

The Price of Eating Well in Ottawa

2012

There are people in Ottawa that cannot afford a nutritious diet.

Each year, Ottawa Public Health conducts the *Nutritious Food Basket Survey*. Every year the results show that low-income households struggle to pay rent and bills and to buy sufficient nutritious food for their family. The survey requires visits to eight grocery stores throughout the Ottawa region. Sixty-seven food items were priced to determine an average cost of a nutritious diet for Ottawa. The last time this survey was completed was May 2012.

While the provincial and federal governments make adjustments to minimum wage and various benefits and credits, low-income families still do not have enough income to meet their financial responsibilities. The following scenarios illustrate this point.

Households on fixed incomes

Low-income households often live in rental housing. Using the average costs of renting in Ottawa for 2012, here are five household scenarios outlining monthly expenses and income.



	Households on Fixed Incomes (Ottawa)				
	Ontario Works Single man age 35	Ontario Works Single mother age 35 with a boy age 14 and a girl age 8	Ontario Works A family of 4: a man and woman age 35, a boy age 14 and a girl age 8	Ontario Disability Support Program Single man age 35	Old Age Security/ Guaranteed Income Supplement Single woman age 71
Income	\$599 ¹	\$981 ¹	\$1,136 ¹	\$1,064 ¹	\$1,272 ²
Additional Benefits and Credits ³	\$43	\$874	\$896	\$51	\$54
Total Monthly Income	\$642	\$1,855	\$2,032	\$1,115	\$1,326
Rent ⁴ (Ottawa)	\$743 (Bachelor)	\$1,104 (2 Bedroom)	\$1,412 (3 Bedroom)	\$896 (1 Bedroom)	\$896 (1 Bedroom)
Cost of a Nutritious Diet ⁵ (Ottawa)	\$209	\$536	\$745	\$209	\$151
Amount remaining to cover other basic monthly expenses	-\$310	\$215	-\$125	\$10	\$279

Note: The 2012 Nutritious Food Basket was priced using the 2010 Nutritious Food Basket Guidance Document in the Ontario Public Health Standards. This Guidance Document was significantly changed in 2009. Therefore, the costs from 2009 - 2012 cannot be compared to previous years.

Households earning minimum wage

Even households that are earning minimum wage can find it impossible to meet all financial needs:

Households Earning Minimum Wage (Ottawa)	
One full-time minimum wage earner A family of 4: a man and woman age 35, a boy age 14 and a girl age 8 (\$10.25/hour for 40 hours/week)	
Income ¹	\$1,777
Additional Benefits and Credits ³	\$948
Income Deductions ⁶	-\$106
Total Monthly Income	\$2,619
Rent ⁴ (Ottawa)	\$1,227 (3 Bedroom)
Cost of a Nutritious Diet ⁵	\$759
Amount remaining to cover other basic monthly expenses	\$633

¹ Basic and maximum shelter allowance. OW and Ontario Disability Support Payment (ODSP) rates effective May 2012. Source: Social Assistance, Pension and Tax Credit Rates April to June 2012, Ministry of Community and Social Services.

² Old Age Security and Guaranteed Income Supplement (OAS/GIS) rates May 2012. Source: Social Assistance, Pension and Tax Credit Rates April to June 2012, Ministry of Community and Social Services.

³ Additional benefits include maximum Canada Child Tax benefits, National Child Benefit Supplement and Ontario Child Benefit. Effective July 2011-2012. Additional credits based on net annual income. GST/HST and Ontario Sales Tax Credit are issued on a quarterly basis, but calculated on a monthly basis. Figures derived from GST/HST and related provincial programs calculator. Effective July 2011-June 2012.

⁴ Private Apartment Average Rents by Bedroom Type. Rental Market Report: Ontario Highlights. Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, Spring 2012.

⁵ Nutritious Food Basket Data, Ottawa Results 2012.

⁶ Income deductions include Employment Insurance Premium, Canada Pension Plan Premium and Income Tax paid.

These scenarios illustrate that households on fixed incomes and minimum wage earners have little, if any, money left over to cover basic monthly expenses such as:

- Heat and hydro
- Telephone
- Laundry
- Toiletries and household cleaning products
- Insurance
- Transportation (bus pass, taxi or expenses associated with running and maintaining a car)
- Clothing for all family members
- Debt payment
- Gifts
- Non-prescription drugs and dispensing fees for prescription drugs
- Banking service charges
- Costs associated with having children in school
- Child care expenses
- Money to cover unexpected expenses

In reality, people usually choose to pay their rent and other fixed expenses, such as heat, hydro, and transportation, first, before buying food. Food becomes a “discretionary” expense, resulting in a diet of poor nutritional value.





What kind of effect can this have on health?

Poor Birth Outcomes

Poor nutrition among pregnant women increases the likelihood of low birth weights. Those babies who survive are at greater risk of developing health problems and disabilities than babies of normal weights. In addition, low intake of the vitamin folate prior to, and during pregnancy, can increase the risk of infants born with neural tube defects.

Reduced Learning and Productivity

Learning and productivity are reduced when people are hungry and/or malnourished. Adults are less productive in their work environments or while seeking work. Undernourished children are more susceptible to illness, perform at lower academic levels, find it harder to concentrate in school, and have poorer psychosocial outcomes than their well-nourished peers.

Chronic Diseases

People in low-income households are more likely to suffer from chronic diseases such as heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, and food allergies. They have difficulty managing these chronic medical conditions since they do not have enough money for therapeutic diets.

Lack of Nutrients

Several studies have shown that people who live in households that cannot afford a nutritious diet often do not get enough of certain nutrients including folate, iron, zinc, and vitamin A. This is more common in mothers because they compromise their own diets to make sure their children are fed.

Beyond food banks and charity

Many people think that food banks are the solution to this problem. Food bank operators try hard to address this need, but they cannot accomplish this alone because:

- They have a limited selection of food since they rely mainly on food donations.
- They have limited facilities to store fresh food such as fruits, vegetables, milk, and meat.
- They must restrict the number of times recipients use their services, because their supply is limited.
- Many people who cannot afford to feed their families may not be open to using food banks.

Food banks were never meant to be a permanent solution to the systemic problem of poverty. They were meant to be a temporary solution.



Finding solutions

Community programs such as community kitchens, Good Food Box programs, community gardens, and school nutrition programs provide social, psychological and community benefits, in addition to nutritional benefits.

But these types of programs by themselves will not solve the issue of households not being able to afford a nutritious diet. They must ultimately be accompanied by a stronger social safety net such as:

- improved social assistance and minimum wage rates
- more affordable housing policies
- improved employment insurance coverage and benefits
- accessible and affordable child care

What can you do to help?

Educate yourself about the root causes of poverty.

Participate in coalitions to advocate for policies to reduce poverty and create a stronger social safety net for Canadians and Ontarians.

Volunteer in your community to support programs such as community kitchens, Good Food Box programs, community gardens, and school nutrition programs.

Donate a variety of non-perishable foods items or money to food banks on a regular basis.



Resources

Call Ottawa Public Health 613-580-6744 or visit ottawa.ca/health/nutrition to get the following resources:

- *Tips for Smart Shopping on a Budget*
- *Everybody's Food Budget Book*
- *Worksheet: The Cost of a Nutritious Food Basket in Ottawa, 2012*
- More information about local food programs

For more information about poverty and food security issues go to:

- Just Food:
justfood.ca
- Social Planning Council of Ottawa:
ottawafoodbank.ca
- Ottawa Food Bank:
ottawafoodbank.ca
- Ottawa Good Food Box:
ottawagoodfoodbox.ca
- Ontario Association of Food Banks:
oafb.ca
- Campaign 2000:
campaign2000.ca
- 25 in 5: Network for Poverty Reduction:
25in5.ca
- Social Planning Network of Ontario
spno.ca
- Food Banks Canada
foodbankscanada.ca