



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Why is food so expensive in BC,
and what can be done about it?

August 2025



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Foreword

As farmers, producers, advocates and non-profits, we are all passionate about food, and we bring different perspectives and insights into how food gets from farm to table in BC.

We are also a group of Living Wage Employers, committed to ensuring that our staff and contractors earn enough to pay the bills and have a decent quality of life.

Over the past 4 years, we have seen the Living Wage increase dramatically. In Metro-Vancouver, it has risen from \$20.52 in 2021 to \$27.05 in 2024, a 31% increase. This represents a real challenge.

Alongside housing costs, the rising cost of food is one of the biggest drivers of the increase to the Living Wage. The food component of the Living Wage budget is 28% higher than four years ago. Living Wage BC estimates that a family of four will be spending an extra \$3,220 a year on the same basket of food in 2024 than they would have done in 2021.

This is unsustainable, and action is needed. In this report, we break down why food prices have soared and recommend actions for all levels of Government to take to address food unaffordability and insecurity in BC.

Workers shouldn't need a food bank to provide food for their family.

Signed,

BC Food and Beverage Association

Close to Home Organics

Food Stash Foundation

Foodbanks BC

Vancouver Neighbourhood Food Networks

Vancouver Food Runners

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1. Introduction

Food is fundamental to human life and access to food is a human right. Beyond its physical benefits, food brings people together, from family dinners to festive celebrations. It reflects cultural traditions and personal values, acting as a medium through which stories and heritage are shared.

In 2023, 21.8% of people in BC lived in a food-insecure household.¹ That amounts to over 1.2 million people living in households that struggle to afford the food they need.

Many of the workers we work with shared that they felt they couldn't cut back on rent, but they could cut back on food. As the Wellesley Institute state "This may help explain the increase in food insecurity. It's not just high food costs, it's that food costs are something that households can cut back on".²

The food component of the Living Wage budget has increased from \$953.41 a month for a family of four in 2021, to \$1222 a month in 2024, a 28% increase in four years. Food is the second biggest item in the family budget, with Canadians allocating 16.65% of their household budget to food purchases. Quest, which runs non-profit grocery markets, found that some families were spending 40% of their income on food.³

Many Canadians have been forced to access food banks and food charities, while others have responded to higher prices by seeking discounts, buying in bulk, and reducing the amount and quality of food.⁴

According to Food Bank Canada's 2024 Hunger Count, over 2 million food bank visits occurred in Canada in 2024, marking the highest level on record—a staggering 95% increase since March 2019. An increasing number of food bank users are working, but their income is not enough to keep up with rising food costs.⁵

As part of this report, we spoke with key individuals and organisations responsible for putting food on the table along every step of the food chain, from farmers to food banks. We also met with nearly 50 low wage workers and heard their concerns and feedback on being able to afford food for themselves and their families.

This report explores the issues which lead to the increased insecurity and unaffordability of food and the impact this has on individuals and families. It lays out recommendations for all levels of Government to help reduce the cost of food, increase incomes to manage increased costs, and to ensure that everyone in British Columbia can access the food they need.

"Sometimes I just have \$400 for my monthly budget, and for months like that, I do the bare minimum for food. It's frustrating and tough. At this point, I feel like I don't have choices, the cheapest food is what fuels my body."

A young adult living and working in Vancouver



2. Rising Food Prices

As of January 2025, food prices increased 2.7% from the previous year. This continues a long-term trend, with consumer grocery prices in BC rising by 21.4% between April 2021 and April 2024.⁶ The widening gap between income and the cost of living, driven in part by rising food prices, has forced more individuals and families to rely on charitable food assistance to meet their basic needs.

2.1 Global Inflation

Food prices have increased substantially since the end of the pandemic because of pandemic-induced supply-chain disruptions, rising 39 percent between January 2020 and February 2022.

Russia's war in Ukraine and export bans in some large producer countries have further exacerbated pressures on key cereal, energy, and fertilizer markets.

Adjusted for inflation, global food prices reached a 60-year high in March 2022.

2.2 Food Inflation in Canada

Following global trends, food prices in Canada have risen sharply. In September 2022, food prices surged 11.4% year over year, the fastest increase since 1981, far outpacing the 6.9% overall inflation rate at the time. This spike was driven by global supply chain disruptions, rising production costs, and economic uncertainty.⁷

By spring 2025, the strain of food inflation remained severe. With grocery costs rising faster than wages, many households have struggled to afford essentials. Over the past three years, grocery prices have increased by 20%, while wages have only risen by 12%.⁸ This imbalance has eroded purchasing power, making food less affordable despite recent efforts to curb inflation.⁹

Looking ahead, the Canada Food Price Report 2025 forecasts a 3% to 5% increase in food prices over the year.¹⁰ While overall inflation is slowing, food remains increasingly unaffordable. A family of four is expected to spend \$16,833.67 per year on food in 2025, up \$801.56 from the previous year, equating to an additional 39 cents per hour for a full-time worker. Notably, food has now overtaken childcare as the second-largest household expense, accounting for 15% of the family budget.

"The cost of living crisis feels like it is really ramping up. It does not feel like it's stopping. And it doesn't feel like doesn't feel like much is being done to address it."

Food Bank worker

"If you go to the grocery store, I'm paying three to \$4 more per item than I was six months ago, maybe up to \$6 for an item than I was a year ago."

Non-profit worker

"\$50 used to be enough for groceries for a week, and now it's like one go."

Disabled person, Squamish

2.3 BC Trends

Despite the general decline in global food prices, domestic food prices, including in BC, are still on the rise. This trend is particularly concerning because it directly impacts the cost of living for households, especially those with lower and middle-income families.

The figures below show some B.C specific food price changes in the last five years identified through our Kitchen Table Discussions.¹¹

"In my country, when you don't have enough money for meat, you can add veggies, right? Because it's cheap. But here, everything is expensive."

Migrant worker living in Squamish

Jan 2020 Price

Jan 2025 Price



Olive Oil
1 Litre

\$7.93

+113%

\$16.85

"It's like liquid gold - there's no way I can afford olive oil anymore."

Low wage worker, Vancouver



Infant Formula
900g

\$29.41

+52%

\$44.65

"I used to be able to afford to supplement with breast milk my first daughter. I cannot afford to do that. I really can't afford formula - it's insane."

Mom, Squamish



Grapes
1 KG

\$6.81

+41%

\$9.59

"I met someone the other day that has said her kids are dying for grapes at lunch, and she can't afford grapes."

Senior, Squamish



Ground Beef
1 KG

\$10.81

+38%

\$14.03

"We use ground beef a lot because it's cheap, but that went up so much recently, \$2 a packet or something. It's like eight bucks for the regular which is a pretty big joke."

Mom, Sunshine Coast



Potatoes
1 KG

\$3.45

+34%

\$4.61

"Potatoes are the most expensive. You get two potatoes and it'll cost you about \$3."

Senior, Squamish



Salmon
1 KG

\$25.20

+25%

\$31.39

"I don't understand why fish is so expensive, when the sea is just there!"

Low wage worker, Whistler

3. Why Is Food So Expensive?

Understanding the factors driving price increases — from seed, through the supply chain, to stores — helps identify the root causes of financial strain on households and informs effective policy responses. It also demonstrates that there is not one “silver bullet” which will reduce food costs for consumers, and instead governments at all levels, and across all departments, need to work together to develop solutions to bring down the cost of food and address food insecurity.



From Seed

Climate change is leading to farming failures. In 2024, BC farmers posted a \$360 million loss.



Through Supply Chains

Canada is more dependent on imported food than many other countries, leaving it vulnerable to post-Covid global supply chain issues. Tariffs further add to these costs.



To Staffing

Staffing makes up some of the biggest costs with producing food, and yet workers who make, prepare and grow food are some of the lowest paid in BC.



To Store

Major grocery giants make record profits and control the price of food. This negatively impacts both consumers and producers.



Surplus Food

46.5% of food is wasted, and of this, 41% is edible. Food waste costs businesses money, and this cost is passed on to consumers.

While food prices have gone up in grocery stores, returns for farmers, small and medium food manufacturers, primary food producers and workers have not kept up. Each of these sectors has been impacted uniquely and requires targeted measures to support production at affordable prices.

3.1 Climate Change and Farming Failures

BC Farmers are not benefiting from rising consumer prices. BC's agricultural sector posted a net loss of \$457 million in 2024 – the biggest loss ever.¹² Statistics Canada data shows that BC farms haven't turned a profit since 2017, and the farm sector has seen a larger net loss every year since 2020.¹³

Climate change has a significant impact on agriculture and the supply chain. A study by the European Central Bank predicts that by 2035, higher temperatures alone will push up worldwide food prices by up 3.2% annually.¹⁴

While the overall trend of global food inflation is decreasing, the cost of some products continues to rise because of crop failures. The cost of olive oil in BC increased by over 112% from 2020-2025 because of drought in the Mediterranean. Spain, the world's largest producer of olive oil, experienced a reduction in production of 62% last year. The worldwide shortage has reportedly led to supermarkets in Spain locking up their olive oil stocks to prevent theft.¹⁵

Access to adequate water is a critical concern for producers in BC. The province relies on annual snowpack and glacial meltwater for stream recharge. As glaciers recede and less precipitation falls as snow, water levels will decline, potentially leading to water scarcity and reduced soil moisture during the growing season. While increased temperatures may extend the growing season, more frequent and intense weather changes could hamper agricultural activity in the region.¹⁶

Climate change is having a major impact on, and will continue to affect, food security and sovereignty in remote communities across British Columbia. Shifts in wildlife migration patterns and population sizes are reducing the availability of food from hunting and fishing, while rising temperatures and changing seasons are altering growing periods. In these areas, where importing alternative food sources can be more difficult or costly, the effects are even more pronounced.¹⁷

A stronger, more financially supported agricultural sector, would help buffer food prices and support farmers.

3.2 Supply Chain Challenges

Canada is the sixth largest importer of agri-food and seafood products in the world, and these imports come with additional costs and risks. According to BC Food and Beverage Association (BCFB) a third of the cost of food comes from input and supply chain costs.¹⁸

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted prices through supply chain disruptions, affecting stages such as processing, packaging, and transportation. Outbreaks at food processing facilities led to temporary closures, which had a ripple effect on consumer prices. When a processing facility shuts down, it results in supply constraints that can drive up prices due to reduced availability.¹⁹

The Russian invasion of Ukraine also put additional upward pressure on global food prices due to the significant roles both nations play in agricultural and oil production. For example, Russia, Ukraine and Belarus account for 20% of the global fertilizer market, so the war in Ukraine, and Russian sanctions, pushed up the price of fertilizer for farmers globally.²⁰

On the import side, Canada relies heavily on the U.S. for fresh produce, importing about 67% of its vegetables and 80% of its fruit.²¹ Tariffs on these goods would make fresh produce, dairy, and processed foods more expensive for Canadian consumers, further straining household budgets. In addition, when wildfires and droughts occur in those regions, it pushes up the price of these essentials.

Beyond price increases, tariffs pose serious supply chain risks. Food manufacturers relying on American ingredients may face delays or be forced to source from alternative, costlier suppliers. Transportation and logistics bottlenecks, such as increased customs checks and trade disputes, could further slow shipments and push up costs.

Remote and rural communities in BC are especially vulnerable to supply chain disruptions. Road maintenance and repairs can be slow, and closures due to weather, accidents, or maintenance are frequent. These closures can block access to and from communities for hours, days, or even weeks, severely limiting their access to food and pushing up costs.²²

"One thing I did notice was the price of soy milk, soy milk there at the time was \$1 per litre from Germany. Germany doesn't grow soybeans. Canada does so. Why is the price in Canada three times what it was?"

Senior, Sunshine Coast

"Because we are so remote, everything has to be shipped here by trucks, and as the cost of gas goes up, so the cost of shipping goes up, so the cost of food, and by the time it gets here, it's even more expensive for us, and we have less options."

Food Bank worker

3.3 Grocery Store Monopolies

While consumers are struggling with the rising cost of food, the structure of the grocery industry is affording big companies record-breaking profits.

Most Canadians buy groceries in stores owned by only a handful of grocery giants. Over 80 per cent of Canada's grocery dollars end up in the pockets of only five companies - Loblaws, Sobeys, Costco, Walmart, and Metro (which only operates in Ontario and Quebec).²³ These companies have many sub-brands, so even when a consumer thinks they are shopping in an independent store, they may not be. In BC, as well as the major national brands, Pattison Food Group (which operates Save-on-Foods, Buy-Low Foods, Choices Market, PriceSmart and Urban Fare, among others) also takes a large share of the market.

"Add more grocery stores - I live in Sechelt, and perhaps we could have another grocery store for competition."

Low wage worker, Sunshine Coast



Geographic distance and the small size of many BC communities means that many consumers can only realistically choose between one or two large grocery stores, further weakening any effective competition in those markets.

According to the Centre for Future Work, food retailers earned a net income of almost \$6 billion in 2022, compared to \$2.4 billion in 2019, and an average of \$1.8 billion per year in the five years before COVID. Even the modest increase in profit margins has added to consumer frustration over fair prices and affordability.²⁴

The market concentration makes it extremely difficult for small independent grocery stores and co-ops to remain economically viable, thereby limiting the number of options consumers have.

Many consumers have found small grocers to be more affordable because they can be more competitive in the pricing of their produce compared to larger stores. Some small independent grocers can access low-cost produce with lower standards (for example misshaped foods) than the larger grocery stores.²⁵

"Loblaws has record profits, and everyone else is getting squeezed by that. How is that happening?"

Non-profit worker

"I don't pray a lot, but I would pray for a Costco nearby."

Single parent, Whistler

A common theme that emerged from our Kitchen Table Discussions was the need for a large wholesaler offering affordable food. While some participants expressed interest in buying in bulk, others noted significant barriers, such as the lack of a car or a freezer, to doing so. Investing in local “bulk buy” programs could help ensure that low-income workers can access affordable food without incurring these additional costs.

A recent boycott of Loblaw stores in Canada did not significantly impact the company’s bottom line. This demonstrates that consumer actions, like boycotts, often have a limited impact on large corporations due to the lack of choices and the dominance of these major players, although consumer choice can make a positive impact on a small scale in places where alternatives do exist.²⁶

There is also a growing concern among consumers about practices such as price fixing and shrinkflation. In 2016, the Competition Bureau began investigating alleged bread price-fixing. In 2024, Loblaw Cos. Ltd. agreed to pay \$500 million to settle a class-action lawsuit regarding their involvement in the bread price-fixing scheme.²⁷

It is not just consumers that are impacted by the grocery store monopolies, but food producers too. The BC Food & Beverage Manufacturing State of the Industry Report 2024 indicated the industry’s challenges due to the significant bargaining power concentrated within a small number of grocers. They suggested that retailers’ strong bargaining position stems from their large market shares, resulting from the small number of players and consolidation in the grocery retail industry.²⁸

3.4 Staffing

The food sector, including agriculture, manufacturing, processing, retail, and hospitality, is one of the largest employers in Canada. However, the industry is characterized by low wages, precarious work conditions, and a high turnover rate, with workers in this sector often receiving wages set at or just above the minimum wage. This is especially true for individuals working in grocery stores and food service roles.

According to the Broadbent Institute, workers in grocery stores have seen their “real wages” decrease in a time of high inflation. This is done through increasing wages below the rate of inflation, creating a real wage-reducing effect without the same level of backlash from workers that would come from a nominal wage cut.²⁹

Farm workers who hand-harvest tree fruits, berries, vegetables, and daffodils in BC can legally be paid a “piece rate” less than the minimum wage.³⁰ These workers are not entitled to overtime, statutory holiday pay or other employment standards protections. According to the Employment Standards Coalition, most of the 8,000 Canadian seasonal farm workers are older, recent South Asian immigrants.³¹

Many of these migrant workers are on closed work permits, meaning they cannot leave the job if they are unhappy, trapping them in low paid and sometimes exploitative conditions. Even for those who may be happy with their jobs, they are unable to take on a second job to supplement the low pay and high costs.

Although lifting the wages of low paid staff in the food sector could result in further price increases, we believe that it’s vital that anyone involved in growing, making, preparing, and selling food can also afford the food for themselves and their families. If we can implement changes across the board which would lower the cost of food, and thereby lower the living wage, we can make it easier for these workers to earn a Living Wage.

“Food is a human right, and food prices need to be under the scanner. We have seen price gouging, price fixing, and shrinkflation. Something needs to be done about this and to make food more affordable for all.”

Single mother of three, Vancouver

“I know there’s a lot of things that I just had to cut out because it’s just not in the budget.”

Food service worker, Squamish

“You cannot work outside your job, you are stuck with one employer.”

Migrant worker, Whistler

Role ³²	Average hourly wage, 2024
All employees	\$34.76
Metro Vancouver Living Wage	\$27.05
Accommodation and food service	\$21.80
Harvesting labourers	\$19.94
Labourers in food and beverage processing	\$21.77
Food and beverage servers	\$22.91
Store shelf stockers, clerks and order fillers	\$19.93

3.5 Surplus Food

In Canada, 46.5% of all food produced is wasted every year, amounting to a staggering \$58 billion in avoidable food waste annually. Of this wasted food, 41.7% could be redirected to support Canadians, helping reduce food insecurity in communities across the country.³³

Food waste represents a significant financial burden for businesses, ultimately raising costs for consumers. In British Columbia, retail food stores and food service sectors lose approximately \$1.3 billion worth of food annually. This lost value benefits no one and places a strain on communities socially, economically, and environmentally.³⁴ There are a lot of reasons why food ends up being unsold, including over-ordering, new branding/packaging leading to existing food on shelves being replaced, over-cautious best-before-date labels, and aesthetic imperfections.

One approach is to reconsider our expectations about food appearance and our understanding of “best before” dates versus expiry dates. A significant portion of avoidable food waste comes from best-before dates, which account for 23% of the waste, from processing to purchase.

While addressing food waste needs to be decoupled from the narrative that it is an appropriate solution to solving hunger, it can help make food budgets go further and reduce the environmental impact of waste.

“I don’t waste any food... if I have little leftovers, I freeze it, and then if I have a pile together, I put it all in the soup pot.”

Senior, Squamish

“Some of those grocery stores should say, hey, let’s freeze it, send it to the food bank, because they’re not going to sell half of it.”

Low wage worker, Sunshine Coast





4. The Impacts of Food Unaffordability

Increasing food costs have a range of impacts on individuals and communities. These themes intersect with each other and present a strong case for immediate action.

4.1 Increasing Dependence on Food Banks and Charities

While food banks are designed to serve those facing immediate food needs, the vast majority of food-insecure families do not access charitable emergency food assistance. Food insecure households often consider food banks a last resort after exhausting other strategies. Many food bank users also report feeling stigma and shame with having to visit food banks. Research has found that only 1 in 5 food-insecure households report using food banks and instead sought help from friends and family.³⁵

Despite this, food banks and community food organizations across BC have seen a significant rise in the number of people accessing their services. This surge has increased the pressure on nonprofits and charities to replace parts of the broken safety net. Accessing food banks and food charities is influenced not only by increased food costs but also by low social benefits and the gap between income and the cost of living.

According to Food Bank Canada's 2024 Hunger Count report, over 2 million food bank visits occurred in 2024, marking a staggering 95% increase since March 2019. In BC, food bank visits have increased by 81% since 2019. Although not counted in these statistics, other community food programs, community fridges, and affordable produce initiatives have also seen a significant uptick in demand and visits.

While food banks do a vital job with providing food to people who need it, they are a tool to help people in crisis and are not a long-term solution to food insecurity, which needs to be addressed by financial measures.

"The biggest reason people used to come to the food bank was lack of work. Now it has shifted to cost of living, primarily rent and basic living expenses."

Food Bank worker, Whistler

"[I'm] dependent on the food bank. It used to be maybe it was just wasn't making it this week or something. Now I have to go every week or we're not going to have enough."

Parent, Sunshine Coast

4.2 Changing Diets Leading to Poor Health Outcomes

Many of the people that we spoke with shared that rent costs are a necessity, whereas food costs are something that households can cut back on. The result is people either drastically changing their diet (through cutting out meals) or unable to afford the food their body needs (for example allergy alternatives). The impact of this is poorer health outcomes in the long and short term for individuals.

One small business owner in BC shared that she was cutting out a meal a day to save money.

We also met with several people who, faced with high medication costs or specific dietary needs, didn't know what to choose. Often, they would cut back on other food to be able to pay for their health needs.

Food unaffordability limits choice for individuals, with highly processed foods being cheaper but often much less healthy. Research on the connection between food insecurity and dietary patterns has shown that food insecurity is associated with reduced consumption of healthy food groups and overall poor diet, especially in terms of fruit and vegetable intake.³⁶ A lot of the people we spoke with wanted to eat healthier, but couldn't because it was too expensive.

At its most stark, food insecurity increases the risk of premature mortality. According to the University of Toronto, severely food-insecure adults die 9 years earlier than their food secure counterparts.³⁷

Food insecurity impacts both the health of individuals and the health of the economy. The Canadian Public Health Association has also found that food insecurity can lead to increased health care spending and longer and more frequent hospital stays for numerous health conditions.³⁸

"Most days I don't eat great. Sometimes I'm eating a Kraft Dinner, and pizza pops that are \$5 for four, and stuff like that. And it's just crappy food that, you know, that is just cheap, right?"

Low wage worker, Sunshine Coast

"People are sacrificing the food they're buying because they have a commitment to pay rent."

Non-profit worker, Squamish

"My spouse has dietary needs, and he can't eat certain food. He eats a lot of fruit, but it's so expensive. So with, grapes, which he likes eating, he'd have to pick a couple from the bag, instead of getting the whole bag."

Low wage worker, Whistler

"It's true, all the healthy food is really, really expensive."

Migrant worker, Squamish

"Kids need good nutrition to be able to learn and play and grow and become good citizens of this country."

Non-profit worker, Squamish

"We've started...to cut down one meal a day. That's just calories cut out, just money cut out to try and keep up with our budget."

BC Small Business Owner



4.3 Changing Habits

Shopping around at various stores or accessing food banks simply trades financial cost for time. This is time people are not spending working, looking after their family, and spending in the local community and can add to stress and anxiety for individuals.

Others have adapted by seeking deals and discounts, shopping at various stores, buying in bulk, and, in some cases, moving in with roommates to help manage the rising costs of living.

People who are hungry or who spend their time searching for cheaper food are less productive at work, while every additional dollar spent on food is money not spent in other sectors.

4.4 Mental Health Impacts

Food insecurity significantly affects overall health and well-being, including mental health. The uncertainty of not knowing where your next meal will come from can cause intense stress and anxiety. In Canada, while approximately 1 in 5 people experience a mental illness each year, those facing food insecurity are at much greater risk: they are three times more likely to suffer from depression, 2.5 times more likely to experience anxiety, and twice as likely to have sleep disorders.³⁹ Many of the people we spoke with talked about how the increased cost of food puts strain on their mental health and relationships with others.

Some of the younger people we spoke with, shared how there is tension within friendship groups because they cannot afford the cost of eating out.

Couples shared that they often had arguments about the inability to buy food, or emotions were heightened due to hunger.

Parents shared the guilt they feel when they can't afford the food their children like or need.



"I usually visit different stores and do a price comparison. I have also made small dietary changes as at the end of the day, putting food on the table is more of a priority. My daughter loves salmon, and to be honest, the only time I can afford it is when it's on sale. Looking for sales and discounted food prices is my new normal reality."

Single Mother, Vancouver

"I never used to actually look at the price of food before, but now that everything's gone up like I have to be mindful about what I'm putting in my cart."

Low wage worker, Whistler

"I'll be anxious when the food is gone every week and the refrigerator is empty."

Migrant worker, Squamish

"All the time you are stressed, and you are maybe angry all the time, and you are not too patient with other people."

Migrant worker, Squamish

"You make excuses not to go out because you can't afford dinners."

Low wage worker, Whistler

"I need to buy the groceries and stuff, and I am struggling, and I know he's struggling also because he want to help, but he cannot do anything."

Migrant worker, Squamish

"I'd like to be able to feed my kid real food, but I have a budget I gotta stick to."

Parent, Squamish

4.5 Inequitable Access to Food

Although rising food costs impact everyone across BC, research shows that key demographics are feeling it the most. The BC Centre for Disease Control found household food insecurity is most prevalent among households where the respondent identifies as Indigenous (30.7%), Arab/West Asian (27.6%), or Black (22.4%).⁴⁰

A study from the Broadbent Institute found that Black households were 3.5 times more likely to be food insecure compared to white households, even when adjusting for immigration status, education level, and home ownership. This disparity has been linked to the increased likelihood of developing chronic diseases, like diabetes, asthma, and depression, and to poor educational and health outcomes, like learning challenges, low graduation rates, and low self-esteem.⁴¹

The westernization of traditional diets has exacerbated food insecurity in Indigenous communities, a consequence of colonization, residential schools, and the disruption of their cultures, languages, and social bonds.⁴² According to the BC Centre for Disease Control, 30.7% of First Nations people living off-reserve in Canada now experience food insecurity. 47% of families living on-reserve reported running out of traditional food before they could replenish their supplies.⁴³ The First Nations Food and Nutrition Study found that 91% of First Nations adults in BC would like more traditional food in their diets but faced barriers to accessing traditional foods. These barriers include regulations, lost skills and knowledge, and climate change.⁴⁴

"We're getting busy and people are working harder, we don't have time to cook, but there's like a whole loss of culture there."

Non-profit worker, Squamish

4.6 Rural vs. Urban Divide

Individual and household food security across BC are influenced by factors such as income, employment and housing. In some communities there is an additional layer affecting food security - elements such as food supply, food prices and community and cultural values determine how remote communities access food.⁴⁵

Rural food costs are higher due to limited access, fewer retail options, and long transportation distances. Smaller populations discourage large chains, leaving residents to rely on expensive, smaller stores with limited selection. This drives up prices for basic groceries, putting additional pressure on low-income households.

The BC Centre for Disease Control highlights that remote communities face worsening food security, exacerbated by COVID-19. Challenges include limited access to stores, long travel times, physical barriers, high prices, and lack of representation in food cost data. Supply chain disruptions and reliance on traditional foods add to the strain, with communities dependent on shipments vulnerable to delays from extreme weather events like wildfires and floods.⁴⁶

"Lots of people travel to Vancouver because there are more options there for different types of grocery stores and different costs of food."

Non-profit worker, Squamish

Many of the people we spoke with would take trips to their nearest city for cheaper food. These trips would come with additional costs, and so individuals had to weigh up whether the additional cost of gas was worth the amount they were saving on food.

4.7 Impact on Parents

In our focus groups with parents, many shared how they carried a lot of guilt because they couldn't afford the food or activities their children wanted. For many of the parents, the increased cost of food on top of an unaffordable rental market and limited access to affordable child care, put a real strain on family dynamics.

One parent shared that she is thinking of ending parental leave early to go back to work in order to afford food for her and her family.

And another has decided not to have any more children because they cannot afford it. This was met with nods of agreement from other parents in the room.

"I don't want my low income status to impact their ability to experience as much as they want to, depending on their interests and stuff."

Single parent, Whistler

"I'm looking at going back, like ending mat leave early, just because, pragmatically, that's maybe what we need to do in terms of, like, paying for things."

"I always wanted a big family. I wanted to have like five kids. I really did. I still do, but I know I'm done."

Parent in Squamish



5. Recommendations for Change

Food security is a complex issue and requires a multifaceted approach that targets overarching themes such as affordability, racism, colonialism, and poverty reduction. By formulating policies and strategies that address these issues, we can ensure the protection of basic rights to food and ensure individuals receive sufficient income to cover the cost of essentials.

"If you pay rent, high rent, you cannot afford the food."

Single parent, Whistler

There is not one "silver bullet" that will make food affordable and end food insecurity. Governments at all levels and across all departments need to work together to develop solutions to bring down the cost of food and address food insecurity. It is essential to also include the voices of those most affected by food insecurity and unaffordability.

Through extensive conversations with various stakeholders, we have outlined potential first steps categorized under three solution areas:

- Food Affordability
- Increasing Incomes
- Ensuring Equitable Access to Food

By addressing these three issues, we can reduce food unaffordability and insecurity in BC.

However, these recommendations also sit alongside other work that needs to happen to reduce the cost of living for people in BC, including, but not limited to:

- **Stopping huge rent increases:** Accelerate the development of affordable housing and introduce an emergency measure to target and control rent increases between tenancies.
- **Connecting BC through better, low-cost transit:** Expand the publicly operated transit network in rural areas, create an inter-community express bus service, and offer free transit to youth 18 and under to reduce transportation costs for working families.
- **Ensuring \$10 a day childcare for all children:** The rollout of \$10 a-day childcare needs to expand to before and after school care and care during school holidays.

5.1 Food Affordability

There are 6 times more food charities than grocery stores in BC.⁴⁷ Food banks and food charities have been facing rising pressure in demand, and one of the reasons contributing to this increase in demand and usage is the higher cost of food purchased from stores. Policies and support directed towards enhancing food affordability will address this.

"Government can really do that - make good food affordable."

Parent, Squamish

Municipal Level

- **Develop a local map of community food assets:** Municipalities can collaborate with community and health partners to identify food assets. A community asset map can help assess gaps in food access. Municipalities can utilize land use policy tools such as area planning, zoning code, property tax relaxations, Development Cost Levies, and Community Amenity Contributions to help fill critical barriers and gaps in the asset maps.
- **Municipal support for existing community food programs and infrastructure:** Many municipalities in BC already have a network of local organizations doing vital work to support food-friendly neighborhoods and affordable food access. Municipalities should develop a food systems funding policy to support local non-profits to do this work to address immediate hunger in the community while longer-term food insecurity solutions are developed.
- **Support local food manufacturers and charities with finding affordable commercial rental space:** Many small food manufacturers and food charities find it financially prohibitive to lease or purchase land or space for their operations. Municipalities should explore what incentives they can offer to encourage commercial and industrial landowners to prioritize small and independent food and beverage organizations and non-profits.
- **Invest in bulk buy programs:** This would allow community members can access affordable food without the cost of cars or freezers.
- **For remote and Indigenous communities:** Reliable and safe communal transportation and community markets where people can share, trade and/or sell traditional and local foods.

"Even local food is expensive."

Low wage worker, Whistler

Provincial Level

- **Increase investment to BC's independent farmers:** A stronger agricultural sector should help buffer food prices and support farmers. Additionally, a micro greenhouse grant program could be established to fund thousands of small greenhouses across the province, reducing reliance on large-scale corporate food production while directly supporting BC farmers and enhancing year-round local food availability.
- **Fast-track support to independent grocery retailers and co-ops:**⁴⁸ Diversify the food retail sector and extend support to small businesses and food co-ops to make them more viable in the face of competitive pressures. Provide financial assistance, subsidies, tax benefits for freight costs in remote locations, and grants for communities to develop local sustainable food systems such as hydroponics and greenhouse food production. Follow up with market assessment to understand the efficiency of and challenges of new grocery stores.
- **Consumer education and awareness:** Implement unit pricing policies like Quebec's mandatory unit pricing to empower consumers to make informed choices.⁴⁹
- **Increase investment and support for local food production:** Shift from an export-focused food production system to a community-focused and regenerative approach. Prioritize support for young farmers and marginalized communities, by addressing issues such as land access, skills development and knowledge sharing.
- **Expand roll out of The Farmers' Market Nutrition Coupon Program:** The coupon program supports farmers' markets and promotes food security throughout British Columbia. Throughout all our focus groups it came up as one of the top existing programs that helped people access affordable local food. Access should expand to all low-income individuals.

"I'd like to see more support to for local growers so we can get fresh foods firsthand."

Low wage worker

"I'm on the government program for vegetables, and that's the only time I can really afford it. We get the coupons, vegetable coupons."

"Yeah, I have those too. They really help".

Parents in Squamish

Federal Level

- **Break up the monopolies:** Currently, the grocery sector in Canada is dominated by a few large companies, which can limit competition and lead to higher prices for consumers. By breaking monopolies and fostering a more diverse marketplace, we can create opportunities for new businesses to enter the market and offer competitive prices and innovative products, as we have seen within the telecom industry.
- **Monitor Industry Profitability:** Implement the recommendations from the Competition Bureau Retail Grocery Market Study Report⁵⁰ to monitor industry profitability and ensure fair pricing practices. By promoting competition and preventing price gouging, federal interventions can contribute to greater affordability and accessibility of food for consumers nationwide. In addition, introducing additional competition in the grocery retail space would help to push grocery retailers to have more mutually profitable relationships with their suppliers and would help to ensure the long-term sustainability of BC food and beverage manufacturers.
- **Explore regulating the prices of essential and healthy food:** Nutritious food is critical for health and could be regulated to ensure affordability just like other utilities such as water and electricity.

"A bit more of like, regulation on how much profit you can actually make on food when food is an essential"

Non-profit worker, Squamish

"I think there needs to be a paradigm of nourishment. It's like a garden: if you nourish it, you get more fruit. When communities and individuals are nourished—whether through a living wage or other supportive measures that benefit society, families, and children—everything improves."



5.2 Increasing Incomes

Household food insecurity is primarily an income-based issue that requires income-based solutions.⁵¹ Several studies have shown that tackling this requires solutions targeted towards income solutions. Household budgets and spending are greatly weighed down by the rising cost of living. Individuals and families need to budget tightly to meet the increased cost of rent, utilities, interest rates, and food prices.

“We basically just live paycheck to paycheck. We don’t really have the opportunity to save or have any disposable income.”

Parent on the Sunshine Coast

However, these solutions go alongside also reducing the cost of food, because food and healthy eating are sometimes considered optional whereas other necessities are not.⁵²

Municipal Level

- **Living Wage Policies:** Implement living wage policies to ensure that all staff and contracted workers earn enough income to afford necessities, including food.

Provincial Level

- **\$20 Minimum Wage with further increases planned out:** Lift minimum wages to ensure that all individuals earn enough income. Increases in minimum wage reduce the risk of food insecurity among Canadian families.⁵³
- **Remove the piece rate minimum wage for hand harvesters:** Workers who grow and harvest our food should be entitled to the same wages and protections as any other worker in BC.
- **Increase social assistance and disability benefits to the poverty line and index to inflation rates:** Households whose main source of income is from social assistance are three times more likely to be food insecure than households who have income from wages or salaries.⁵⁴ Numerous studies have shown that the incidence of food insecurity declined among families and individuals who receive income support such as the Canada Child Benefit and provincial social assistance.
- **Remove the earnings limits and spousal caps for people receiving disability assistance:** Enable people with disabilities to work to their full potential.

Federal Level

- **Grocery Rebate:** The federal government has previously acknowledged the link between food insecurity and income. In Budget 2023, it announced a one-time Grocery Rebate that provided \$2.5 billion in targeted inflation relief. The federal government should ensure it is not a one-off benefit and instead remains while food costs remain high for consumers.
- **Employment Insurance:** Re-examine the relationship between unemployment and food insecurity and the role of EI in mitigating the risk of food insecurity among the unemployed in Canada. Policy reforms that improve the adequacy and accessibility of EI could help protect Canadian households from food insecurity when unemployment hits unexpectedly, especially for part-time workers, and new and returning labor force entrants.⁵⁵
- **Increase the Canada Disability Benefit:** Starting in July 2025, people with disabilities who receive the Disability Tax Credit will begin receiving a maximum of \$200 per month as part of the new Canada Disability Benefit. Across the country, 30% of families relying on a person with a disability for their basic needs don’t have enough to eat. \$200 a month is not enough to ensure that people with disabilities can afford their basic needs, particularly with the additional costs of having a disability and ongoing inflation pushing up costs. There is a growing need to expand and increase barrier-free disability benefits.
- **Expand the Canada Workers Benefit (CWB):** In Canada, working-age, single adults experience the highest and deepest rates of poverty and some of the highest rates of food insecurity, yet they have limited social safety nets to rely on. At least 52% of all food-insecure households rely on employment or self-employment as their main source of income, highlighting the growing gap between wages and the cost of living.⁵⁶ Workers are struggling to meet their basic needs due to a precarious labor market that offers lower wages, fewer protections and benefits, and unpredictable work hours. Strengthening the Canada Workers Benefit (CWB) by increasing the minimum benefit level of the Working Age Supplement would provide greater financial support to low-income workers, helping them afford necessities, including food.

5.3 Promoting Equitable Access to Food

Ensuring equitable access to food ultimately requires a significant restructuring of our food system. This process can start by assessing community needs and taking an integrated approach to developing policy actions by prioritizing equity and considering the unique needs of marginalized groups. Furthermore, we need to cultivate a culture of care and compassion to properly address the roots of food insecurity, tackling unjust and oppressive systems of harm, violence, privilege, and power.

"If we invest in healthy food, then we'll have cost savings in the future. In terms of health care, there's all sorts of trade offs that can be made."

Parent, Squamish

Municipal Level

- **Support existing community food capacity and assets:** Assess the needs for community food and other infrastructure development to ensure the integration of community food assets, including the creation and funding for community gardens, neighborhood food networks and hubs, community kitchens and markets, as well as other food programming.
- **Creation of local forums:** Representation should include community members including local farmers, food producers and nonprofits to discuss and address issues across the food system.
- **Cultural Food Assets:** Ensure and foster cultural food as critical to a community's ability to maintain cultural foods and intangible cultural heritage traditions.
- **Urban Agriculture:** Provide opportunities and support for the enhancement of local agricultural initiatives providing meaningful green jobs and enhancing public access to food growing.
- **Community-based Markets:** Strengthening local market economies will help build income security and sustainability for local farmers and increase affordable access and resiliency in our food systems.
- **Inclusive food policies:** Create inclusive food policies by involving Indigenous communities, immigrants, and refugees in the development of food security strategies.
- **Proximity matters:** Most Canadians buy groceries from stores located near their home. Consumers living in urban areas have significantly more options than those located in rural and remote areas of BC. Enhance connectivity through further investments in public transport systems and/or further investments in food assets in existing food with priority in rural areas.⁵⁷

Provincial Level

- **Commit to ongoing funding for the establishment of universal school meal programs:** This would ensure all children in BC receive access to food in an equitable, accessible and non-stigmatizing manner.
- **Stronger partnerships to reduce food waste:** Build effective partnerships between industry (farm, producers, retailers) and non-profits, with support from the province, to increase access to good quality surplus food, without reproducing or uplifting the charity food system. Surplus food needs to be made available to all through non-targeted food recovery programs.
- **Support for agencies that play a critical role in local food systems change:** This would support programs such as surplus food redirection, food banks, and low-cost grocery stores.
- **Innovation:** Pilot innovative ways to make food more accessible, such as mobile food markets in remote areas.
- **Additional guidance to ensure food sent to landfills is kept to a minimum:** This would ensure as much food rescue as possible can occur. This requires relaxing aesthetic standards, clearer communication on best before and expiry dates, and packaging standards for clear communication and promoting consumer awareness.
- **Adopt and Implement Food Donation Regulations:** Implement regulations like California's *SB 1383* in BC, which require certain food businesses to donate all edible food they would otherwise dispose of.⁵⁸ This law, which phases in food donors over two tiers, can serve as a model for BC to help redirect surplus food to food recovery organizations. By mandating food donations, the government can ensure that edible food is used to support communities in need rather than contributing to waste.

Federal Level

- **Integrated approach:** Develop policy actions that support the upliftment of equity-denied groups.
- **Support Indigenous agriculture:** Help Indigenous communities and peoples to meet their food security, food sovereignty, and economic development goals and increase equitable participation in the agriculture and food sectors.
- **Stronger partnerships to reduce food waste:** Build effective partnerships between industry (farm, producers, retailers) and non-profits.
- **Revise Standards for Food Quality:** Encourage the relaxation of aesthetic standards for fresh produce to prevent unnecessary food waste and lower food prices.
- **Education on Indigenous food:** Develop programs for teaching about Indigenous (traditional) foods.

Best Practice Example: Belo Horizonte's Approach to Food Affordability

Problem: In the early 1990s, Belo Horizonte, a city in Brazil, experienced a national economic downturn, causing food prices to rise and affordability issues to increase. Around 38% of the city's 2.5 million residents lived below the poverty line, with 18% of children under three being malnourished.

Solution: Belo Horizonte responded by creating the Secretariat for Food Policy and Supply (SMAAB), centralizing food-related policies and programs to address food insecurity. Key initiatives included:

- **Popular Restaurants:** City-managed eateries where meal prices are capped at the unit cost.
- **Food Banks and School Meals:** The School Meals Program, funded federally and implemented locally, provides meals to students.
- **Supply and Regulation of Food Markets:** The Abastecer program licenses vendors to sell 25 essential items at 20-50% below market prices, with other items sold at market rates.
- **Direct Producer Programs:** "Straight from the Country" and "The Country Store" programs connect small rural producers with urban consumers, enhancing farmer income and offering affordable products.
- **Support for Urban Agriculture:** Initiatives include Community Gardens, School Gardens, Pro-Orchard Projects, and workshops on alternative planting methods.

Impact: From 1991 to 2010, extreme poverty in Belo Horizonte fell from 17.2% to 5.6%. By centralizing food activities, the city developed a government-led food system that complemented the market system. Approximately 300,000 people, or 12% of the population, benefit from these programs daily. By allocating just 2% of the city's annual budget, the city has eliminated hunger while also boosting the local economy and livelihoods of small-scale agricultural holdings in the region.





6. Conclusion

Food insecurity and unaffordability have emerged as significant challenges in British Columbia, affecting a large portion of the population.

1 in 3 workers in BC don't earn a Living Wage, meaning 740,000 British Columbians don't earn an income guarantees they can afford food for their families.

The rising cost of living has led to a dramatic increase in the number of food bank visits, with 2024 marking a record high number of individuals seeking assistance. The financial burden of food is becoming increasingly unsustainable, with many households spending a significant portion of their income on food while also having to make compromises in terms of food quality.

With nearly 23% of residents living in food-insecure households, the increasing costs of food are placing a growing strain on individuals and families, making it harder for many to access healthy, nutritious meals. This issue is compounded by systemic inequalities, with marginalized groups such as Indigenous, racialized, and disabled communities facing disproportionate barriers to food security.

This report underscores the urgent need for a comprehensive response at all levels of government to address these challenges through a rights-based approach. It highlights the importance of reducing food costs, raising wages, and implementing policies to support those struggling with food insecurity.

Providing adequate access to affordable, nutritious food is not just a matter of public health but also social justice, as it ensures that all individuals, regardless of income, background, or ability, can lead healthy, dignified lives.

The recommendations outlined in this report offer a pathway toward a future where food insecurity is reduced, and all people can easily afford the nourishment they need.

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