

The Real Cost of Eating Well in Northwestern Ontario

Report Summary and Recommendations, 2022



Northwestern
Health Unit

www.nwhu.on.ca



The Real Cost of Eating Well in Northwestern Ontario

Purpose of this report

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

Registered Dietitians from Northwestern Health Unit (NWHU) measure the cost of food in our region using the Nutritious Food Basket (NFB) tool. The average cost of food and rent in the region are then compared to different household income scenarios. This report supports existing evidence that shows the root cause of food insecurity is poverty, not food.

NWHU shares this data to help advocate for income-based solutions: policies to reduce poverty, improve living wages, and close the gap between income and the cost of living.

Food is a basic human right, and everyone in northwestern Ontario should have the physical and financial means to access nutritious food.

NWHU encourages individuals, businesses, and organizations to share this report widely and to take action for income-based solutions that address household food insecurity.

The Nutritious Food Basket

Northwestern Health Unit (NWHU) surveys the local cost of eating every two years using the National Nutritious Food Basket (NFB). By measuring the prices of 61 basic food items across 11 stores in our communities, the average cost of groceries for a month in northwestern Ontario (NWO) is calculated.

The NFB is not a lowest cost food basket, but rather a standardized tool used by Ontario Public Health Units to measure the average cost of a basic healthy diet according to Canada's Food Guide.

The following items are not included: processed foods, infant foods or formula, and foods for special diets, such as gluten-free products. It also does not include cleaning and personal hygiene products such as toothpaste, shampoo, toilet paper and dish soap. Therefore, this data can be an underestimation of the costs needed to obtain food in a **safe, secure, and culturally appropriate manner**.

NFB Assumptions:

- People have time, food skills and equipment to cook meals
- Food is always chosen based on lowest price
- People have access to quality grocery stores

Using survey results from May 2022, the cost to feed a family of four* in the NWHU catchment area was \$299 per week, or \$1295 per month.

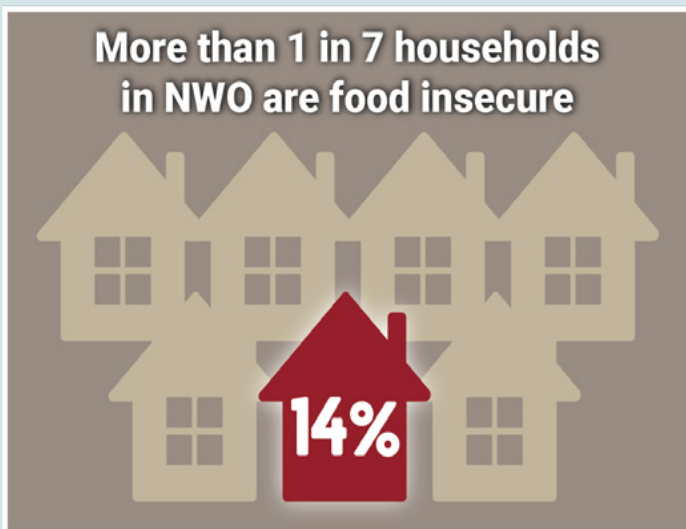
THE COST to FEED a FAMILY OF FOUR
\$299 per week **\$1295** per month

When money is tight, people are forced to cut into their food budget to pay for other non-negotiable living expenses, such as rent and utilities.

This is called **household food insecurity** – inadequate or insecure access to food because of financial constraints.

The root cause of food insecurity is poverty

More than 1 in 7 households
in NWO are food insecure



According to a local survey by NWHU, more than 1 in 7 households (14.3%) in NWO are food insecure – either they did not have enough to eat, lacked the quality or variety of food they wanted, or worried that there might not be enough to eat because of a lack of money¹. This is higher than provincial estimates from Stats Canada that indicate 11% of households in the province are food insecure².

Food insecurity negatively impacts physical, mental, and social health, and contributes significant costs to our healthcare system³.

Table 1. Nutritious Food Basket Income Scenarios for NWO, 2022

	Average Monthly Income and Expenses:	Income (Including eligible benefits & credits, after tax)	Rent (May or may not include utilities)	Food (Nutritious Food Basket)	Leftover income for all other basic expenses
Family Households	Scenario 1: Family of 4, Ontario Works	\$2780.00	\$1308.00	\$1295.18	\$176.82
	Scenario 2: Family of 4, one minimum wage earner	\$3993.00	\$1308.00	\$1295.18	\$1389.82
	Scenario 3: Family of 4, Median income	\$9323.00	\$1308.00	\$1295.18	\$6719.82
	Scenario : Single parent with 2 children, Ontario Works	\$2548.00	\$977.67	\$952.18	\$618.15
Single Households	Scenario 4: Single male, Ontario Works	\$876.00	\$602.00	\$466.01	-\$192.01
	Scenario 5: Single male, Ontario Disability Support Program	\$1322.00	\$814.33	\$466.01	\$41.66
	Scenario 6: Single female, Old Age Security and Guaranteed Income Supplement	\$1898.00	\$814.33	\$333.13	\$750.54

Family of four: two adults aged 31-50, a boy aged 14 and a girl aged 8.

After paying for shelter and food, minimum wage earners and households on fixed incomes (OW, ODSP) have very little, if any, money left over to cover other basic living necessities.

If you only had \$176.82 left to support your family until the end of the month, which would you choose? Heat or food?

Money left over must cover all other basic necessities.

 Heat and Hydro	 Personal Hygiene Products	 Transportation	 Child Care	 Household Cleaners
 Clothing	 School Supplies	 Telephone	 Home Furnishings	 Personal Care Items

Case Study #1

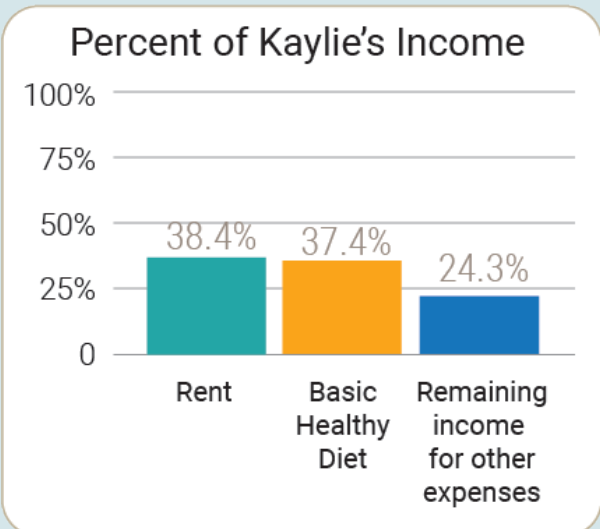


Meet Kaylie.

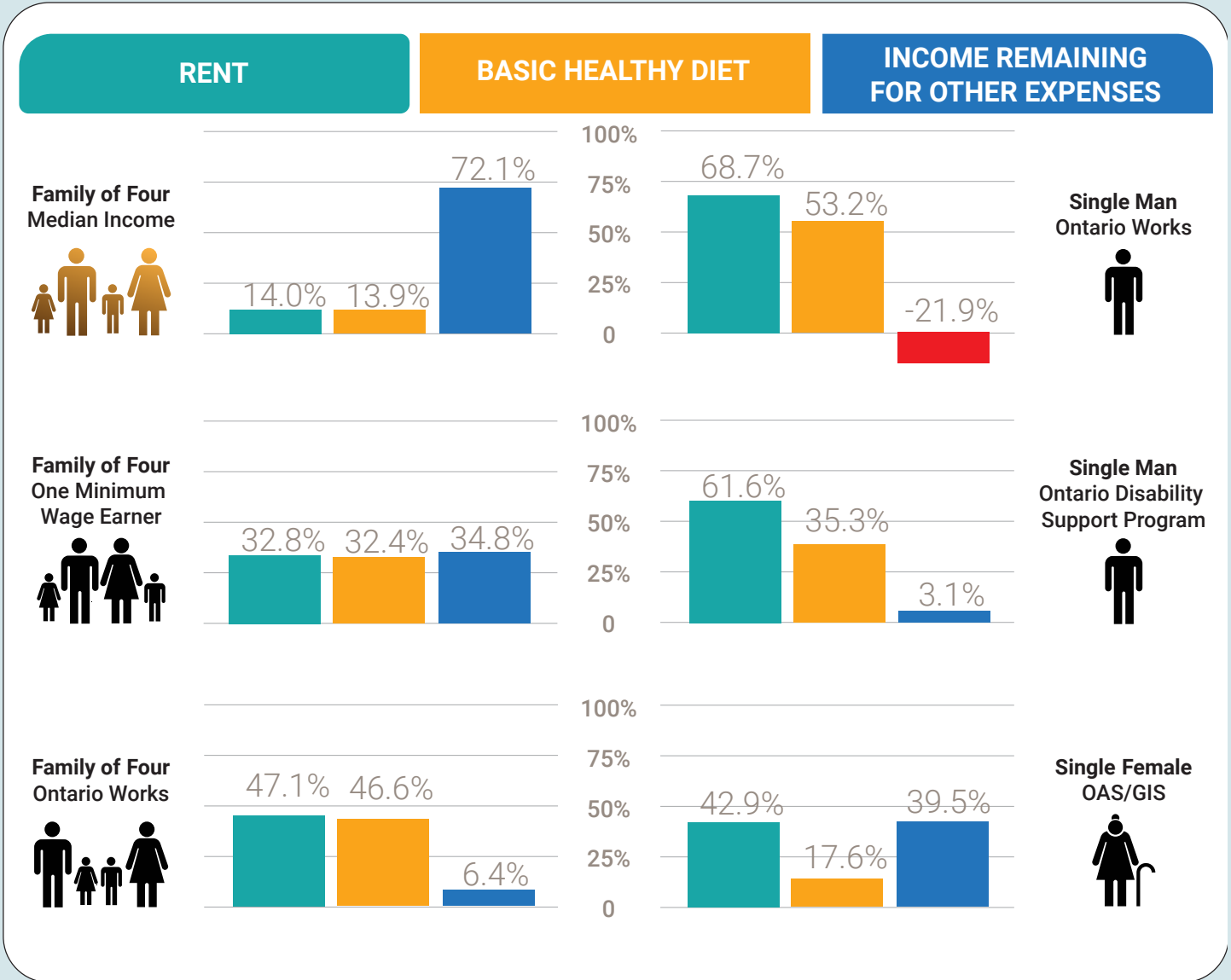
Kaylie has been relying on Ontario Works as her main source of income for the past year. Kaylie had previously been a proud employee of a local small business, who unfortunately had to close its doors from the impacts of the COVID-19 lockdowns. She has been unable to find stable full-time work. Kaylie 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 \$618 left for the month. She must choose between paying for heat and hydro, clothing for her boys, hockey equipment and school supplies, medications, and her phone bill.

Kaylie often visits the local food bank to pinch her pockets. She feels incredibly stressed and tries to hide her money anxiety in order to stay strong for her boys.



Percent of Income, Households in NW Ontario, 2022



Affordable housing is defined as housing costs being 30% or less of your total household income before tax. Graphs may equal more than 100% to signify expenses that exceed income.

Household food insecurity is a public health issue...

Food is a basic human right.

Not being able to afford nutritious food can seriously affect the health of individuals, families, and our communities.



Individuals experiencing food insecurity are more likely to:

- Have poorer mental health – they are more likely to experience depression and mood and anxiety disorders
- Experience increased stress
- Have poorer physical health, including:
 - › worse oral health
 - › increased risk of infectious diseases and injuries
 - › inadequate nutrition
 - › increased risk of chronic diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease
 - › more likely to be diagnosed with multiple chronic diseases
 - › chronic pain, arthritis, and back problems
- Be hospitalized more frequently and for longer
- Have a lower life expectancy (on average, nine years shorter than someone who is food secure)

Children in food insecure homes are more likely to:

- Have poorer childhood mental health, including:
 - › Hyperactivity and inattention
 - › Anxiety disorders
 - › Depression and suicidal ideation in adolescence and early adulthood
- Develop asthma
- Be at risk for poor nutrition, growth, and development (infants)
- Experience negative impacts on their academic performance and social skills (older children)

Our healthcare system is impacted by household food insecurity:

- Healthcare costs among food insecure adults are **more than double** those of food secure adults. **Why?**
 - › More likely to be hospitalized, with longer hospital stays and a higher risk of being readmitted
 - › More likely to be forced to delay, reduce, or skip prescription medications because they can't afford them, which leads to worsening health and greater use of healthcare services
 - › May have difficulty managing existing chronic health conditions due to financial constraints like affording prescribed medications or adhering to therapeutic diets.
- While 1 in 8 households in Ontario are food insecure, adults living in food insecure households account for **more than 1 in 3 hospitalizations due to mental health problems.**³



Food insecurity can affect anyone.

Single-parent households

- Single parents with children are the most vulnerable to suffering from food insecurity – more than 1 in 3 (38.1%) single mothers in Canada are food insecure, and 1 in 5 (20.9%) single fathers⁴.

Children

- In Ontario, 1 in 5 (20.6%) children under 18 are living in food insecure households. That's 565,000 children⁴.

Lone households

- Individuals that live alone make up over one-third (38.4%) of all food insecure households in Canada⁴.

Indigenous people

- Almost one-third (30.7%) of Indigenous people that live off-reserve in Canadian provinces suffer from food insecurity. This is almost three times higher than the Ontario average and double the Canadian average across the provinces (15.9%)⁴.
- Previous studies have estimated on-reserve food insecurity in northern and remote communities to be much higher – some as high as 70.3%⁵.

Having a job isn't enough.

In 2020, during the early pandemic, Canadians earning the lowest incomes suffered half of all job losses, disproportionately affecting workers that already struggle to make ends meet⁶.

Over half (51.9%) of all food insecure households in Canada rely on employment incomes⁴. The lack of stable and secure employment impacts the risk of household food insecurity. Unstable work is common in the north, including:

- Seasonal work
- Contract work with a lack of permanency or union support
- Inadequate or unpredictable wages

The minimum wage has also failed to keep pace with increasing inflation, which means those with minimum-wage jobs are at a higher risk for food insecurity.

Social assistance isn't enough.

In Ontario, 67.2% of households that rely on social assistance income were food insecure – higher than Canadian average (63%)⁴.

“Relying on any form of public income support except public pensions meant being very vulnerable to food insecurity.” PROOF, 2022

Living in the north - the current picture

Over the past two years, various government mandates were put in place to protect Ontarians from the effects of the COVID-19 virus. Lock-down periods were important in protecting and saving lives, but also disrupted local communities. The closure of some businesses and workplaces created unstable and unpredictable losses or reductions to employment income, contributing to food insecurity. In addition, many students had to participate in classes online or were unable to attend school due to illness, which often meant that parents and guardians had to stay home with students, causing a decrease in, or loss of, employment income.

“With the record inflation since 2021, we can expect the prevalence and severity of food insecurity to worsen if measures aren’t taken to address the socioeconomic circumstances that give rise to it and to ensure that the incomes of vulnerable households can keep up with the rising costs of living.”

PROOF, 2021.

This period in history, defined by a global pandemic, conflict overseas, and record inflation,

have disrupted global supply chains, food supply, and the economy. As a result, the basic cost of living in Canada continues to rise. The cost of necessities, like healthy food and housing, are taking a larger percentage of our incomes. For those already surviving on low incomes and social assistance, the current economic landscape only further exposes the inadequacy of these living wages.

This report is about highlighting that people with low incomes do not have enough money to cover the basic costs of living, including nutritious food. This cannot be overemphasized.

However, the issue of food insecurity is further complicated in northwestern Ontario, specifically for rural, remote, and northern communities. Higher transportation and fuel costs, greater risk of damage or loss of perishable items during transport, and a lack of competition among singular or limited grocery stores in communities are a few of the unique circumstances we face. In these situations, the high cost of food does partially contribute to poverty-driven food insecurity in northwestern Ontario communities^{7,8}.

Food is a basic human right. Everyone has the right to be food secure – being able to access enough safe, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food in a way that is socially acceptable and dignified.

Adequate incomes are needed to support the cost of basic living and well-being in northwestern Ontario.

Food insecurity and poverty reduction need to be addressed at municipal, provincial, and federal policy levels. This includes:

- Adequate social assistance, disability rates, and minimum wages that reflect the actual cost of living
- Basic Income Guarantee
- Affordable housing policies and infrastructure
- Employment stability, security, and benefits
- Accessible and affordable childcare

What can you do?

- Support your local community food programs for the time being
- Write to your local government – for a list of politicians and a template letter, check out the *No Money for Food is... Cent\$less* campaign
- Speak out and advocate for improved policies that reduce food insecurity
- Educate others on food insecurity and its connection to poverty

It's important to acknowledge the various community food programs that attempt to offer short-term relief to food insecurity 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 are **not** solutions to food insecurity.

What is a BASIC INCOME GUARANTEE?

What is a Basic Income Guarantee (BIG)?

- “A basic income is an unconditional cash transfer from government to individuals to enable everyone to meet their basic needs, participate in society and live with dignity, regardless of work status” (Basic Income Canada Network)⁸.
- Most direct evidence comes from research on low-income single seniors who, after the age of 65, have half the rate of food insecurity compared to those under the age of 65.
 - › Canada’s Old Age Security and Guaranteed Income Supplement are a form of BIG.
 - › Implemented in the 1960’s, these public pension BIG’s have dramatically reduced poverty and food insecurity in Canadian seniors⁹.

Case Study #2

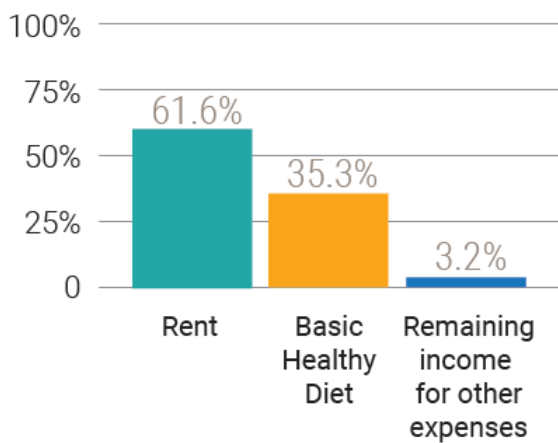


Meet Johnny.

Johnny left home as a young adult and found himself in northwestern Ontario with a new job. Only a year after the start of his mining career, Johnny suffered a terrible accident in the workplace, leaving him unable to walk and relying on the Ontario Disability Support Program for income.

After paying for his 1-bedroom apartment, Johnny only has \$507 left for the month. To feed himself well, Johnny would need to spend around \$466 a month on food, only leaving him with \$41. How does he decide between buying groceries, heating his apartment, and transportation to his physiotherapy appointments? Johnny is embarrassed to tell his family he is struggling. He worries about how he will maintain this long-term and feels like there is no way out.

Percent of Johnny's Income



References

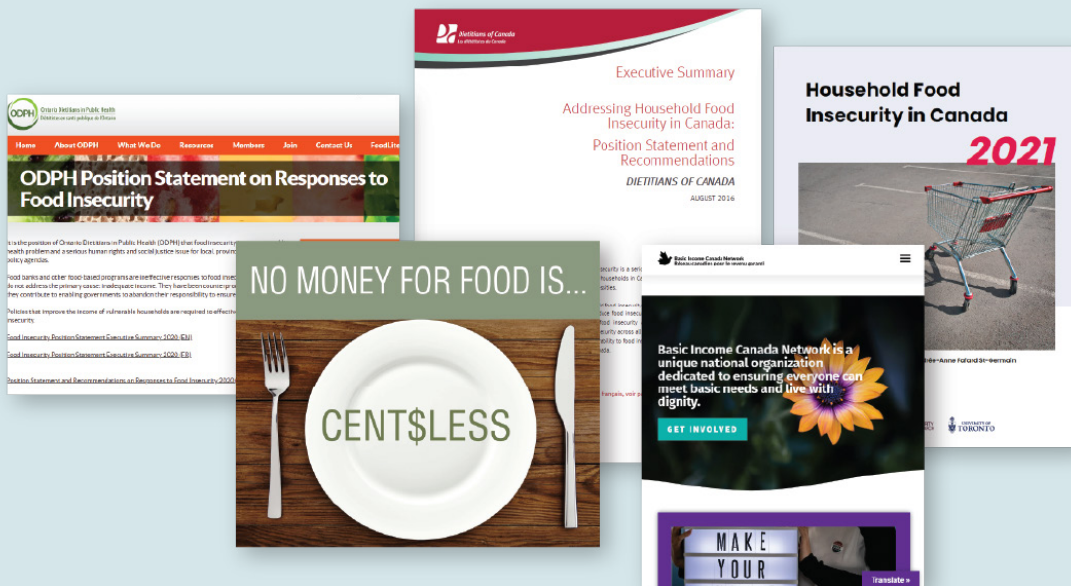
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2. Statistics Canada. Table 13-10-0834-01 Food insecurity by economic family type
3. PROOF. University of Toronto. <https://proof.utoronto.ca/>
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Caveats regarding the collection and calculation of NWHU NFB data:

1. This data was collected during pilot testing of an updated process to monitor food affordability in Ontario in May and June of 2022. Data should not be compared to previous years, due to changes in methodology and National Nutritious Food Basket content changes.
2. This data was collected during the COVID-19 pandemic
3. Food basket calculations include an additional 5% to cover the cost of miscellaneous foods used in meal preparation, such as spices, seasonings, condiments, baking supplies, soup, coffee, and tea. (MFAO Methodology, 2022).
4. NFB costing and food insecurity rates (PROOF) both do not include on-reserve data collection.
5. Proxy measures were used for calculating average rental rate costs due to poor CMHC data availability for the NWHU catchment area.
 - a. 3-bedroom market rental data was sourced from the Thunder Bay census region (2021) due to a lack of availability for the Kenora census agglomeration: <https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fassets.cmhc-schl.gc.ca%2Fsites%2Fcmhc%2Fprofessional%2Fhousing-markets-data-and-research%2Fhousing-data-tables%2Frental-market%2Frental-market-report-data-tables%2F2021%2Frmr-ontario-2021-en.xlsx%3Frev%3D78e6632d-80ad-47b8-8eec-81ace460a2d9&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK>
 - b. 1-bedroom and 2-bedrom market rental data was averaged based on data available for Dryden, Sioux Lookout, and Fort Frances (2020) to develop a proxy measure for the NWHU catchment area: <https://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/en/professionals/housing-markets-data-and-research/housing-data/data-tables/rental-market/rural-rental-market-survey-data-average-rent-centre>

Key Documents

- *PROOF Report*
- *ODPH Position Statement and Recommendations on Responses to Food Insecurity*
- *Dietitians of Canada Position Statement and Recommendations: Addressing Household Food Insecurity in Canada*
- *No Money for Food is... Cent\$less*
- *The Basic Income Canada Network (BICN)*
- *Ontario Living Wage Network*
- *Hunger Count 2022*





THE ROOT CAUSE OF
FOOD INSECURITY
IS POVERTY.



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