

# CAN NOVA SCOTIANS AFFORD TO EAT HEALTHY?

*2015 Executive Summary*



A PROJECT OF THE FOOD ACTION RESEARCH CENTRE (FOODARC)  
AT MOUNT SAINT VINCENT UNIVERSITY AND  
VOICES FOR FOOD SECURITY IN NOVA SCOTIA,  
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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Nova Scotia is a province rich with food resources. Sadly, **Nova Scotia also has the highest rate of food insecurity of all Canadian provinces. Only Canada's Northern territories experience greater food insecurity.** This means that many Nova Scotians have inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints. Rates have been high since 2005, reaching a peak in 2013 with at least 18.4% of Nova Scotians experiencing food insecurity (Tarasuk, Mitchell, & Dachner, 2015b).

### CAN NOVA SCOTIANS WITH LOW INCOMES AFFORD TO EAT A HEALTHY DIET?

To find out, we looked at what it costs for people and households in Nova Scotia to eat a basic nutritious diet in June 2015. We calculated the monthly cost of a standardized basic food basket, called the National Nutritious Food Basket (NNFB), using participatory food costing (PFC) methodology. Then, we compared the cost of the basket and other basic expenses to the incomes of different household scenarios to answer our research question.

This report is part of *Voices for Food Security in Nova Scotia*. *Voices* is a community-university participatory research project of the Food Action Research Centre (FoodARC) at Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU). *Voices* is funded by the Nova Scotia Department of Health and Wellness. This is the seventh PFC cycle since 2002. In each reporting cycle, we use the same methods to gather and understand the information. This is called data collection and analysis. It means we can see how the cost and affordability of food changes over a long period of time. Using high quality PFC data – or information – means we can advocate better for all Nova Scotians to have the food they need to be healthy. We have good evidence to show which policy changes will lead to food security in Nova Scotia.

In June 2015, we randomly chose 21 grocery stores from across the four Nova Scotia Health Authority zones, representing both large and small stores and urban and rural areas, to take part in the project. Twenty-nine of

FoodARC's community-based research partners were trained in PFC methods. They collected prices for the 67 food items in the National Nutritious Food Basket using the Participatory Food Costing Survey Tool (Nova Scotia Participatory Food Costing Project, 2015). The Survey Tool was adapted from the NNFB and has been used to do all seven participatory food costing studies in the province.

## What is the National Nutritious Food Basket?

The NNFB is a basket containing 67 food items. It can be used to figure out the cost of a basic nutritious diet for people of different ages and sex, including during pregnancy and lactation.

Foods in the NNFB are:

- minimally processed
- easily found in grocery stores
- eaten by most Canadians in amounts that make up a balanced diet

To find out whether households in Nova Scotia have enough money every month to afford a basic nutritious diet, we have created affordability scenarios. These scenarios – or stories – represent the types of households who are at high risk of food insecurity. We know this from research about food security done before in Nova Scotia (Frank, 2015a Nova Scotia Participatory Food Costing Project, 2009, 2011, 2013; Nova Scotia Participatory Food Security Projects, 2008; Williams, 2014) and from national population surveys (Tarasuk, Mitchell, & Dachner, 2015b, 2016)

**Table 1 Participatory Food Costing 2015 household scenarios.**

Reference household of four	<p>This household is made up of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a man and woman 31 to 50 years old</li> <li>• a girl, 7</li> <li>• a boy, 13</li> </ul> <p>This is the same as in the 2012 cycle. This set of scenarios shows how affordable a basic nutritious diet is for a household with:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) a median income;</li> <li>2) an average income;</li> <li>3) one full-time minimum wage salary and one part-time minimum wage salary;</li> </ol> <p>OR</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4) Income Assistance.</li> </ol>
Lone mother with two children	<p>The household is made up of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a woman aged 31 to 50 years</li> <li>• two boys, 4 and 12 years</li> </ul> <p>This scenario has been changed from the “lone mother with three children” in previous cycles because a lone mother with two children is more common in Nova Scotia. The scenario shows the affordability of a basic nutritious diet on Income Assistance.</p>
Lone man without a disability	<p>This household is made up of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a man, 19 to 30 years, who receives Income Assistance. OR</li> <li>• a man, 19 to 30 years, who works full-time earning minimum wage</li> </ul> <p>This is the same as in the 2012 cycle. About 75% of people getting Income Assistance in Nova Scotia are single people without children (personal communication, Department of Community Services, November 1, 2016).</p>
Lone man with a disability and lone senior man with a disability	<p>This household is made up of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a man with a disability, 54 to 59 years, who receives Income Assistance, OR</li> <li>• a man with a disability, 65 to 70, who receives Old Age Security and the Guaranteed Income Supplement</li> </ul> <p>This scenario is new in the 2015 cycle. It is changed from the lone senior woman in previous cycles to show how affordable a basic nutritious diet is for a person with a disability.</p>

**Table 2 Summary of end of month balance after purchasing a basic nutritious diet.**

	Current Situation			Policy Change	
	Income Assistance	Minimum Wage	OAS/GIS	Increased Canada Child Benefit	\$15/h min wage
Reference household of four	-\$986.44	-\$418.07	N/A	-\$929.73	\$167.24
Lone mother with two kids	-\$681.10	-\$510.12	N/A	-\$589.33	-\$101.07
Lone man	-\$793.54	\$141.40	N/A	N/A	\$674.90
Lone man with disability	-\$510.33	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Lone senior man with disability	N/A	N/A	-\$26.79	N/A	N/A

**WHAT DID WE LEARN?**

Over 14 years of PFC research in Nova Scotia, the monthly cost of a basic nutritious diet for the reference household of four has increased by 63%. While the monthly cost of the NNFB for the reference household of four seems to vary across the province, we found no statistically significant difference in cost between zones.

Similar to our previous findings, the NNFB costs more in rural areas of Nova Scotia than in urban areas (Nova Scotia Participatory Food Costing Project, 2011, 2013). We also found the average monthly cost of the NNFB was lower in larger stores.

**SUMMARY OF END OF MONTH BALANCE AFTER PURCHASING A NUTRITIOUS DIET**

Findings showed that the reference household of four earning median and average incomes would be able to afford a basic nutritious diet and their basic costs of living with money left over for other needs and emergencies. A median income household would have \$1841.22 left, and an

average income household would have \$726.32 left at the end of each month.

However, we found households earning minimum wage or receiving Income Assistance would not be able to afford their basic needs, let alone save money or cover unexpected costs. A household of four earning minimum wage could have a deficit of \$418.07 and a household of four receiving Income Assistance could have a deficit of \$986.44 a month after purchasing a basic nutritious diet. This puts them at high risk of food insecurity.

A lone mother of two receiving Income Assistance could have a monthly deficit of \$681.10 after paying for a basic nutritious diet and essential household needs. A lone 19- to 30-year-old man without a disability receiving Income Assistance could face a monthly deficit of \$793.54 after buying a basic nutritious diet. If this same man were to work full-time hours earning minimum wage, he would have \$141.40 left over at the end of each month to cover other expenses.

A lone man 54 to 59 years old with a spinal cord injury,

whose main income is Income Assistance, could face a monthly deficit of \$510.33 after buying a basic nutritious diet. When this man reaches 65, he is eligible for the Old Age Security (OAS) benefit and the Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS). These government payments can decrease his monthly deficit after buying a basic nutritious diet to \$26.79. Seniors who receive OAS and GIS show us what a basic income for eligible Nova Scotians of all ages might look like, but the lone senior man with a disability is still vulnerable to food insecurity. This shows that income supports for people with disabilities are not enough to provide a basic nutritious diet.

### WHAT IS THE FINANCIAL IMPACT OF GOVERNMENT POLICY CHANGES?

In this cycle of PFC, we added scenarios to examine whether or not government policy changes would make economic access to healthy food more secure for Nova Scotia households. We have highlighted two policy levers to examine what difference they could make on the potential risk of food insecurity for Nova Scotians:

1. the federal government's new Canada Child Benefit (CCB)
2. a hypothetical increase in the minimum wage to \$15 per hour

When we collected the data – or information – for this report, the reference household of four was eligible for the Canada Child Tax Benefit (CCTB) and Universal Child Care Benefit (UCCB). At the time, with these government benefits and Income Assistance, this household would face a monthly deficit of \$986.44. With the new CCB, this household could now receive \$900.00 per month in tax-free government benefits, up from \$843.29. This means a deficit of \$929.73 per month after buying a basic nutritious diet. Even though this is slightly better, the deficit at the end of each month is still significant. This puts the household at serious risk of food insecurity. Over all, the CCB will only make a difference of \$56.71 for the reference household of four.

The lone mother and her children were also eligible for the CCTB and the UCCB when we collected the data for

this report. Even so, this household would face a potential monthly deficit of \$681.10. With CCB and Income Assistance, the family would receive \$983.33 a month in government benefits, which means a deficit of \$589.33 a month after buying a basic nutritious diet. This household still has a big deficit at the end of each month and is still at risk of food insecurity. Overall, the CCB has only made a potential improvement of \$91.77.

In June 2015, the minimum wage in Nova Scotia was \$10.60 per hour. With a hypothetical increase to \$15 per hour, the reference household of four could move from having a monthly deficit to a surplus \$167.24 to cover all other expenses after buying a basic nutritious diet. At \$10.60 per hour, this same household could face a monthly deficit of \$418.07.

With a \$15 per hour minimum wage, the lone mother with two children who works full-time would still face a deficit each month after buying a basic nutritious diet. At \$10.60 an hour, the monthly deficit could be \$510.12. At \$15 an hour, the deficit could be \$101.07, a \$409.05 difference. This seems to improve the situation for this family, but they are still at risk of food insecurity.

With an increase in the minimum wage to \$15 per hour, the lone man without a disability working full-time would have a larger amount remaining each month after buying a basic nutritious diet. At \$10.60 an hour, he would have \$141.40 remaining at the end of each month. At \$15 an hour, he would have \$674.90 remaining. Overall, these results show that an increase in minimum wage could help households afford a basic nutritious diet except for the lone mother who would still face a significant potential deficit.

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Our findings show that we need complementary, progressive social and economic policies that create options for affordable housing, childcare, and transportation. These could operate alongside income-related supports to adequately address food insecurity in Nova Scotia. We have drawn seven conclusions from this cycle of PFC. Based on these conclusions, we make 14 recommendations for building food security:

**1. Current Income Assistance rates are inadequate and unacceptable. They leave low-income households with a large potential monthly deficit, meaning people and families cannot afford a basic nutritious diet.**

#### Recommendations:

- I. Within five years, increase Income Assistance rates to a level that would allow all households to meet their basic needs. After that, adjust the rates every year to keep up with the cost of living, including the cost of a basic nutritious diet.
- II. Ensure strong social policy as the foundation for food policy that ensures food security.
- III. Reduce the rate at which employment income is deducted from Income Assistance amounts for people who are working while receiving Income Assistance.

**2. The current minimum wage is not high enough for working households with children to afford a nutritious diet.**

#### Recommendations:

- IV. Research the possibility and impact of putting a living wage in place in Nova Scotia workplaces and pilot a program to see how a living wage makes a basic nutritious diet more affordable.
- V. Increase incentives for businesses to employ Nova Scotians in full-time positions and offer benefits.

**3. Income supports that make sure people have enough to live on, including a living wage and Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS), reduce the likelihood of low-income households being at risk for food insecurity.**

#### Recommendations:

- VI. Pilot and evaluate the impact of a guaranteed basic income in Nova Scotia on household food insecurity.
- VII. Put automatic enrolment in place for the GIS.

**4. Low-income households need affordable and subsidized housing to meet their basic nutritional needs.**

#### Recommendation:

- VIII. Increase the number of adequate, affordable, and safe housing units to reflect the number of households living below the low-income cut-off.

**5. Childcare costs make low-income households raising young children unable to afford a basic nutritious diet.**

#### Recommendations:

- IX. Look at the provincial childcare subsidy to see if it helps people seek and keep employment.
- X. Increase the amount of the federal CCB, or increase other benefits to offset the high cost of childcare.
- XI. Examine the effectiveness of a publicly funded, provincially regulated childcare system.

**6. Income supports for people with disabilities are not enough to afford a basic nutritious diet, which increases their likelihood of food insecurity.**

#### Recommendation:

- XII. Provide adequate income and related policy supports for Nova Scotians with disabilities, who work and who do not work, to ensure they have access to a basic nutritious diet.

**7. For low-income households, a lack of affordable transportation can compromise their ability to access and afford a basic nutritious diet.**

#### Recommendations:

- XIII. Invest in affordable and accessible community-appropriate public transit.
- XIV. Increase Income Assistance to ensure Nova Scotians who need to can afford to have a private vehicle.

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