

Cost of eating in Alberta

Executive Summary

Food security is recognized as an important public health issue in Canada. Everyone has a right to healthy food.

What do we know about food insecurity?

Food insecurity is defined as a “lack of access to affordable, adequate food through socially acceptable means.” Measures of household food insecurity on national health surveys provide an indication of the scope of this problem in Canada. According to the Canadian Community Health Survey, Cycle 2.2 (CCHS), 1.1 million or 9.2% of Canadian households experienced moderate or severe food insecurity in 2004. In Alberta, this rate of household food insecurity is 10.7% (one out of every ten households). Individuals from food insecure households are at increased risk of poor nutritional status and poor health. Failing to invest in this issue has serious impacts.

Certain populations experience higher rates of food insecurity. The CCHS and other research have clearly demonstrated that an adequate income is essential to ensure reliable access to adequate food. Almost half (49%) of Canadians with the lowest incomes are food insecure. In Alberta, the rate of food insecurity amongst those receiving social assistance as their key income source is 84%, a rate much higher than the national average of 60%.

How do we know some households don't have enough money for food?

Community and public health nutritionists in Alberta price a basket of food at a number of grocery stores in Alberta using the Alberta Nutritious Food Basket. This nutritious food basket tool includes 51 basic foods that require some food preparation skills. In June 2008 in Alberta, the average monthly cost of the nutritious food basket, for a family of four, was \$774. This is a 10% increase from November 2007.

The cost of food is one component of the issue for households living on low income. When exploring whether food is affordable for households with a limited income, the cost of other basic needs such as shelter, transportation and childcare must also be considered. When a household lacks the money to pay all basic monthly household expenses the amount of money available to spend on food may be reduced. Food brought into the home may be compromised both in quality (how healthy the food choices are) and quantity (the amount of food available).

What did our Cost of Eating in Alberta 2008 analysis reveal?

The Cost of Eating in Alberta 2008 report examined the incomes and costs of four basic needs (shelter, food, transportation and childcare) in six different lower income household scenarios. Costs were collected in six Alberta communities. These scenarios were created to examine the affordability of basic needs for household situations known from national surveys to be at risk of food insecurity. As expected, the households depicted would have a very difficult time meeting basic needs.

- A monthly household food cost of not more than 15% of household net income is considered affordable. Food costs ranged from 14% to 32% of income. In all but one of the scenarios examined, the cost of a healthy diet exceeded the recommended percentage.
- Monthly shelter costs of not more than 30% of household total before-tax income are considered affordable. The cost of shelter was a significant household cost for all the scenarios examined, ranging from 23% to 73% of total before-tax income. The high burden of housing cost was particularly evident in the urban centres where it made up 37% to 71% of the household income.

Why should we be concerned about these findings?

The findings of this report are not new. Numerous reports have demonstrated that food insecurity is related to inadequate household income. Housing and food are both basic needs, however, as the proportion of income spent on housing increases, household income available to spend on necessities such as food decreases. High costs of housing, childcare and transportation can place lower income households at great risk of food insecurity.

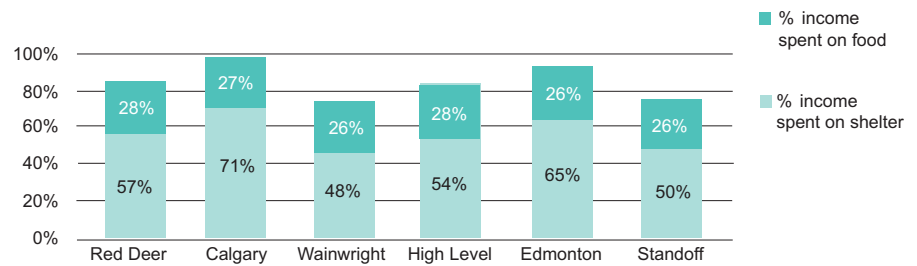
For individuals and families to achieve healthy eating recommendations for health and the prevention of chronic disease, they must have the capacity to make healthy choices. Those who are food insecure do not have this capacity. Ensuring that lower income households have enough money to buy adequate amounts of nutritious food and pay for the other basic costs of living (shelter, transportation, childcare) is fundamental. A lack of knowledge about healthy eating or poor budgeting skills are not the issues that limit lower income households in providing nutritious food for their families. Food insecurity results from inadequate household income.

What can be done to help?

- Make sure that you and those that you connect with are informed about food insecurity

Efforts to address household food insecurity are weakened by incorrect information or stereotypes around individuals and families at most risk of food insecurity. There is plenty of evidence to support that low income is a major predictor of food insecurity.

Percentage of income spent on food and shelter for a lone mother of two receiving income support in communities across Alberta



- Support actions in Alberta and Canada that address poverty and food insecurity

Visit the websites of the coalitions and networks working on the issues of poverty and food insecurity and decide how you can help out. Share this information and your actions with those with whom you work and socialize.

- Make one phone call or write one letter

Every letter or phone call has the potential to make a difference. Everyone has a role to play – the Prime Minister, the Premier, Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLA), municipal councilors, family, friends, and other community members. Write a letter or visit your local MLA and/or the Minister responsible for the policies and programs that affect poverty. Ask for a fair income support rate and a living wage that are adequate and indexed every year.

- Bring food insecurity to discussions about affordable housing

Housing is on the agenda of many municipalities and local governments. Many actions to alleviate the housing crisis have been suggested.

Conversations and action plans often focus solely on increasing affordable housing options. This report and others have clearly demonstrated the link between lack of affordable housing and food insecurity; food insecurity issues must be considered at any table where housing is discussed.

- Bring healthy food and good nutrition into local food security strategies

Many local actions exist to provide charitable food to households living in poverty. It is important that households who access the charitable sector for food receive foods that promote health. Food, meals and snacks provided should be nutritionally rich and provide a model of healthy food and dietary practices.

The provision of emergency food supplies to the most needy fills an important short term need but long term solutions are required. Policy changes to ensure households have the financial resources to purchase healthy foods at all times, in short to achieve food security, is critical.