



Financial Barriers to Accessing Healthy Foods in Canada: A Report for Understanding the Landscape

In Canada, just like in the United States, many people are struggling to access healthy food due to rising prices, economic challenges, and geographic barriers. As a Canadian facing these challenges becomes more common, it's important to understand the specific issues Canadians are dealing with, especially when it comes to the cost of nutritious food. The following report outlines the main financial barriers, using recent data from multiple reports to highlight the scope of the problem.

1. Rising Food Costs and Increasing Financial Stress

- **Soaring Food Prices:** Over the past few years, food prices in Canada have been increasing significantly, placing an added financial burden on households. In 2024, the average cost of food rose by 5-7%, with essential healthy foods like fruits, vegetables, and proteins seeing the sharpest price hikes. This is particularly concerning for families and individuals with lower incomes, as these groups are already spending a larger portion of their budget on food.
- According to the **MNP Ltd. Consumer Debt Index (2024)**, half of Canadians are only \$200 away from being unable to meet their financial obligations, including paying for food. This shows just how close many Canadians are to being financially unstable, which makes affording healthy, nutritious food a significant challenge.

2. High Levels of Food Insecurity and Increased Dependence on Food Banks

- **Food Insecurity:** Food insecurity in Canada is a major issue, with approximately **4.5 million Canadians** (about 1 in 8 people) unable to consistently access enough nutritious food. This problem is particularly widespread among low-income families, single-parent households, and Indigenous communities, who face additional barriers to affording and accessing fresh food. According to **Statistics Canada's Household Food Insecurity Report (2021)**, food insecurity remains one of Canada's most pressing social issues.
- **Dependence on Food Banks:** The rise in food insecurity has led to an increasing reliance on food banks. In 2023, **Food Banks Canada's Hunger Count Report** revealed that over **1.3 million Canadians** accessed food banks in just one month, with many of these individuals being children. The growing demand for food banks is directly tied to the rising costs of living and the inability of many Canadians to afford healthy food.



3. Geographic Barriers: Northern and Remote Communities Struggling to Access Affordable Healthy Food

- **Remote and Northern Areas:** One of the most unique challenges in Canada is the high cost of food in remote, northern, and Indigenous communities. These areas experience "food deserts," where residents often cannot access fresh, nutritious food because grocery stores are limited and food must be shipped long distances, leading to extremely high prices. In some northern and Indigenous communities, healthy foods like fresh produce and meats can cost **50% more** than in southern regions. This makes it very difficult for people in these areas to afford balanced, nutritious diets.
- **Challenges in Urban Areas:** While food deserts are more pronounced in rural and northern areas, they also exist in urban centers. Many low-income urban neighborhoods lack access to full-service grocery stores and are instead served by convenience stores that primarily sell processed, unhealthy foods. This further limits residents' ability to purchase fresh and healthy options, contributing to poor diet choices and, in turn, to higher rates of chronic illness.

4. Economic Pressures: Job Insecurity and High Living Costs

- **Unemployment and Low-Wage Jobs:** Although Canada's unemployment rate was around **5.5%** in 2024, many Canadians are still underemployed, working in part-time or low-wage jobs that don't provide enough income to cover the rising cost of living. Many Canadians face financial stress because their jobs don't offer the stability or pay needed to meet basic needs, including purchasing healthy food.
- **Inflation and Living Costs:** Rising inflation and the high costs of housing, childcare, and transportation are squeezing household budgets across Canada. This financial strain means that many individuals and families are unable to prioritize healthy food, instead opting for cheaper, less nutritious alternatives. **The Conference Board of Canada** highlighted that even though wages have increased slightly, they are not keeping pace with the growing cost of living.

5. The Risk of an Economic Downturn: More Financial Struggles Ahead

- **Economic Downturn and Recession:** Experts are warning that Canada could face a potential recession in the coming months, which would add to the financial burdens already being felt by many Canadians. As the economy slows, job losses may rise, and inflation could continue to drive up the cost of living. According to **The Conference Board of Canada's Economic Outlook (2024)**, if Canada enters a recession, food insecurity and financial struggles could become even worse.



- **Rising Debt:** Canadians are also grappling with high levels of personal debt, which makes it even harder for them to afford basic needs. **Statistics Canada** reports that consumer debt in Canada has hit record levels. When paying off debt takes priority, many Canadians are forced to cut back on spending for healthy food, leading to poor diet choices and a cycle of food insecurity.

Conclusion: Similar Challenges to the U.S. Landscape

As we can see, Canadians face many of the same challenges as Americans when it comes to the financial barriers to accessing healthy foods. From soaring food prices and rising food insecurity to geographic barriers in remote communities, the financial struggles faced by Canadians are similar to those experienced in the U.S. While both countries have unique characteristics, particularly in terms of remote and northern communities, the overarching theme is clear: economic pressures and high food costs are making it harder for people to access the healthy food they need.

These issues highlight the urgent need for both local and national solutions that can address food insecurity and the growing financial strain faced by Canadian households. The use of food banks is growing, while more people are turning to low-cost and often unhealthy alternatives. Both governments and communities need to focus on making healthy food more accessible and affordable to help reduce the growing crisis of food insecurity across the country.

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