



The cost of eating in BC

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Do you know how much you spend in an average month for food? If not, chances are you are doing pretty well financially. For

many British Columbians, that is certainly not the case. For an average family of four (two adults, two children) in BC, it costs about \$715 a month to purchase a healthy food basket. That is the average. In the Vancouver Coastal Health region, it is \$796; and the low is \$680 in the Interior Health region.

Each year since 2000, dietitians working in public health have priced a basket of food at grocery stores around the province. This year (2007) they collected prices at 128 grocery stores using the National Nutritious Food Basket which is based on Canada's Food Guide. The food basket includes 66 basic foods that require food preparation. It does not include take-out or restaurant meals and does not account for any special dietary needs. It also excludes non-food items such as personal care or household supplies that often go into the grocery basket.

Not having enough good, nutritious food can lead to many problems — physical, mental, and social — for those experiencing the problem. For that reason, we look at those surviving (or not) on lower incomes. Yes, that includes people pushed to rely on income assistance, but it also includes a surprising number of those with jobs. Using data from food banks in the province, we know that slightly more than half of those using food banks rely on income assistance; the second most common source of income is employment, at 13.4%.

Shelter costs in Canada should account for about a third of a family's income. Specifically, a family with

one wage earner and an average income would spend about 33% of their income on shelter. But, that same family on income assistance would need to spend double that, leaving little for food, clothing and other essentials. When more than 30% of a household's income is spent on rent, the ability to make healthy and preventative choices such as good quality homes in neighbourhoods of choice, nutritious foods and regular exercise and recreation becomes rather difficult to maintain, if not entirely impossible.

“So, get a job, already!” We hear (shouted from the back of the room). That is always a good strategy, however, a family with one earner in a low-wage job (\$11 an hour) would need to spend almost half (49%) of their income to shelter, well above the target 30%.

“Then food must be too expensive,” is the next rational cry. But the cost of food is not the issue. A family with average income would use about 17% of their income to buy food, in line with the target 15% share food should take. The family on assistance needs to spend 42% of their income; the low-wage job family would use 31% for the food basket. Clearly, there

simply is not enough money to buy sufficient healthy food.

As individuals, what can we do to improve this? Start by understanding the problem. Consider your own situation: could you afford the food basket if you were in their shoes? We can support

coop and low-cost housing projects. We can get political about eliminating poverty. How about writing a letter to your MLA and asking for fair income assistance rates, a higher minimum wage and affordable housing? Time to fire up the word processor, I think.

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