



TO: Chair and Members of the Board of Health

FROM: Dr. Alexander Summers, Medical Officer of Health
Emily Williams, Chief Executive Officer

DATE: 2023 April 20

MONITORING FOOD AFFORDABILITY AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC POLICY AND ACTION

Recommendation

It is recommended that the Board of Health:

- 1) *Receive Report No. 25-23, re: “Monitoring Food Affordability and Implications for Public Policy and Action” for information; and*
- 2) *Forward Report No. 25-23 re: “Monitoring Food Affordability and Implications for Public Policy and Action” to Ontario boards of health, the City of London, Middlesex County, and appropriate community agencies.*

Key Points

- Local food affordability monitoring is a requirement of the [Ontario Public Health Standards](#).
- The 2022 Nutritious Food Basket survey results demonstrate that incomes, particularly when dependent on social assistance, are not adequate for many Middlesex-London residents to afford basic needs.
- Food insecurity has a pervasive impact on health; and there is a need for income-based solutions.

Background and 2022 Nutritious Food Basket Survey Results

Food insecurity, defined as inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints, is a key social determinant of health¹. In 2020, approximately one in five households in Middlesex-London were food insecure². Food insecurity is associated with an increased risk of a wide range of challenges to physical and mental health, including chronic conditions, non-communicable diseases, infections, depression, anxiety, and stress³⁻¹⁰ ([Appendix A](#)).

Routine monitoring of food affordability helps generate evidence-based recommendations for collective public health action to address food insecurity and income inadequacy. The [Ontario Public Health Standards](#) require monitoring local food affordability as mandated in the [Population Health Assessment and Surveillance Protocol, 2018](#). The Nutritious Food Basket (NFB) is a survey tool that measures the cost of eating as represented by current national nutrition recommendations and average food purchasing patterns.

Local food affordability monitoring was paused in 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2022, MLHU staff participated in the provincial pilot testing of the Ontario Dietitians in Public Health’s (ODPH) new costing tool using a hybrid model of in-store and online data collection.

In May 2022, using the ODPH tools, the estimated local monthly cost to feed a family of four was \$1,084 ([Appendix B](#)). In Ontario, according to the Consumer Price Index, the price of food purchased from stores in January 2023 was 10.1% higher than in January 2022, rising at an annual rate not seen since the early 1980s¹¹.

Local monthly food and average rental costs are compared to a variety of household and income scenarios, including households receiving social assistance, minimum wage earners, and median incomes (see Appendix B). The scenarios include food and rent only and are not inclusive of other needs (i.e., utilities, Internet, phone, transportation, household operations and supplies, personal care items, clothing etc.). Households with low incomes spend up to 45% of their after-tax income on food, whereas, Middlesex-London residents who have adequate incomes (family of 4) need to spend approximately 12% of their after-tax income. The scenarios highlight that Middlesex-London residents with low incomes cannot afford to eat after meeting other essential needs for basic living. Unfortunately, this demonstrates that incomes and social assistances rates have not kept pace with the increased cost of living.

Opportunities

Upstream-level approaches that address the systems that create and maintain food insecurity, including income inadequacy and poverty, are the most effective in reducing food insecurity¹.

In October 2022, the ODPH urged the Ontario government to adopt income-based policy solutions that effectively reduce food insecurity. These solutions may include higher minimum wage rates, increasing social assistance rates, and reducing income tax rates for the lowest income households. Additionally, ODPH submitted a resolution to advocate for increased social assistance rates to address food insecurity for consideration at alpha's Annual Conference in June 2023. MLHU registered dietitians continue to work locally, regionally and provincially with public health counterparts and community partners and will explore potential healthy public policy priorities in this area over the upcoming year.

Healthy Living Division staff will complete and submit the results of 2023 local food affordability monitoring to the Board of Health in Q4 2023.

This report was submitted by the Healthy Living Division.



Alexander Summers, MD, MPH, CCFP, FRCPC
Medical Officer of Health



Emily Williams, BScN, RN, MBA, CNE
Chief Executive Officer