



THE
**REAL
COST**

of Eating Well in Northwestern Ontario

Report and Recommendations, 2024

Northwestern Health Unit



**Northwestern
Health Unit**

www.nwhu.on.ca

THE REAL COST

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Purpose of this report

Household food insecurity is a well-recognized and growing public health issue in Ontario and across Canada. It is defined as inadequate or insecure access to food because of financial constraints.

*Registered Dietitians from Northwestern Health Unit (NWHU) measure the cost of food across our region using the Ontario Nutritious Food Basket tool. The average cost of food and local rent is then compared to different household income scenarios. These scenarios and the accompanying report support existing evidence that the root cause of food insecurity is about income, **not** food.*

Food is a basic human right, and everyone in northwestern Ontario should have the physical and financial means to access nutritious food. NWHU shares this report to highlight the need for income-based solutions: policies to reduce poverty, improve living wages, and close the gap between income and the cost of living.

NWHU encourages individuals, businesses, and organizations to share this report widely and explore actions they can take to support income-based solutions to food insecurity.

Household food insecurity

is a prevalent and worsening public health concern in Canada, including northwestern Ontario. The latest statistics show significant increases in household food insecurity in the northwest, which is similar across the province.

	Kenora RR District	% Change	Ontario	%Change
2020	20.4%		17.1%	
2021	17.0%	-17%	16.1%	-6%
2022	21.3%	25%	18.7%	16%
2023	24.0%	13%	24.2%	29%

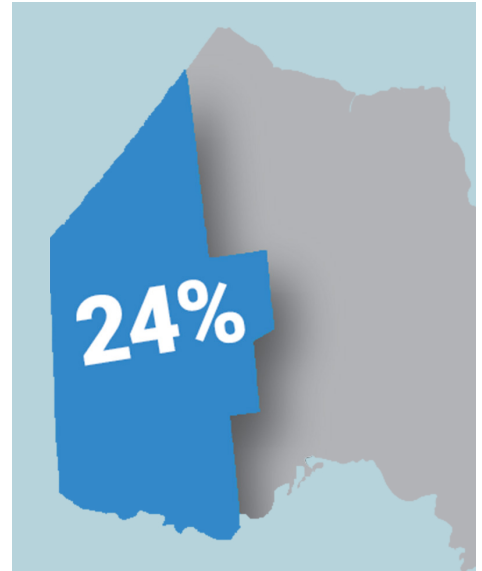
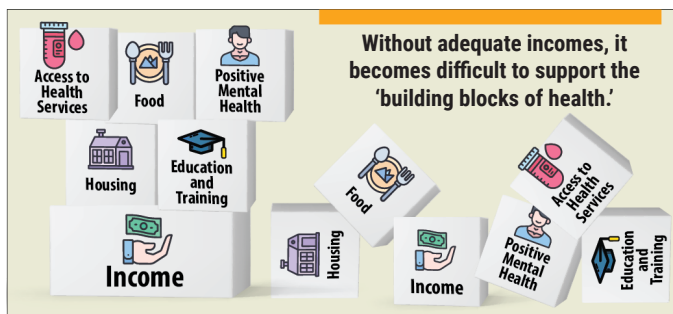
This means **approximately 1 in 4 households** in the region face inadequate or insecure access to food because of financial constraints. Food insecurity can include worrying about running out of food, not being able to afford balanced or nutritious meals, eating less food than needed, or even going days without food.

Food insecurity can be both a determinant of health and an outcome of poor health, and this relationship is often a vicious cycle. Experiencing food insecurity is linked to:

- Increased risk of developing mental and physical health conditions, like depression, anxiety, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and chronic pain,
- Increased risk of infectious diseases and injuries,
- Higher likelihood of being diagnosed with multiple chronic diseases, requiring more frequent hospitalization and longer hospital stays,
- A shorter lifespan - almost 10 years shorter than someone who is food secure.²

Household food insecurity is a strong measure of material deprivation.³ When money is tight, food becomes a flexible expense in order to afford other basic needs, like housing. This is important, because it means food insecurity is not just about inadequate food – it’s an indicator that other basic needs for health and well-being are likely being compromised or unmet.

Income is argued to be the most influential determinant of our health, as it’s the key to accessing other determinants of health including housing, education and employment, health services, and our ability to engage in health promoting behaviors, like access to quality food and recreational activities.⁴



Statistics show approximately 24% of households in the Kenora-Rainy River Districts are facing food insecurity.

Food insecurity is not just about inadequate food – it’s an indicator that other basic needs for health and well-being are likely being compromised or unmet.

Calculating the Real Cost of Eating Well in Northwestern Ontario*

Family household scenarios:

NWHU estimates that to feed a family of four in northwestern Ontario in 2024 would cost \$1512.51 per month – a 7% increase from 2023.




Meet Kaylie.

Kaylie has been relying on Ontario Works as her main source of income for the past year. Kaylie had previously been a proud employee of a small local business, who unfortunately had to close their doors through the COVID pandemic. She's been unable to find stable full-time work. Kaylie has two young boys – her youngest just started school this year and has been growing like a weed. Her oldest has been begging to play hockey this season.

If Kaylie were to purchase nutritious food for her family and pay rent for their 2-bedroom apartment, she would have **no money left for the month (-\$1)**. She must choose between food on the table, heat and hydro, clothing for her boys, hockey equipment and school supplies, medications, or her phone bill.


Kaylie has started visiting the food bank in order to make ends meet each month. She feels incredibly stressed and tries to hide her money anxiety from her boys and family members.

 Family of four	Income (\$)	Rent (\$) (% of total income)	Food (\$) (% of total income)	Remaining income for all other monthly expenses
Median Ontario Income	\$9685	\$2058 (21%)	\$1513 (15.6%)	\$6114

*Standardized family is calculated based on two adults aged 31-50, a boy aged 14, and a girl aged 8.

Having a job isn't enough. Approximately half (48.2%) of all food insecure households in Ontario rely on employment incomes². The minimum wage in Ontario has failed to keep pace with increasing inflation, which means those with minimum-wage jobs are at higher risk of food insecurity.


According to the Ontario Living Wage Network's calculations in 2024 a living wage for Northern Ontario should be \$20.30/ hour.⁵ A living wage reflects what people need to earn to cover the actual costs of living in their community.⁶

 Family of four	Income (\$)	Rent (\$) (% of total income)	Food (\$) (% of total income)	Remaining income for all other monthly expenses
One Minimum Wage Earner	\$4537	\$2058 (45%)	\$1513 (23%)	\$966

In 2023, 30.7% of Ontario children under 18 were living in food insecure households. This is a 51% increase from 2021.³ Children living in food insecure homes are more likely to suffer poor mental health including hyperactivity, anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation; have poor growth and development; and experience negative impacts on their academic performance and social skills.²

*Income, rent, and food costs are rounded to the nearest dollar. For more details on the methodology used for these calculations, please see the Considerations at the end of this report.




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 Family of four Ontario Works	Income (\$)	Rent (\$) (% of total income)	Food (\$) (% of total income)	Remaining income for all other monthly expenses
	\$2938	\$2058 (70%)	\$1513 (50%)	-\$633

According to the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), housing is considered “affordable” if it accounts for less than 30% of a household’s before-tax income.⁷ A recent report found that apartment rentals are considerably higher than what minimum wage can afford in every single Canadian province, including Ontario.⁸

Single Parent Household Scenarios:

Single parents with children are the most vulnerable to suffering from food insecurity – more than 1 in 3 (38.1%) single mothers and 1 in 5 (20.9%) single fathers in Canada are food insecure.²

	Income (\$)	Rent (\$) (% of total income)	Food (\$) (% of total income)	Remaining income for all other monthly expenses
 Single pregnant person Ontario Disability Support Program	\$1524	\$1184 (77%)	\$443 (29%)	-\$103
 Single parent with 2 children Ontario Works	\$2699	\$1561 (57%)	\$1129 (41%)	\$9
 Single parent with 2 children Minimum Wage	\$4329	\$1561 (36%)	\$1038 (24%)	\$1730

After paying for just housing and food, low- and fixed-income earners have very little, if any, money left over to cover their basic living necessities. This includes:



Heat and Hydro



Personal Hygiene Products



Clothing



School Supplies



Transportation



Child Care



Telephone



Home Furnishings



Personal Care Items




Household Cleaners


Single Household Scenarios:

Non-standard work has grown to become the norm in Canada, including temporary contracts, part-time work, and the need to work multiple jobs. This has led to insufficient hours and wages, reduced autonomy, fewer healthcare benefits, limited pensions, and fluctuations in pay. Many people feel trapped on social assistance; despite a desire to work, remaining on social assistance feels more stable than this precarious work.⁹


In Ontario, over **two-thirds** (67.2%) of households that rely on social assistance experience food insecurity.²

 Single male, ODSP	Income (\$)	Rent (\$) (% of total income)	Food (\$) (% of total income)	Remaining income for all other monthly expenses
	\$1484	\$1184 (79%)	\$524 (35%)	-\$224

According to the 2022 *Hunger Report*, individuals living in rural Ontario receiving ODSP fell \$650 below the poverty line every single month, while those receiving Ontario Works fell over \$1000 below the poverty line every month.¹⁰

 Single male, Ontario Works	Income (\$)	Rent (\$) (% of total income)	Food (\$) (% of total income)	Remaining income for all other monthly expenses
	\$899	\$650 (72%)	\$524 (58%)	-\$275

Canada's Old Age Security and Guaranteed Income Supplement (OAS/GIS) are forms of a [Basic Income Guarantee](#) and have dramatically reduced poverty and food insecurity among Canadian older adults. After the age of 65, low-income individuals have **half the rate of food insecurity** compared to those under the age of 65.¹¹

 Single female, OAS/GIS	Income (\$)	Rent (\$) (% of total income)	Food (\$) (% of total income)	Remaining income for all other monthly expenses
	\$2087	\$1184 (56%)	\$314 (15%)	\$589

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Relying on any form of public income support except public pensions, meant being very vulnerable to food insecurity.

PROOF, 2022

Income-based solutions are needed to reduce food insecurity for all

Food insecurity and poverty reduction can be addressed at municipal, provincial, and federal policy levels. Without adequate incomes, the building blocks of health cannot be supported. Income-based solutions address the root cause of the problem, help to preserve dignity, and give choice to buy foods that meet individual needs.

Evidence supports the need for income-based solutions, including:

- Minimum wage, social assistance, and disability rates that reflect the actual cost of living and are indexed to inflation.
- A basic income guarantee or guaranteed livable income.
- Housing infrastructure that is accessible, affordable, and meets the needs of communities.
- Accessible and affordable childcare services, and child benefits designed to adequately support low-income families.
- Employment stability, security, and benefits.



What about community food programs?

It's important to acknowledge that community food programs provide needed short-term relief in northwestern Ontario. These include community kitchens, food boxes, community gardens, school nutrition programs, and food banks. These programs can help build food skills, resiliency, and social connection, but ultimately they are not a long term solution to resolving food insecurity.

Learn more about food insecurity on our website.

VISIT NOW 

How Does NWHU Calculate the Real Cost of Eating Well?

NWHU uses a survey tool called the Ontario Nutritious Food Basket (ONFB) to cost food across the region. The ONFB is adapted from the [National Nutritious Food Basket](#) and was created by Ontario Dietitians in Public Health (ODPH) in collaboration with Public Health Ontario (PHO) for use by all Ontario public health units. The ONFB is the tool used by Ontario Public Health Dietitians to monitor food affordability, a requirement in the Ontario Public Health Standards.

The ONFB consists of 61 basic food items that represent Canada's Healthy Eating Recommendations, Dietary Reference Intakes, and national food consumption data. This includes several vegetables and fruits (fresh and frozen), bread products, milk, yogurt, cheese, fresh meats, canned goods, peanut butter, and cooking oil. It's important to note that the ONFB is not a lowest-cost food basket and should not be used as a budgeting tool.



NWHU staff complete standardized training before collecting food costs at 11 stores in the Kenora-Rainy River Districts. This data is pooled to calculate the average regional cost of nutritious food across a variety of age and sex categories. Food cost data is then incorporated into income scenarios, developed by ODPH, to assess food affordability.

Considerations when reading this report:

1. Food insecurity rates:

- a Rates of household food insecurity for the NWHU catchment area (pg. 1) are derived from Canadian Income Survey (CIS) data by PHO. As CIS data does not capture those that live on First Nations communities or other small, remote areas, this value is likely an underrepresentation of food insecurity across the region. The CIS sample frame is also not designed to produce representative samples at the public health unit level; this should be taken into account when interpreting the public health unit-level estimates in this report.
- b The issue of food insecurity is further complicated in northwestern Ontario, specifically for rural, remote, and northern communities. Higher transportation and fuel costs, greater risks of damaged or lost perishable items during long transport, and a lack of grocery competition in communities are a few of the unique circumstances we face. In these situations, coupled with recent food supply chain disruptions and record-high inflation, the high cost of food does partially contribute to food insecurity in northwestern Ontario communities.^{12 13}

2. ONFB costing methodology:

- a Costing is only conducted across municipalities in the Kenora-Rainy River Districts, and therefore is not a representative average for the whole region. We know from previous food costing studies^{12 14} that



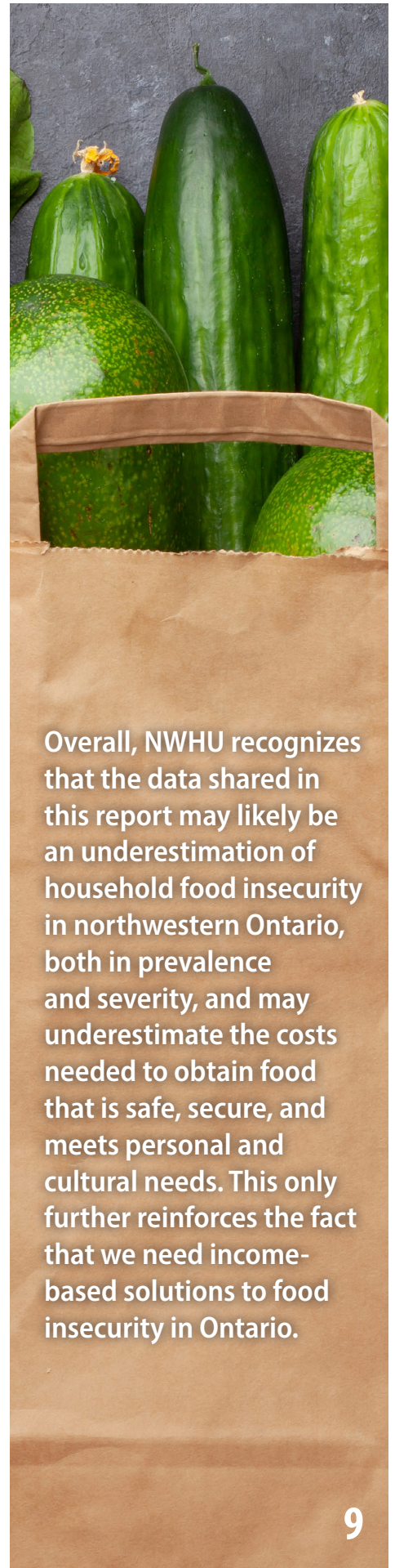
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market food costs can be substantially higher in northern and First Nations communities, especially those that rely on ice road transport or flown-in goods.

- b In the event preferred items in the ONFB were unavailable, proxy items of similar nutrition and price may be used. Please note there may be minor differences between nutrition and/or price between the preferred and proxy items.
- c The ONFB excludes processed foods, infant foods or formula, and foods for special diets, such as gluten-free products. It also does not include personal hygiene items like soap, shampoo, and toilet paper that are often purchased while grocery shopping.
- d The food costs calculated exclude many components of eating in the “real world,” such as eating out with family and friends, food preferences, and unplanned circumstances.
- e The ONFB assumes that people have the time, food skill, and equipment to cook low-cost recipes with the food items included, that people always choose foods based on lowest price, and that people have access to quality grocery stores. The ONFB is also not culturally representative of all eating patterns, such as differences in food preparation techniques, cultural foods and spices, and traditional land-based foods. NWHU recognizes these are significant limitations of this data collection.

3. Income scenario methodology:

- a 2024 Monitoring Food Affordability Income Scenarios are calculated annually by ODPH. Incomes used represent incomes with all eligible benefits and credits, after tax. All data sources used to estimate incomes of the family and single-person households are publicly available. 2023 calculations were reviewed for accuracy by WoodGreen Community Services, one of the largest social service agencies in Toronto.
- b Rental rate averages were calculated by NWHU in 2024 as existing data from the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) is not representative of rural communities in northwestern Ontario. Rental rates across local municipalities were collected once monthly during the first week of the month from January to December 2024. Informal data sources, including Facebook Marketplace, Facebook rental/housing pages, local classifieds ads, and Kijiji were utilized as these online sources provide a realistic representation of where and how residents are accessing rental properties. Averages were calculated across listing categories (shared accommodations, 1 bedroom, 2 bedrooms, 3+ bedrooms). Rental rates may or may not include utilities. NWHU recognizes the limitations of this approach, including missingness by only collecting data once monthly, which may omit postings that have been filled and deleted in that time period. Online sources are likely not exhaustive of all rental property listings available locally (i.e., local bulletin boards, word of mouth).
- c Housing assigned to each income scenario family/individual was informed by the National Occupancy Standard, which provides common reference point for “suitable” housing, which is how many people a given dwelling unit might accommodate given the number of bedrooms.



Overall, NWHU recognizes that the data shared in this report may likely be an underestimation of household food insecurity in northwestern Ontario, both in prevalence and severity, and may underestimate the costs needed to obtain food that is safe, secure, and meets personal and cultural needs. This only further reinforces the fact that we need income-based solutions to food insecurity in Ontario.

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