

# Food Affordability & Food Insecurity in Algoma

The 2024 Nutritious Food Basket Results and Recommendations



*Algoma*  
**PUBLIC HEALTH**  
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# What is the Nutritious Food Basket?

Each year, Algoma Public Health (APH) conducts the Ontario Nutritious Food Basket (NFB) survey to determine the cost of healthy eating for families and individuals in Algoma.

The NFB includes 61 food items based off of Health Canada’s National Nutritious Food Basket, which was updated in 2019 to be consistent with Canada’s Food Guide. NFB data collection, management, and interpretation is led by APH Registered Dietitians (RD), with assistance from an RD-trained food surveyor (typically a dietetic learner).

NFB costing is conducted each year in May at eight full-service grocery stores across Algoma. The stores are representative across Algoma based on population and geographic distribution, including a mix of premium and discount stores. The costing is completed in-person or online.

The NFB includes an additional 5% cost to cover miscellaneous foods, such as spices, coffee, tea, and baking supplies, however, it does not include infant food or formula, food for special diets (e.g., gluten-free) or cleaning and personal hygiene products such as toothpaste, shampoo, toilet paper, menstrual products, and dish soap. Therefore, this data likely underestimates the money needed to obtain essential items.

## Limitations of the NFB

The NFB is not a meal planning or budgeting tool. It makes the following assumptions:

- People have the time, ability, skills, space and equipment to prepare meals from scratch.
- Food is always chosen based on the lowest available price.
- People have access to grocery stores and can grocery shop regularly.



The NFB is not inclusive of all religious and cultural groups, including Indigenous Peoples, as it does not reflect the full spectrum of ingredients, preparation, or procurement practices. APH recognizes this as a limitation of this data.

# 2024 Nutritious Food Basket Results

The 2024 NFB data indicates that the estimated monthly cost of eating for a single individual is \$426.07 and for a family of four is \$1225.04 (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** The monthly cost of eating well in Algoma.

## Assessing Food Affordability

The NFB results are used to assess food affordability. To do this, the costs of food and housing are compared to different individual family income scenarios.

The household income scenarios were developed by Ontario Dietitians in Public Health (ODPH) to provide real-world context. The scenarios show how much money would be left over each month for other essential expenses, such as childcare, transportation, and household bills. Further analysis of food affordability in Ontario is available in this [report by Public Health Ontario and ODPH](#).

Housing is a basic cost that makes up a large part of a household’s fixed monthly budget. The average rental cost for Algoma has been obtained from the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC)<sup>(1)</sup> and adjusted for inflation using the Consumer Price Index<sup>(2)</sup> in 2024. Algoma Public Health has conducted additional market research to assess how well the adjusted CMHC data represents the current local rental market, and findings suggest it underestimates current rental prices by as much as **45 - 65%**. Therefore, the amount left over for other expenses is likely overestimated.

**Note:** Due to changes in the costing survey, comparisons cannot be made to data prior to 2019.

# NFB Income Scenarios for Algoma in 2024

## The Current Situation

	Family of Four <sup>i</sup> , Ontario Works	Single Parent with two Children <sup>ii</sup> , Ontario Works	Single Person, Ontario Works	Single Person, Ontario Disability Support Program	Single Pregnant Person, Ontario Disability Support Program	Single Person, Old Age Security/ Guaranteed Income Supplement	Single Person, Part-time Precarious Employment (Gig Economy)
Monthly Income <sup>iii</sup>	\$2938	\$2699	\$899	\$1484	\$1524	\$2087	\$1713
Average Monthly Rent <sup>iv</sup>	\$1196	\$1223	\$716	\$985	\$985	\$985	\$716
Monthly Cost of Food <sup>v</sup>	\$1225	\$913	\$426	\$426	\$453	\$304	\$426
% of Income Required to Purchase Healthy Food	42%	34%	48%	31%	28%	15%	14%
Amount leftover for other expenses <sup>vi</sup>	\$517	\$563	-\$243	\$73	\$86	\$798	\$571

<sup>i</sup> Family of four: two adults aged 31 - 50, one male aged 14, and one female aged 8.

<sup>ii</sup> Children are over the age of 6.

<sup>iii</sup> Based on Ontario averages and includes benefits, such as the Canadian Child Benefit.

<sup>iv</sup> Based on CMHC data<sup>(1)</sup> and adjusted using the Consumer Price Index<sup>(2)</sup>. Algoma Public Health conducted additional research to assess how well CMHC data represents the current rental market, and findings suggest an underestimation of rental prices by as much as 45 - 65%. Consider these limitations when evaluating the income scenarios.

<sup>v</sup> Calculated using the 2024 Nutritious Food Basket collected by Algoma Public Health.

<sup>vi</sup> Other expenses may include daycare, transportation, hygiene and cleaning products, heat/water, internet, phone, etc.

**Table 1.** Nutritious Food Basket Income Scenarios for Algoma, 2024.

# NFB Income Scenarios for Algoma in 2024

In Table 1, several scenarios indicate that social assistance rates are not sufficient to pay for rent, food, and other household necessities. A single individual receiving Ontario Works would be in debt of \$243 each month after paying for food and rent. A single parent with two children over the age of six on Ontario Works would only have \$563 leftover to cover essential expenses like transportation, school supplies, medications, heat and hydro, internet, etc.

Income Scenarios	Amount leftover after rent and food
Single parent with two children, Ontario Works	\$563
Family of four, Ontario Works	\$517
Single person, Ontario Works	-\$243
Single pregnant person, Ontario Disability Support Program	\$86
Couple, Ontario Disability Support Program	\$937



Clothing



Hygiene products



Childcare



Phone & internet services



School supplies



Home furnishings



Heat & hydro



Emergency expenses



Transportation



Cleaning products



Medications & health



Activities

**Table 2.** Amount leftover after rent and food to pay for other expenses.

# Food Insecurity in Algoma

For many households in Algoma, healthy eating is not affordable. Food insecurity is defined as “inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints.”<sup>(3)</sup> Experiences of food insecurity exist on a spectrum from marginal to severe.

**Marginal:** worrying about running out of food and/or having a limited selection of food

**Moderate:** not eating an adequate quality or selection of food

**Severe:** not eating an adequate quantity of food or, at the most extreme, not eating for a whole day or more due to lack of money

Food insecurity is an urgent public health issue. People living in food insecure households are more likely to suffer from physical and mental health conditions, leading to greater need for healthcare services, higher rates of hospitalization, and elevated risk of premature death<sup>(3)</sup>. Children in food insecure households are more likely to have poorer overall health, including greater risk for bone fractures, asthma, and mental health conditions such as social anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation<sup>(3)</sup>.

Food insecurity is a sensitive marker of material deprivation, as the deprivation experienced by households who are food insecure often extends beyond food. This financial stress can contribute to poor mental health outcomes, such as heightened stress and anxiety.

Recent data for Canada shows that food insecurity is at an all time high. In 2023, the amount of people living in food insecure households rose to 22.9%, up from 15.7% in 2021. This amounts to 8.7 million people, including 2.1 million children<sup>(4)</sup>. The rate of severe household food insecurity increased the most, from 4.8% in 2022 to 7.8% in 2023<sup>(5)</sup>.

Between 2021 - 2023, an average of 17.6%<sup>(6)</sup> households in Algoma experienced food insecurity. The full extent of food insecurity in Algoma is likely worse, as Indigenous Peoples living on-community are not included in data collection. There are eight First Nations communities across Algoma.

# Who is Most Likely to Experience Food Insecurity?

The risk of food insecurity is higher in the following household types<sup>(3)</sup>:

- Female lone-parent households with children under 18 (approx. 14% of Algoma households)<sup>(7)</sup>
- Individuals with employment insurance (approx. 11%) or social assistance as the main source of income (approx. 8%)<sup>(8)</sup>
- Those living in rental housing (approx. 28% of Algoma households)<sup>(7)</sup>
- As a result of systems of oppression, certain racial/ cultural groups, notably Black and Indigenous households. In Algoma, 14% of the population is Indigenous and 3.4% is a visible minority<sup>(9)</sup>

## Did you know?

Having a job does not guarantee food security. Nearly 60% of Ontarians experiencing food insecurity have income from employment<sup>(10)</sup>. Minimum wage in Ontario is currently \$17.20. According to the Ontario Living Wage Network's calculations in 2024, a living wage for Northern Ontario is \$20.30<sup>(11)</sup>.

# Reducing Food Insecurity Using Income-Based Strategies

Food charities (e.g. food banks) help provide temporary and emergency hunger relief for those who can access them. Often, a food charity's capacity and reach are limited. Research indicates that only about 20% of those experiencing food insecurity access charity-based food supports<sup>(3)</sup>. There are many challenges people face accessing these supports, including transportation, health-related dietary needs, religious and personal preferences, as well as operational limitations (hours, location, supply, & personnel)<sup>(3)</sup>.

Alternative strategies must be pursued to achieve food security for all. There is strong evidence that food insecurity can be reduced through income-based solutions. When people's financial circumstances improve, they can spend their money on food with dignity.



# Addressing Food Insecurity in Algoma

Food is a basic human right. Every Algoma resident deserves dignified access to safe, nutritious, and culturally appropriate foods.

Evidence-based policy responses focused on adequate income and social assistance rates are needed to have a meaningful impact on improving food insecurity<sup>(3,10)</sup>.

## Actions individuals can take:

- **Learn more about food insecurity.** Become a well-versed advocate for effective food insecurity solutions.
  - [New data on household food insecurity in, 2023 - PROOF](#)
  - [Ontario Dietitians in Public Health – Position Statement and Recommendations on Responses to Food Insecurity](#)
  - [Addressing Household Food Insecurity in Canada – Position Statement and Recommendations from Dietitians of Canada](#)
  - [Indigenous Food Insecurity - PROOF](#)
- **Spread the word.** Share the reality of food insecurity and the need for income-based solutions with your family and friends.
- **Volunteer at or host a free tax clinic.** Volunteer your time and skills to a local Community Volunteer Income Tax Program to help people access the benefits they are entitled to.

## Actions businesses can take:

- **Become a living wage employer** through the Ontario Living Wage Network. Paying a living wage can help employees meet their needs and allow them to participate in their community.
- **Advocate for better income policy, including a basic income.** A basic income guarantee ensures everyone receives sufficient income to live with dignity. Learn more at [Basic Income Canada Network](#).
- **Help foster economic resilience for individuals at higher risk of experiencing food insecurity.** Provide targeted support for access to and training for jobs with livable wages and benefits.

## Actions municipalities can take:

- **Advocate for federal and provincial income-related policies.** Be a strong advocate for adequate income by sending or endorsing letters to the federal and provincial governments.
- **Invest in local programs and services that make life more affordable.** Support low-income families and individuals with programs and services that increase affordable housing, transit, recreation, and childcare.
- **Prioritize food insecurity and poverty.** Collaborate with community partners from various sectors, including public health, to monitor, report on and address food insecurity and poverty.

## Food Insecurity Case Scenarios

### Algoma Case Scenario #1: Meet Brianna

Brianna was born and raised in Elliot Lake. She moved away for college and to gain work experience, but as she grew up and felt ready to start a family of her own, she moved home to be closer to her parents and childhood friends. Brianna had a job she was proud of working at a local business, but she lost her job when the business closed during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns. Since then, Brianna has worked a variety of unstable, temporary jobs, but relies on Ontario Works as her main source of income.

Brianna has two young children, an 8-year-old girl and a 14-year-old boy. Both are quickly growing out of last season's clothing. Brianna's daughter is begging her to join a dance class. With help from her parents, Brianna was able to enroll her son in hockey again this year, but he is quickly outgrowing his old equipment and driving him to all his games and practices costs a lot in gas.

Brianna would love to go back to school for a more stable career, like nursing, but at the end of each month after paying rent (\$1223) and food (\$913) for her family, she only has \$563 left over to cover heat and hydro, clothing, household essentials, phone bill, medications, and transportation costs.

# Food Insecurity Case Scenarios Continued

## Algoma Case Scenario #2: Meet Brian

Brian is a 35-year-old male living in Sault Ste. Marie. After graduating from Sault College, Brian quickly got a job that he loved. After working there for 5 years, Brian suffered a back injury at work that left him with chronic pain. Brian is unable to work due to his chronic pain, which has left him living with depression. Brian has been receiving Ontario Disability Support Program since his injury.

Each month, Brian pays his rent (\$985), which leaves him with only \$499. Brian would need to spend \$426 to feed himself well for the month. This would leave him with only \$73 left over to cover basic expenses, including his essential anti-depressant medication. Brian tries to visit a food bank once a month to lessen his food cost, but he still does not have enough to cover heat/hydro, internet, phone, clothing, medications, etc.

Brian wants an online job but can't afford a phone or internet bill to help with his job search. Although Brian knows he needs additional support, he feels embarrassed to ask his parents for money each month and feels stuck in his current situation.

*Scenarios 1 & 2 were adapted with permission from Northwestern Health Unit<sup>(12)</sup>.*

## Algoma Case Scenario #3: Meet Davis

Davis is a 41-year-old male living in a bachelor apartment downtown Sault Ste. Marie. He moved to the city from Blind River two years ago to be closer to his aging grandparents. He has looked for steady employment, but gig-work (Skip the Dishes and Instacart) allows him the flexibility to take care of his grandparents while also earning an income.

His earnings from gig work are often irregular and insufficient to cover basic living expenses. After paying for rent and food, he has \$571 leftover. His work requires that he use his personal vehicle, gas and cell phone and he needs his vehicle to sometimes run errands for his grandparents and take them to appointments. Recently, he had to spend money on car repairs and the cost of insurance just went up.

He is looking to move to a shared accommodation that will be a bit cheaper to afford to live. Unfortunately, so far, the shared accommodations available are overcrowded and lack the privacy, and security that are necessary for a stable and healthy living environment. He's heard about a free tax clinic and is interested in going to learn more about how to claim some of his work expenses.

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