



Low-income families can't afford healthy food – The Cost of Eating in BC 2009

The Facts:

- A family of four on income assistance would need more than 100% of their income for shelter and food. Buying healthy food alone requires almost 50% of income
- Food and shelter costs have increased significantly over the past decade, while income assistance rates have remained virtually unchanged and minimum wage has not increased
- Unemployment is rising, as is the number of clients receiving income assistance
- Many low-income residents face challenges purchasing healthy foods. In urban centres the high cost of housing leaves little money left for food; in geographically isolated communities there may be a limited variety of healthy foods and food is often more expensive than in urban centres
- Almost 90,000 people visited a food bank in BC in March 2009, the highest number on record and a 15% increase over 2008
- Most other provinces have established poverty reduction plans or anti-poverty legislation.

The Cost of Eating in BC 2009 report demonstrates that income assistance is too low to pay rent and buy healthy food. In the spring of 2009, dietitians throughout BC priced a standard basket of food at 134 randomly selected grocery stores. The basket contains 67 basic foods that require preparation. The cost of the food basket is then compared to disposable income for a number of family scenarios. For those on income assistance, shelter and food costs consume an unreasonable proportion of the income. For those with a low earned income (\$11/ hour, \$3 more than minimum wage), food costs also represent an unreasonable percentage of their income.

Monthly Costs	Family of 4 income assistance	Single parent 2 children income assistance	Family of 4 low earned income	Family of 4 average income
Disposable income	\$1773	\$1724	\$2458	\$4491
Cost of shelter	\$1028	\$1028	\$740	\$1293
% income needed for shelter	58%	60%	30%	29%
Cost of food	\$872	\$659	\$872	\$872
% income needed for food	49%	38%	35%	19%
% income (\$) left for all other costs	-7% (-\$127)	2% (\$37)	34% (\$846)	52% (\$2326)

Quebec and Ontario have established anti-poverty legislation. Newfoundland/Labrador, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Manitoba have all adopted poverty reduction plans. It's time for BC to catch up and develop a plan with vision, targets and timelines that includes:

- Raising income assistance rates to account for the actual cost of healthy food and safe housing and indexing rates to the cost of living
- Raising the minimum wage to a level that supports an individual working full-time, full-year with an income above Statistics Canada low-income cut-off in a major urban centre
- Supporting a wide range of initiatives to ensure all British Columbians have access to safe and affordable housing
- Supporting initiatives that increase access to healthy food for all British Columbians, especially those living in rural and remote communities, or for whom access to food is difficult
- Building a system of high quality, affordable, accessible child care
- Measuring success by improvements in the health and social statistics of the most disadvantaged British Columbians.