

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.
-

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.



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



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

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.

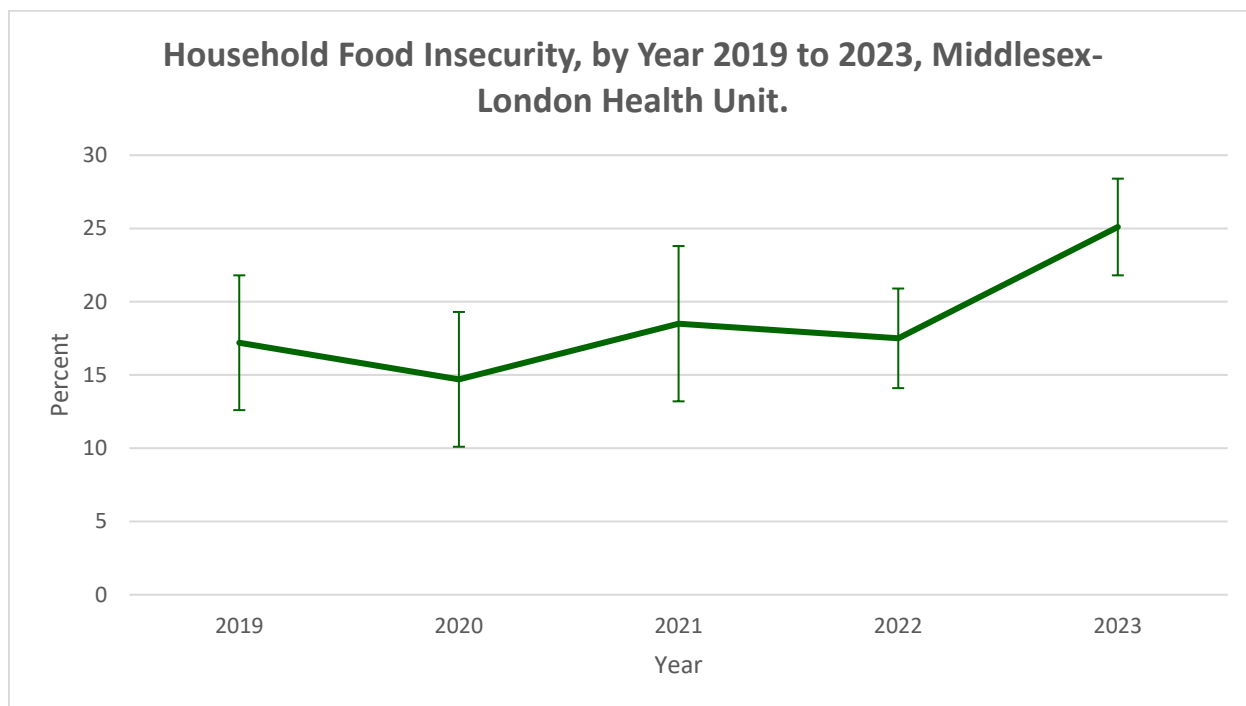
Taking Action for Reconciliation Supportive Environments: Establish and implement policies to sustain a supportive environment, as required, related to the identified recommendations.

References

- ¹ Li T, Fafard St-Germain AA, Tarasuk V. (2023). Household food insecurity in Canada, 2022. Toronto: Research to identify policy options to reduce food insecurity (PROOF). Retrieved from <https://proof.utoronto.ca/>.
- ² Jessiman-Perreault G, McIntyre L. (2017). The household food insecurity gradient and potential reductions in adverse population mental health outcomes in Canadian adults. *SSM - Population Health*, 3:464-472.
- ³ Vozoris, NT, Tarasuk VS. Household food insufficiency is associated with poorer health. (2003). *The Journal of Nutrition*, 133(1):120-126.
- ⁴ Tarasuk V, Mitchell A, McLaren L, et al. (2013). Chronic physical and mental health conditions among adults may increase vulnerability to household food insecurity. *The Journal of Nutrition*, 143(11):1785-1793.
- ⁵ Men F, Gundersen C, Urquia ML, et al. (2020). Association between household food insecurity and mortality in Canada: a population-based retrospective cohort study. *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, 192(3):E53-E60.
- ⁶ McIntyre, L, Williams, JV, Lavorato, DH, et al. (2013). Depression and suicide ideation in late adolescence and early adulthood are an outcome of child hunger. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 150(1):123-129.
- ⁷ Kirkpatrick, SI, McIntyre, L, & Potestio, ML. (2010). Child hunger and long-term adverse consequences for health. *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*, 164(8):754-762.
- ⁸ Melchior, M, Chastang, J F, Falissard, B, et al. (2012). Food insecurity and children's mental health: A prospective birth cohort study. *PLoS ONE*, 2012;7(12):e52615.
- ⁹ Ontario Dietitians in Public Health. (2020). Position statement and recommendations on responses to food insecurity. Retrieved from <https://www.odph.ca/odph-position-statement-on-responses-to-food-insecurity-1>.
- ¹⁰ CCO and Ontario Agency for Health Protection and Promotion (Public Health Ontario). The burden of chronic diseases in Ontario: key estimates to support efforts in prevention. Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario; 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.ccohealth.ca/sites/CCOHealth/files/assets/BurdenCDReport.pdf>.
- ¹¹ Dietitians of Canada. (March 2024). Dietitians of Canada position statement on household food insecurity in Canada. Retrieved from https://www.dietitians.ca/DietitiansOfCanada/media/Images/DC-Household-Food-Insecurity-Position-Statement_2024_ENG.pdf.
- ¹² BC Centre for Disease Control. (2023). Food costing in BC 2022: Assessing the affordability of healthy eating. Vancouver, BC.: BC Centre for Disease Control, Population and Public Health Program. Retrieved from http://www.bccdc.ca/Documents/Food_Costing_in_BC_2022_Report_FINAL.pdf.
- ¹³ Ontario Agency for Health Protection and Promotion (Public Health Ontario). Snapshots data file for household food insecurity (2019 to 2023 (annual, 2-year combined, 3-year combined)). Retrieved from <https://www.publichealthontario.ca/en/Data-and-Analysis/Health-Equity/Household-Food-Insecurity>.

¹⁴ Statistics Canada. (2024). Table: 17-10-0148-01. Population estimates, July 1, by census metropolitan area and census agglomeration, 2021 boundaries. Retrieved from <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1710014801>.

¹⁵ Coleman, A. (November 2024). Onario Living Wage Network: Calculating Ontario's living wages. Retrieved from https://assets.nationbuilder.com/ontariolivingwage/pages/110/attachments/original/1731935587/Calculating_Ontario's_Living_Wages_-_2024.pdf?1731935587.



Indicator	Year	Geography	Per cent (%)	95% Confidence Interval (Lower)	95% Confidence Interval (Upper)	Margin of Error
Food insecure (household level)	2019	Middlesex-London Health Unit	17.2	12.5	21.8	4.6
Food insecure (household level)	2020	Middlesex-London Health Unit	14.7	10.1	19.3	4.6
Food insecure (household level)	2021	Middlesex-London Health Unit	18.5	13.2	23.7	5.3
Food insecure (household level)	2022	Middlesex-London Health Unit	17.5	14.1	20.9	3.4
Food insecure (household level)	2023	Middlesex-London Health Unit	25.1	21.8	28.4	3.3

Reference: Ontario Agency for Health Protection and Promotion (Public Health Ontario). Snapshots data file for household food insecurity (2019 to 2023 (annual, 2-year combined, 3-year combined)). Retrieved from <https://www.publichealthontario.ca/en/Data-and-Analysis/Health-Equity/Household-Food-Insecurity>.

Middlesex-London Income and Cost of Living Scenarios for 2024

Income Source	Monthly Income ¹	Monthly Rent ² / % Income		Monthly Food ³ / % Income		What's Left? ⁴ 2024	What's Left? ^{4,5} 2023
Single Person Ontario Works	\$881	\$988	112%	\$415	47%	-\$522	-\$420
Single Person Ontario Disability Support Program	\$1,465	\$1,222	83%	\$415	28%	-\$172	-\$186
Single Pregnant Person Ontario Disability Support Program	\$1,505	\$1,222	81%	\$440	29%	-\$157	-\$170
Single Person Old Age Security/Guaranteed Income Security	\$2,069	\$1,222	59%	\$296	14%	\$551	\$553
Single Parent with 2 Children Ontario Works	\$2,670	\$1,523	57%	\$890	33%	\$257	\$309
Family of 4 Ontario Works	\$2,908	\$1,734	60%	\$1,194	41%	-\$20	-\$15
Family of 4 Minimum Wage Earner (full-time)	\$4,507	\$1,734	38%	\$1,194	26%	\$1,579	\$1,351
Family of 4 Median Income (after tax)	\$9,685	\$1,734	18%	\$1,194	12%	\$6,757	\$6,475
Family of 4 Refugee Claimants Minimum Wage Earner (full-time)	\$3,238	\$1,734	54%	\$1,194	37%	\$310	N/A

The household scenarios spreadsheet is prepared annually by [Ontario Dietitians in Public Health](#) (ODPH) to support Ontario public health units to monitor local and provincial food affordability.

What's Left?⁴

People still need additional funds for childcare, utilities, Internet, phone, tenant insurance, transportation, household operations and supplies, personal care items, clothing, school supplies, gifts, recreation and leisure, out of pocket medical and dental costs, education, savings, and other costs.

Income¹

[WoodGreen Community Services](#) calculated the incomes for each scenario.

Income estimates for each scenario include all family and tax benefit entitlements available to Ontario residents (e.g., Climate Action Incentive Payment, Ontario Trillium Benefit, Canada Child Benefit, GST/HST credit, Canada Worker Benefit). Individual incomes may be lower if individuals do not file their income tax and/or do not apply for all available credits and benefits.

The main income for each scenario was estimated for May/June 2024. The exception is median income obtained from Statistics Canada, as the most recent data are from 2022. Combined Ontario median income for couples with children was utilized, with deductions made for income tax, Employment Insurance, and Canada Pension Plan.

Rent²

Average apartment rental costs are estimates based on the [Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation \(CMHC\) Ontario Rental Market Report](#). CMHC provides a consistent data source with a known methodology. CMHC does not publish a statistic if its reliability is too low or if publication would violate confidentiality rules. However, CMHC's data likely underestimate local rental costs, and as a result the amount of funds remaining for each scenario would likely be lower and the percentage attributable to rent would be higher.

The Rental Market Survey is conducted in urban areas with populations of 10,000 or more. The survey includes both new and existing units in privately initiated structures with at least 3 rental units. The cost for a new tenant would likely be higher, as current tenants are protected from large annual increases by Ontario's [residential rent increase guideline](#).

Utility costs (e.g., heat, electricity, hot water) may or may not be included in the rental amounts.

CMHC cost estimates were for October 2023. Cost estimates were adjusted for inflation using the [Consumer Price Index \(CPI\)](#) for shelter in Ontario for the estimated increase from October 2023 to May 2024.

Accommodation size for most scenarios was selected based on suitability as defined by the [National Occupancy Standard \(NOS\)](#). The standard includes various criteria, including a maximum of 2 people per bedroom. Most scenarios utilize 1, 2, or 3-bedroom apartments, depending on the household size and composition. Exceptions were made for 2 scenarios where the suitable accommodation size may not be realistic due to what is available or affordable. The scenario with a single person receiving Ontario Works is costed with a bachelor apartment. The scenario with a single parent with 2 children receiving Ontario Works was costed with a 2-bedroom apartment.

Food³

Food costs are calculated using the Ontario Nutritious Food Basket (ONFB), which is based on the [National Nutritious Food Basket \(NNFB\)](#). The ONFB survey tool is revised annually by ODPH, in collaboration with Public Health Ontario (PHO). The ONFB measures the cost of basic eating that represents current nutrition recommendations and average food purchasing patterns.

The NNFB is based on Canada's Food Guide, national food intake data, and Dietary Reference Intakes (DRIs). The NNFB and Canada's Food Guide are not inclusive for all religious and cultural groups. The ONFB does not reflect sourcing of traditional Indigenous foods. These are significant limitations of this data collection and may limit the generalizability and relevance of the food costs to different population groups.

London Food Bank volunteers and a Western University Dietetic Practicum Student completed the food costing, with training and support provided by a Health Unit Registered Dietitian. Costing was conducted May 19 to June 1, 2024, at 10 full-service grocery stores in Middlesex County and the City of London, both online and in person, including premium and discount stores. Average costs were calculated for 61

food items. If preferred food items were unavailable, similar items (i.e., proxy items) were used with minor differences between nutrition and/or price.

An adjustment factor was applied to the food costs depending on the household size in the scenario to account for the additional costs per person to feed a small group and the lower costs per person to feed a larger group.

Comparing 2024 to Previous Year's Scenarios⁵

Adjustments to the food and rent costs for the 2023 and 2022 scenarios are required before comparison to the 2024 scenarios. Comparing 2024 food costs to years prior to 2022 is not appropriate due to methodology changes (e.g., introduction of online costing; revisions to the NNFB to be consistent with 2019 Canada's Food Guide, updated national food intake data, and updated DRIs).

Local food costing was not completed in 2020 or 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Food Adjustments

In 2024, Health Canada adjusted the NNFB spreadsheet due to revisions to [Dietary Reference Intakes for Energy](#) for groups where the Estimated Energy Requirement (EER) increased by more than 100 kcal/day (i.e., Males 14-18 years old, Females 14-18 years old, Pregnant <19 years old, Pregnant 19-30 years old, Pregnant 31-50 years old, Breastfeeding <19 years old, and Breastfeeding 19-30 years old).

The 2024 Monitoring Food Affordability in Ontario Master Spreadsheet was updated to reflect the increased EER for these groups. Weekly cost of ONFB in 2024 for these groups increased significantly compared to 2023 and 2022 due to the increased EER.

Rent Adjustments

In 2024, a CPI adjustment to rent costs was made to more accurately reflect actual local rental costs. This adjustment was not made in previous years. CMHC cost estimates were for October 2023. Cost estimates were adjusted for inflation using the [CPI](#) for shelter in Ontario for the increase from October 2023 to May 2024.

Data Sources

Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (January 2024). Rental Market Report: London, 2023, Table 1.1.2 Private Apartment Average Rents (\$), by Zone and Bedroom Type - London CMA. Retrieved from <https://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/professionals/housing-markets-data-and-research/housing-data/data-tables/rental-market/rental-market-report-data-tables>.

Government of Canada (2024). Child and family benefits calculator. Retrieved from <https://www.canada.ca/en/revenue-agency/services/child-family-benefits/child-family-benefits-calculator.html>.

Middlesex-London Health Unit (2024). Ontario Nutritious Food Basket data for Middlesex-London Health Unit – Includes family size adjustment factors.

Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (2024). Social Assistance, Pension, and Tax Credit Rates: April – June 2024.

Statistics Canada. (2024). Table: 11-10-0190-01. Market income, government transfers, total income, income tax and after-tax income by economic family type. Retrieved from <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/cv.action?pid=1110019001>.

Statistics Canada. (2024). Table: 18-10-0004-01. Consumer Price Index, monthly, not seasonally adjusted. Retrieved from <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/cv.action?pid=1110019001>.