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TO: Board of Health for the City of Ottawa Health Unit

DESTINATAIRE : Conseil de santé de la circonscription sanitaire de la ville d'Ottawa

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FILE NUMBER: ACS2025-OPH-HPP-0005

SUBJECT: Monitoring Food Affordability in Ottawa: 2025 Nutritious Food Basket

OBJET : Surveillance de l'accessibilité alimentaire à Ottawa : Panier d'aliments nutritifs 2025

PURPOSE

The purpose of this memo is to update the Ottawa Board of Health on Ottawa Public Health's (OPH) 2025 Nutritious Food Basket (NFB) survey results; to monitor food affordability using a variety of income scenarios and to provide an update on what OPH is doing to address food insecurity in Ottawa.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2024, 25.7% of households in Ottawa experienced food insecurity, up from 15.3% in 2019. Children, as well as Black and Indigenous communities continue to be disproportionately affected. Because poverty, driven by inadequate and unstable income, is the root cause of household food insecurity (HFI), strengthening income-based supports are necessary to effectively address this issue.

The 2025 Nutritious Food Basket results show that the monthly cost of healthy eating in Ottawa is \$1,180 for a reference family of four, and \$343 for a reference single adult male. When comparing NFB results and local housing costs with income, the results have consistently revealed that households receiving Ontario Works (OW), Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) or earning minimum wage are unable to afford their basic needs.

New in 2025, infant formula costing was conducted and revealed an average monthly expense of \$189 for infant formula, exceeding the current provincial Special Diet Allowance (SDA) of \$145. Similarly, the provincial Pregnancy/Breastfeeding Nutrition Allowance (PBNA) of \$40 is inadequate to cover the additional monthly food costs required during pregnancy (\$96) and breastfeeding (\$78). These findings highlight the financial gaps for families receiving social assistance, making it difficult for them to afford adequate nutrition for their infants.

To address food insecurity, OPH will continue to monitor food affordability; raise awareness about food insecurity and its health impacts; collaborate with Community and Social Services on implementation of the Poverty Reduction Strategy; support community partners with data and public health expertise; and identify opportunities to influence policies at the provincial and federal levels to strengthen income supports.

BACKGROUND

Household Food insecurity –

Food insecurity refers to inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints¹, ranging from concerns about running out of food to skipping meals. In 2024, over 1 in 4 households (25.7%) in Ottawa experienced food insecurity, which is a significant increase from 15.3% in 2019². In Canada, children under the age of 18 faced the highest level of food insecurity at 33%³. Black and Indigenous communities

¹ Li T, Fafard St-Germain AA, Tarasuk V. (2023) Household Food Insecurity in Canada, 2023. Toronto: Research to identify policy options to reduce food insecurity (PROOF). Retrieved from <https://proof.utoronto.ca/>

² Ontario Agency for Health Protection and Promotion (Public Health Ontario). (2025) Household Food Insecurity Snapshot – PHU (2019-2024). Retrieved from <https://www.publichealthontario.ca/en/Data-and-Analysis/Health-Equity/Household-Food-Insecurity>

³ PROOF. (2025) New Data on Household Food Insecurity in 2024. Retrieved from <https://proof.utoronto.ca/2025/new-data-on-household-food-insecurity-in-2024/>

continue to experience disproportionately high levels of food insecurity at 47% and 40%, respectively⁴, due to systemic racism and the lasting impacts of colonialism.

Poverty is the root cause of HFI. Canada uses the Market Basket Measure (MBM) as the official measure for poverty and reflects the cost of a specific basket of goods and services needed for a modest, basic standard of living for a family of four and is adjusted annually for inflation. In Ottawa, the MBM threshold or cost of living for a family of four between 2018 and 2024 increased by 22% from \$47,233 to \$57,560. In 2023, the MBM for a family of four was \$56,468, with 9.5% of Ottawa residents living below the poverty line, most of whom were adults aged 18-64⁵.

Despite Ontario's minimum wage increasing from \$17.20 to \$17.60 per hour on October 1, 2025, it still falls below Ottawa's living wage of \$22.80 per hour⁶. Social assistance rates and minimum wage increases have not kept up with the cost of living, leaving many households (especially minimum wage earners, people receiving social assistance and single-parent families) without enough income to meet basic needs, including access to nutritious food. This widening gap between income and the rising cost of living reinforces that HFI is fundamentally an income issue.

HFI is a social determinant of health that has a negative impact on both physical and mental well-being in adults and children. Evidence shows that income-based policies, such as adequate social assistance rates, a living minimum wage, and a guaranteed basic income program are needed to effectively address HFI⁷. In contrast, food-based responses have limited impact on HFI⁸. Charitable food programs are intended as temporary solutions to emergency situations and cannot address the broader, systemic issues that contribute to HFI.

Nutritious Food Basket Survey –

Since 1998, OPH has conducted the Nutritious Food Basket (NFB) survey annually to determine the cost of healthy eating in Ottawa. The methodology remains consistent from 2024 ([ACS2024-OPH-HPP-0001](#)). The NFB survey is not meant to be used as a budgeting tool nor for meal planning purposes. Instead, NFB results are combined with local rent costs in hypothetical income scenarios to see how much money is left for households with low or fixed incomes. Except for one reference scenario, all the other scenarios reflect households experiencing some level of food insecurity.

Infant Formula Costing–

New in 2025, costs for a single container of powdered, cow's milk-based, Stage 1 (up to 1 year of age) infant formula were collected using a new standardized methodology developed by Public Health Ontario in collaboration with Ontario Dietitians in Public Health. Of the 11 retail stores surveyed, 7 had the specified infant formula in stock.

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ Statistics Canada custom tabulation: Market Basket Measure poverty rate of Ottawa by age and family structure, 2023.

⁶ Ontario Living Wage Network. (2024). Retrieved from: <https://www.ontariolivingwage.ca/rates>

⁷ Tarasuk V, McIntyre L. (2025) The evidence is in: accountability needs to be injected into the policy-making process for household food insecurity reduction. *Health Promotion Chronic Disease Prevention Canada*, 45(9), 386-390. Doi: 10.24095/hpcdp.45.9.04

⁸ Idzerda L, Lazarescu C, Corrin T et al. (2025) Food-based interventions to mitigate household food insecurity in Canada: a systematic review. *Health Promotion Chronic Disease Prevention Canada*, 45(9), 367-385. Doi: 10.24095/hpcdp.45.9.03

This information can help inform decision making on infant feeding and support advocacy for increasing Pregnancy/Breastfeeding Nutritional Allowance (PBNA), Special Diet Allowance (SDA), and social assistance rates, which aligns with the [alPHa resolution](#) passed in May 2025. PBNA and SDA are available through OW and ODSP: PBNA provides \$40 per month (or \$50 per month for lactose intolerance) to support nutritional needs during pregnancy and breastfeeding. SDA offers \$145 per month (or \$162 per month for lactose-intolerant infants) to cover the cost of infant formula when breastfeeding is not possible or recommended.

The proportion of women in Ottawa who exclusively feed breast milk to their infants at discharge from hospital or midwifery care declined from 66% in 2013 to 48% in 2024⁹, which highlights the importance of accessible and affordable products to ensure all families can adequately nourish their infants. Known as the breastfeeding paradox, women who can least afford infant formula are also the least likely to feed breast milk due to systemic barriers (unstable housing, food insecurity/poverty, lack of support and access to resources) and not because of personal choice¹⁰.

Housing Affordability –

In 2021, nearly 1 in 4 renter households in Ottawa (23.3%) were experiencing a core housing need¹¹ – meaning that their housing was either inadequate, unaffordable, or unsuitable for the size and composition of their household. Those most affected are individuals relying on social assistance or working minimum wage jobs¹², which are also the households that are most likely to experience food insecurity.

HFI and housing are connected as food affordability depends on a household's income and other expenses – housing is often a household's largest expense. Currently, there is limited evidence that shows financial support for housing directly reduces HFI¹³; however, these programs can help lower the cost of living and as a result, more money is available to purchase other necessities, such as nutritious food.

In 2025, housing allowance benefits have been included in monitoring food affordability to better reflect the financial realities of households with fixed or low incomes experiencing HFI. The City's Social Housing team provided the information and calculations used to determine eligible housing allowance amounts, as part of an ongoing collaboration to better understand the connections between housing affordability, health and food insecurity. The City currently administers housing allowance benefit programs aimed at providing financial stability to households on low-income and provide access to permanent affordable housing for individuals and families experiencing homelessness ([ACS2025-CSS-GEN-006](#)).

As was done in 2024 ([ACS2024-OPH-HPP-0001](#)), local housing data from both Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) and Rentals.ca have been included in this year's hypothetical income

⁹ Ottawa Public Health. Infant feeding at entry to public health service, Better Outcomes Registry & Network (BORN) Ontario 2013-2024. Extracted 29 July 2025.

¹⁰ Frank, L. (2020). *Out of Milk: Infant food insecurity in a rich nation*. UBC Press.

¹¹ City of Ottawa Housing Needs Assessment (2024). Retrieved from https://documents.ottawa.ca/sites/default/files/2024-HNA_EN.pdf

¹² *ibid*

¹³ Idzerda L, Corrin T, Lazarescu C, et al. (2024). Public policy interventions to mitigate household food insecurity in Canada: a systematic review. *Public Health Nutrition*, 27(1), e83. Doi: 10.1017/S1368980024000120

scenarios. CMHC provides data on average rental costs across all households, while Rentals.ca can highlight the higher prices faced by tenants seeking vacant units in the current rental market.

DISCUSSION

NFB Results and Income Scenarios

In 2025, the monthly cost of healthy eating for a reference family of four is \$1,180 and \$343 for a single adult male. Caution must be taken when comparing and interpreting the 2025 NFB results to previous years due to changes in methodology (2022) and the costing tool (2024). While the 2025 NFB shows a 5% decrease from 2024, Statistics Canada's MBM data for Ottawa has shown a steady increase in food costs over the longer term – from \$11,399 per year in 2018 for a reference family of four to \$14,909 in 2024¹⁴. This broader trend suggests that food affordability remains a concern and highlights the value of using multiple data sources¹⁵ to understand the evolving landscape of food affordability and HFI.

Rather than comparing food costs and how they change overtime, the main goal of the NFB results is to compare local food and housing expenses to available income. This can assess whether household income from social assistance, minimum wage employment or public pension supports for older adults is adequate to cover the cost of living. The results have consistently shown that individuals and families on fixed or low incomes do not have enough money to afford basic needs, including buying nutritious food.

In the 2025 income scenarios, all households receiving OW or ODSP face a monthly shortfall after paying for housing and food costs. While households earning minimum wage and individuals receiving public pension supports are in a relatively better financial position, their monthly income still falls short of meeting their basic needs (See Table 1 for details).

However, if a household receives housing allowance benefits, the first income scenario (family of four on OW with two school-age children) could receive up to approximately \$1,595 per month¹⁶ in housing assistance payments. This would reduce their average monthly rent from \$2,831 to \$1,236, allowing more of their disposable income to be used for other essential needs, including purchasing nutritious food.

¹⁴ Statistics Canada Table: 11-10-0066-01. Market Basket Measure (MBM) thresholds for the reference family by Market Basket Measure region, component and base year, 2018-2024.

¹⁵ Statistics Canada's Market Basket Measure, including the food costing component, is not collected for every public health unit across Ontario.

¹⁶ Based on real rent monthly of \$2831, monthly OW shelter allowance of \$756 and Adjusted Family Net Income (AFNI) of \$15,000 (calculated based on OW income)

Table 1: Income Scenarios in Ottawa

This analysis compares monthly income from social assistance, minimum wage employment and senior public pension with the cost of food (based on NFB results) and housing (using data from CMHC and Rentals.ca) to determine how much money remains at the end of the month.

			CMHC		Rentals.ca	
Family Scenario ¹⁷	Total monthly income	Monthly cost of a nutritious diet ¹⁸	Average monthly rent (% income required for rent)	Funds remaining each month for other basic needs ¹⁹	Average monthly rent (% income required for rent)	Funds remaining each month for other basic needs
1) Family of Four, Ontario Works 2 adults (male and female ages 31-50), 2 children (girl age 8, boy age 14)	\$2,994	\$1,180	\$2,002 (67%)	-\$188	\$2,831 (95%)	-\$1,017
					\$1,236 (41%) ²⁰ (after housing allowance benefit)	\$578 (after housing allowance benefit)
2) Family of Four, Minimum Wage Earners 2 adults (male and female ages 31-50), 2 children (girl age 8, boy age 14)	\$5,093	\$1,180	\$2,002 (39%)	\$1,911	\$2,831 (56%)	\$1,082
3) Family of Four, Median Income (after tax) 2 adults (male and female ages 31-50), 2 children (girl age 8, boy age 14)	\$9,865	\$1,180	\$2,002 (20%)	\$6,683	\$2,831 (29%)	\$5,854

¹⁷ All figures rounded to nearest whole number. To view the complete "2025 Monitoring Food Affordability in Ontario (MFAO) Income Scenarios Spreadsheet" including all references, visit: ottawapublichealth.ca/foodinsecurity

¹⁸ Based on the Ontario Nutritious Food Basket Survey conducted by Ottawa Public Health in May 2025, which included a representative sample of 11 full-service grocery stores.

¹⁹ Some examples of basic needs could include telephone, transportation, childcare, household and personal care items, clothing, school supplies, etc.

²⁰ This calculation assumes that, in this particular hypothetical scenario, the housing allowance benefit of \$1595 is used specifically to help cover rent. However, if housing allowance benefit is included as part of the total monthly income, then rent would represent 62% of that total income.

Family Scenario			CMHC		Rentals.ca	
	Total monthly income	Monthly cost of a nutritious diet	Average monthly rent (% income required for rent)	Funds remaining each month for other basic needs	Average monthly rent (% income required for rent)	Funds remaining each month for other basic needs
4) Family of Three, Ontario Works, 2 School-Age Children 1 adult (female age 31-50), 2 children (girl age 8, boy age 14)	\$2,760	\$879	\$2,002 (73%)	-\$121	\$2,831 (103%)	-\$950
5) One Person Household, Ontario Works 1 adult (male age 31-50)	\$892	\$411	\$1,253 (140%)	-\$772	\$1,626 (182%)	-\$1,145
6) One Person Household, Ontario Disability Support Program 1 adult (male age 31-50)	\$1,534	\$411	\$1,253 (82%)	-\$130	\$1,626 (106%)	-\$503
7) One Person Household, Old Age Security (OAS)/Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS)/Guaranteed Annual Income System (GAINS) 1 adult (female age 70+)	\$2,120	\$292	\$1,253 (59%)	\$575	\$1,626 (77%)	\$202

Family Scenario	Total monthly income	Monthly cost of a nutritious diet	CMHC		Rentals.ca	
			Average monthly rent (% income required for rent)	Funds remaining each month for other basic needs	Average monthly rent (% income required for rent)	Funds remaining each month for other basic needs
8) Single Pregnant Person, Ontario Disability Support Program 1 adult (female age 31-50)	\$1,574	\$435	\$1,253 (80%)	-\$114	\$1,626 (103%)	-\$487
9) Family of Three, Ontario Works, 2 Preschool Children 1 adult (female age 31-50), 2 children (girl age 3, boy age 4)	\$2,957	\$689	\$1,869 (63%)	\$399	\$2,559 (87%)	-\$291
10) One Person Household, Minimum Wage Earner 1 adult (male age 19-30)	\$2,236	\$435	\$1,253 (55%)	\$590	\$1,626 (71%)	\$217
11a) Family of Two, Ontario Works, Parent with Infant (Formula-Fed) 1 adult (female age 19-30), 1 infant (0-6 months)	\$2,192	\$338	\$1,869 (85%)	-\$15	\$2,559 (125%)	-\$850

Family Scenario			CMHC		Rentals.ca	
	Total monthly income	Monthly cost of a nutritious diet	Average monthly rent (% income required for rent)	Funds remaining each month for other basic needs	Average monthly rent (% income required for rent)	Funds remaining each month for other basic needs
11b) Family of Two, Ontario Works, Parent with Infant (Breast-fed) 1 lactating adult (female age 19-30), 1 infant (0-6 months)	\$2,087	\$417	\$1,869 (90%)	-\$199	\$2,559 (123%)	-\$889
12) Family of Four, Refugee Claimants, Minimum Wage Earner, 2 School-Age Children 2 adults (male and female ages 30-51), 2 children (girl age 8, boy age 14)	\$3,335	\$1,180	\$2,002 (60%)	\$153	\$2,831 (85%)	-\$676

Infant Feeding and Infant Formula Costing

In Ottawa, the average monthly cost of infant formula is \$189²¹, which exceeds the current SDA of \$145 per month. Similarly, the estimated monthly food costs to meet increased caloric needs are \$96 for pregnant individuals and \$78 for those who are feeding breast milk²², compared to \$40 per month from the PBNA. These gaps highlight the financial challenges families on social assistance face in meeting the nutritional needs of infants and mothers. Additional expenses commonly associated with formula feeding or feeding breast milk (e.g. vitamin D supplement, bottles, equipment) were not factored into the calculations.

Although the current amounts provided through the SDA and PBNA are insufficient, they do help offset certain expenses. Regardless of whether a parent receiving social assistance chooses to formula feed or feed breast milk, they still experience a monthly shortfall after covering for food and rent, increasing their risk for HFI.

While the PBNA and SDA are available to eligible social assistance recipients, it is important that the required forms are easily accessible and can be completed and submitted by an approved health care professional without barriers. To address barriers to access, a process was developed in collaboration with the Healthy Growth and Development team in July 2025, enabling OPH Registered Dietitians to complete PNBA or SDA forms for eligible clients who do not have a primary care provider ([ACS2025-OPH-HPP-0004](#)).

NEXT STEPS

- Continue to monitor food affordability annually by conducting the NFB survey
- Raise awareness about food insecurity, its health impact and system change necessary to help people afford the cost of living
- Continue to collaborate with Community and Social Services to support implementation of priorities in the Poverty Reduction Strategy
- Continue providing data and public health expertise to support community partners that are addressing food insecurity
- Track how this year's NFB data is being used by internal and external partners and identify opportunities for changes/improvements next year to NFB dissemination/inclusion of new data (e.g. incorporation of more housing allowance benefits into additional income scenarios) that could further advance health equity
- Monitor opportunities to influence provincial and federal policies that strengthen income supports for households on low-income (e.g. monitor progress of Bill S-206 currently at 2nd reading in the Senate, which proposes the development of a national Basic Income Guarantee framework).

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION

[2025 Income Scenarios](#)

²¹ Infant Formula Costing Tool for Ottawa Public Health, 2025.

²² Ottawa Public Health. 2025 Monitoring Food Affordability in Ontario (MFAO) Income Scenarios Spreadsheet.