

The Cost of Eating Well in the District of Thunder Bay, 2019

Each year, the Thunder Bay District Health Unit conducts the Nutritious Food Basket (NFB) survey to determine average food prices when following a healthy diet. The survey requires pricing 67 basic food items from four stores in the City of Thunder Bay and two stores in the broader District.

This year's annual survey was conducted in May 2019. The information is then used to determine the average cost of living in the District of Thunder Bay. In short, this survey estimates how much it costs to follow a basic healthy eating pattern in Thunder Bay, while taking into account other expenses such as housing or rent.



While there are various costs of living, the two largest expenses usually are rent and food. Other additional living expenses may include, but are not limited to:

- Heat, water, and hydro
- Phone bills
- Laundry
- Toiletries and cleaning products
- Insurance
- Transportation (e.g. bus passes, vehicle maintenance, or taxi)
- Clothing
- Debt payments
- Gifts
- Non-prescription drugs and dispensing fees
- Bank service charges
- School costs
- Incidentals

The tables in Appendix 1 indicate various income scenarios, along with the average rent and food costs for the District of Thunder Bay. The remaining income is what is left over for covering other additional expenses.

There are people in the District of Thunder Bay who cannot afford a nutritious diet.

Reducing poverty through income-based strategies can reduce food insecurity.

While the provincial and federal governments have made adjustments to minimum wage, and benefits and credits, the NFB survey has repeatedly indicated that many households continue to struggle to pay rent, bills and purchase enough nutritious food for their families. For example, the cost to purchase healthy food should not exceed 10-15% of income, meaning that all but median income earners and old age security/guaranteed income supplement recipients are at risk for food insecurity (Appendix 1).

As a result, people will usually choose to pay for rent and other expenses instead of purchasing nutritious food for a healthy diet. Foods with higher caloric and satiety value, as well as convenience foods are chosen more often, and nutritious food becomes a “flexible” expense resulting in diets of poorer nutritional value.

This year’s income scenarios indicate that those who are on social assistance may encounter trouble with covering other living expenses. For example, a one person household on Ontario works would not be able to fully cover their estimated rent or food costs, let alone other additional living expenses.

These consistent findings over the years has led to the formation of initiatives such as the Ontario Basic Income Pilot (OBIP) to provide a new approach to reducing poverty in a sustainable way. The OBIP was launched early in 2017 with Thunder Bay being a pilot test site. The plan for the pilot was to provide monthly basic income payments to eligible participants for a three year period, ending in 2020. The estimates from last years scenarios appeared to indicate that the OBIP would provide similar funds to minimum wage earners (Appendix - 1 - Scenario 2) to secure appropriate housing, food and for other living expenses. Unfortunately, the OBIP was withdrawn earlier in March of this year.

As it stands, health units across Ontario are continuing to advocate for income-based strategies to reduce poverty.

For more information, you can visit:

<https://www.ontario.ca/page/ontario-basic-income-pilot#section-0>

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Poverty is a leading cause of Food Insecurity in Ontario, which can lead to negative health outcomes.

Not being able to afford a nutritious diet can seriously affect health.

Chronic Disease

Adults in food insecure households have poorer physical and mental health, and higher rates of chronic conditions such as diabetes, heart disease and depression. Once chronic diseases are established, it can further worsen their food insecurity. Overall, this greatly decreases the quality of life and can greatly increase costs to the healthcare system.

Low Birth Weight

Poor diets among pregnant women results in low birth weights in infants. Those babies who survive are at greater risk of developing health problems and disabilities than babies of normal weights. Also, low intakes of folate before and during pregnancy can increase the chances of babies 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 and often find it more difficult looking for employment. Undernourished children are especially 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.

Poor Mental Health

Studies show that poor diets with low nutritional value tend to be linked to higher rates of depression and anxiety. For children, experiencing hunger is linked to hyperactivity and inattention, as well as greater risks of suicidal ideation in adolescence and early adulthood. Overall, higher rates of mental health concerns are associated with increased use of the healthcare system and hospitalization.

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Solutions that focus on promoting an income adequate for healthy living and reducing food security can improve health outcomes.

Currently, there are various community food programs and initiatives that attempt to address food insecurity in Ontario. These include community kitchens, Good Food Boxes, community gardens, gleaning and school nutrition programs. These programs may offer short term benefits to social, psychological, physical and community health.

(For programs within the District of Thunder Bay, visit: <https://www.tbdhu.com/health-topics/healthy-eating/where-to-get-food-thunder-bay-list-of-food-programs-and-services>)

However, the root cause of food insecurity is **poverty**.

This will need to be addressed through broader policies at the provincial and federal levels through strategies that promote:

- Adequate social assistance, minimum wage and basic income
- Affordable housing policies
- Adequate employment insurance coverage and benefits
- Accessible and affordable child care

What can we do?

1. Stay educated on poverty and how it leads to food insecurity
2. Volunteer and support community food programs and initiatives in the time being
3. Speak out and advocate for positive changes to improve policies that reduce poverty

For more information on poverty and food insecurity, please visit:

PROOF – Food Insecurity Policy Research:

<https://proof.utoronto.ca/food-insecurity/>

Lakehead Social Planning Council:

<https://www.lspc.ca/poverty-reduction-strategy/>

Ontario Dietitians in Public Health:

<https://www.odph.ca/centsless>

Social Assistance Research Commission:

<https://www.ola.org/en/legislative-business/bills/parliament-42/session-1/bill-60>

Appendix 1 – Comparison of Household Income and Expenses for Families (2019)

Low-income households often live in rental housing. Using the average costs of renting in the District of Thunder Bay for 2018, and the results of the NFB survey, here are four family scenarios outlining their respective monthly costs of living.

Scenarios	Family of 4 Ontario Works (2 parents; 2 children)	Family of 4 Full-time Minimum Wage (2 parents; 2 children)	Family of 4 Median Income (after tax)	Family of 3 Ontario Works (1 parent; 2 children)
Monthly Income ⁱ	\$2,643.00	\$3,646.00	\$7,983.00	\$2,420.00
Rent ⁱⁱ	\$1,296.00 (3 Bdr. Apartment)	\$1,296.00 (3 Bdr. Apartment)	\$1,296.00 (3 Bdr. Apartment)	\$1,037.00 (2 Bdr. Apartment)
Cost of Food ⁱⁱⁱ	\$891.04	\$891.04	\$891.04	\$641.04
	34% of Monthly Income	24% of Monthly Income	11% of Monthly Income	26% of Monthly Income
Income Remaining for Other Living Expenses	\$455.96	\$1,458.96	\$5,795.96	\$741.96

i Income derived from NFB survey Income Scenario Spreadsheet (May, 2019), developed by the Ontario Dietitians in Public Health – Values represents maximum potential income, which includes Ontario and Federal credits, allowances and benefits

ii Rental cost calculations are from the Rental Market Report – Canada Mortgage and Housing Cooperation (Fall, 2018)

iii Based on the NFB survey for the District of Thunder Bay (May 2019)

Appendix 1 – Continued – Comparison of Household Income and Expenses for Individuals (2019)

Low income households often live in rental housing. Using the average costs of renting in the District of Thunder Bay for 2018, and the results of the NFB survey, here are three individual scenarios outlining their respective monthly costs of living.

Scenarios	One Person Household, Ontario Works	One Person Household, Ontario Disability Support Program	One Person Household, Old Age Security/ Guaranteed Income Supplement
Monthly Income ⁱ	\$838.00	\$1,285.00	\$1,739.00
Rent ⁱⁱ	\$666.00 (Bachelor Apartment)	\$831.00 (1 Bdr. Apartment)	\$831.00 (1 Bdr. Apartment)
Cost of Food ⁱⁱⁱ	\$249.96	\$249.96	\$182.32
	30% of Monthly Income	19% of Monthly Income	10% of Monthly Income
Income Remaining for Other Living Expenses	\$(77.96) ^{iv}	\$204.04	\$725.68

i Income derived from NFB survey Income Scenario Spreadsheet (May, 2019), developed by the Ontario Dietitians in Public Health – Values represents maximum potential income, which includes Ontario and Federal credits, allowances and benefits

ii Rental cost calculations are from the Rental Market Report – Canada Mortgage and Housing Cooperation (Fall, 2018)

iii Based on the NFB survey for the District of Thunder Bay (May 2019)

iv Parentheses denotes a negative value