in Durham Region and create actionable solutions.

5. Previous Reports and Decisions

- 5.1 Report [#2024-INFO-79](#) provided an update on the report: [A Time for Urgent Action: The 2024 Report of the National Advisory Council on Poverty](#), which was released on October 29, 2024

6. Relationship to Strategic Plan

- 6.1 This report aligns with/addresses the following Strategic Direction(s) and Pathway(s) in Durham Region's 2025-2035 Strategic Plan:
- a. Healthy People, Caring Communities
 - H1. Implement preventive strategies to support community health, including food security.
 - a. Strong Relationships
 - S3. Collaborate across local area municipalities, with agencies, non-profits, and community partners to deliver co-ordinated and efficient services.
 - S5. Ensure accountable and transparent decision-making to serve community needs, while responsibly managing available resources.
- 6.2 This report aligns with/addresses the following Foundation(s) in Durham Region's 2025-2035 Strategic Plan:
- a. Processes: Continuously improving processes to ensure we are responsive to community needs.

7. Conclusion

- 7.1 Food insecurity is a public health issue, as it is associated with negative health and mental health outcomes.
- 7.2 Food insecurity is also an equity issue because in Ontario, it is most prevalent among people living on social assistance, young people, people with disabilities, female-lone parent households, and racialized groups.
- 7.3 Evidence included in the Food Insecurity and Food Affordability in Ontario report shows that food insecurity is reduced when financial circumstances are improved. There are proven policy options available to achieve secure and adequate access to food for more people in Ontario.

Respectfully submitted,

Original signed by

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