

MIDDLESEX-LONDON BOARD OF HEALTH

REPORT NO. 82-24

TO: Chair and Members of the Board of Health
FROM: Dr. Alexander Summers, Medical Officer of Health
Emily Williams, Chief Executive Officer
DATE: 2024 December 12

**MONITORING FOOD AFFORDABILITY AND
IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC POLICY AND ACTION (2024)**

Recommendation

It is recommended that the Board of Health:

- 1) Receive Report No. 82-24 re: “Monitoring Food Affordability and Implications for Public Policy and Action 2024” for information; and
 - 2) Direct staff to forward Report No. 82-24 re: “Monitoring Food Affordability and Implications for Public Policy and Action 2024” to Ontario boards of health, the City of London, Middlesex County, and appropriate community agencies.
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Report Highlights

- In 2023, 1 in 4 households in Middlesex-London were food insecure. This is a statistically significant increase from 2022.
- Local food affordability monitoring is a requirement of the [Ontario Public Health Standards](#).
- The 2024 Ontario Nutritious Food Basket results demonstrate decreased food affordability and inadequate incomes to afford basic needs for many Middlesex-London residents.
- Food insecurity has a pervasive impact on health; and there is a need for income-based solutions.

Background

Food insecurity, defined as inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints, is a key social determinant of health¹. Food insecurity is a strong predictor of poor health and is associated with an increased risk of a wide range of physical and mental health challenges, including chronic conditions, non-communicable diseases, infections, depression, anxiety, and stress²⁻⁹ ([Appendix A](#)). Poor diet quality costs Ontario an estimated \$5.6 billion annually in direct healthcare and indirect costs (e.g., lost productively due to disability and premature mortality)¹⁰.

As a result of systemic and structural inequities, racism, and colonization, food insecurity disproportionately affects certain populations^{1,11,12}. Higher rates of food insecurity are found among Indigenous People, Black people, recent immigrants, female lone parent led households, low-income households, and other marginalized populations¹. Although households whose main

income is from social assistance have the highest rate of food insecurity, 58.6% of food insecure households in Ontario rely on wages, salaries, or self-employment as their main income¹.

Routine monitoring of food affordability helps generate evidence-based recommendations for collective public health action to address food insecurity which is often tied to income inadequacy. The [Ontario Public Health Standards](#) require monitoring local food affordability as mandated in the [Population Health Assessment and Surveillance Protocol, 2018](#). The Ontario Nutritious Food Basket (ONFB) is a survey tool that measures the cost of eating as represented by current national nutrition recommendations and average food purchasing patterns. The [Ontario Dietitians in Public Health](#) (ODPH), in collaboration with Public Health Ontario (PHO) develops, tests, and updates tools for monitoring food affordability for Ontario public health units. The costing tool uses a hybrid model of in-store and online data collection.

Local Food Insecurity

In 2023, 1 in 4 households in Middlesex-London were food insecure (25.1%, CI 21.8-28.4%)¹³ ([Appendix B](#)). The rate was higher than in Ontario and the Peer Group comparator (i.e., mainly urban centres with moderate population density); however, this was not a statistically significant difference. The 2023 rate represents a statistically significant increase from 2022; and the highest rate reported in Middlesex-London since the Canadian Income Survey started measuring food insecurity in 2019. In 2022, 1 in 6 households in Middlesex-London were food insecure (17.5%, CI 14.1-20.9%)¹³. Local food insecurity rates are not yet available for 2024.

Nearly 44,000 more Middlesex-London residents lived in food insecure households in 2023 as compared to 2022^{13,14}. An estimated 151,477 residents lived in food insecure households in Middlesex-London in 2023, as compared to 107,835 residents in 2022^{13,14}.

Local Food Affordability

Local food and average rental costs from May 2024 are compared to a variety of household and income scenarios, including households receiving social assistance, minimum wage earners, and median incomes ([Appendix C](#), [Appendix D](#)). 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.). The household scenarios highlight that incomes and social assistance rates are not keeping pace with the increased cost of living.

A key indicator for food insecurity is the average monthly cost of a nutritious diet as a proportion of household income. Households with low incomes spend up to 47% of their after-tax income on food, whereas households with adequate incomes (family of 4) only spend approximately 12% of their after-tax income.

Comparing the monthly funds remaining after rent and food costs in 2024 to 2023 for various household scenarios illustrates that specific scenarios are falling further behind each year and provides evidence for the impact of income-based policy changes on food affordability.

Scenario	Monthly Funds Remaining After Rent and Food Costs		Income-Based Policy
	2023	2024	
Single Person ODSP	-\$186	-\$172	As of July 2023, ODSP rate increases are indexed to Ontario's Consumer Price Index.
Single Person OW	-\$420	-\$522	OW rate increases are not indexed to inflation.
Family of 4 Minimum Wage	\$1,351	\$1,579	As of 2015, under the Employment Standards Act , minimum wage rates are set and adjusted annually based on changes to Ontario's Consumer Price Index in the previous year.
Family of 4 Refugee Claimants Minimum Wage	N/A	\$310	Refugee claimants are not eligible for the Canada Child Benefit. A refugee claimant is a person who left their country and is asking for protection in another country because it is unsafe to return to their home country.

ODSP = Ontario Disability Support Program

OW = Ontario Works

Monitoring food affordability data and methodology details, including cost adjustments required to compare the 2023 and 2024 scenarios, are included in [Appendix C](#).

Public Health Action

Annually, the Health Unit monitors and reports on local food affordability, the impact of health inequities due to food insecurity, effective strategies to reduce these inequities, and shares this information with the municipalities, the public, and community partners.

Living wages help to protect individuals against food insecurity. A living wage is the hourly wage a full-time worker needs to earn to afford basic expenses and participate in community life. In Middlesex-London, the 2024 living wage was \$19.50 per hour¹⁵, an increase from \$18.85 in 2023 and as compared to the Ontario minimum wage of \$17.20. Local food costs, as estimated utilizing the ONFB, are shared with the Ontario Living Wage Network and used to calculate our regional living wage. The Health Unit re-certified as a living wage employer in 2024.

Over the past year, the Board of Health:

- Sent a [letter](#) to the federal government in support of [S-233](#) and [C-223](#) "An Act to develop a national framework for a guaranteed livable basic income" ([Report No. 49-24](#)). The Board's letter was endorsed by [Haliburton, Kawartha, Pine Ridge District Health Unit](#) and [Peterborough Public Health](#).
- Sent a letter to the provincial government to advocate for increased social assistance rates in regards to the affordability of food ([Report No. 25-23 Minutes](#)).

The Association of Local Public Health Agencies (aLPHa) endorsed ODPH-sponsored resolutions that included advocacy to the Province of Ontario to:

- Support income-related policies to reduce food insecurity, especially for households with children ([A24-05](#))
- Utilize food affordability monitoring results from public health units in determining the adequacy of social assistance rates to reflect the current costs of living and to index Ontario Works rates to inflation ([A23-05](#))

- Legislate targets for reduction of food insecurity as part of Ontario's plan for poverty reduction ([A23-05](#))

Next Steps

Health Unit staff are exploring the development of a municipal primer on food insecurity as an important public health and local issue and actions municipalities can take to address it.

The ODPH Food Insecurity Workgroup and PHO are collaborating on a provincial food affordability report planned for release February 2025. The report will include various household and income scenarios utilizing data submitted by Ontario public health units, health outcomes of food insecurity, and discussion of income-based solutions.

Continued work is needed to address food insecurity and its significant health and well-being implications. MLHU can continue to highlight the need for upstream income-based solutions and changes and programs that address both food affordability and access.

This report was written by the Municipal and Community Health Promotion Team of the Family and Community Health Division.



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This report refers to the following principle(s) set out in Policy G-490, Appendix A:

- The Population Health Assessment and Surveillance Protocol, 2018; and the Chronic Disease Prevention and Well-Being and Healthy Growth and Development standards, as outlined in the [Ontario Public Health Standards: Requirements for Programs, Services and Accountability](#).
- The following goal or direction from the [Middlesex-London Health Unit's Strategic Plan](#):
 - Our public health programs are effective, grounded in evidence and equity

This topic has been reviewed to be in alignment with goals under the Middlesex-London Health Unit's [Anti-Black Racism Plan](#) and [Taking Action for Reconciliation](#), specifically recommendations:

Anti-Black Racism Plan Recommendation #37: Lead and/or actively participate in healthy public policy initiatives focused on mitigating and addressing, at an upstream level, the negative and inequitable impacts of the social determinants of health which are priority for local ACB communities and ensure the policy approaches take an anti-Black racism lens.

Taking Action for Reconciliation Supportive Environments: Establish and implement policies to sustain a supportive environment, as required, related to the identified recommendations.