

The Poor Still Pay More: Challenges Low Income Families Face in Consuming a Nutritious Diet

What is this research about?

This research addresses the challenges low-income families face when accessing and affording a nutritious diet in Ontario. It discusses low-income households' consumption of a low quality diet as a result of increasing food prices, meager social assistance benefits and a shortage of food retailers in low-income neighbourhoods.



What you need to know?

Food and proper nutrition are critical for a functioning society and a healthy work force. A healthy labour force leads to higher life expectancy, higher labour productivity, lower health costs, and an overall higher standard of wellbeing. Food prices, in Ontario, have been increasing at a faster rate than

social assistance benefits, forcing recipients to spend a greater portion of their allowance on food. Today, many Ontarians face poverty and hunger, and are forced to use food banks to meet their nutritional needs. However, food banks are not a permanent solution to poverty and hunger.

KEYWORDS

low-income families, nutrition, diet, health, food

Summary Date: April 2013

ARTICLE SOURCE

Milway, J., Chan, K., Stapleton, J., & Cook, B. (2010). *The poor still pay more: Challenges low income families face in consuming a nutritious diet* by the Institute for Competitiveness & Prosperity, Toronto Public Health & Open Policy Ontario.

What did the researchers do?

The researchers relied on past studies regarding the obstacles faced by low-income households when attempting to purchase healthy foods in Ontario. They studied social assistance benefit rates, types and numbers of food retailers in low-income neighbourhoods and the

nutritional value of the foods offered. They also looked at the relationship between a nutritious diet and quality of life, and their effects on society as a whole.



What did the researchers find?

The researchers found that at least one in ten Toronto households are not able to afford a healthy diet. Because rent is not flexible, people often compromise other life necessities to meet their shelter needs. They found that the prices of certain foods such as meat, bakery and dairy products have outpaced inflation more than others. Unfortunately for those strug-

gling to put these items on their table, these foods make up 60% of the recommended daily serving for a healthy diet. The researchers also found food affordability to be the most troublesome for single people on social assistance. Unlike the improvements in benefits for single parent households through the Ontario Child Benefit, the Canadian Child Tax Benefit and the Universal Child Care Benefit, single persons' social assistance benefits have not improved. Based on Health

Canada's National Nutritious Food Basket, a single person on social assistance must spend 34% of their income to receive a nutritious diet. The researchers also note that there are limited food retailers providing quality unprocessed foods and fresh fruits and vegetables in low-income neighbourhoods. Therefore, these residents must rely more on corner stores for food, where prices are higher and fresh fruit and vegetables are limited.

HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?

This research can be used to advocate, as a short-term solution, for an increase in social assistance benefits. More effectively, the researchers suggest separating the housing benefit from social assistance such that it will not only free up more money for food, but also be accessible to the working poor who are currently not eligible to receive it. Relaxing zoning restrictions and easing taxing regulations on commercial property taxes are other suggestions to provide incentive for grocery chains (who can offer quality foods at lower prices than the existing corner stores) to set up shop in low-income neighbourhoods. The research can also be used to make the case for ending supply management as an element of agriculture policy in Canada. These policies result in higher food prices which disproportionately affect low income families.

ABOUT THE RESEARCHER

James Milway

is currently the Chancellor of Temporal Affairs at Archdiocese of Toronto. He served



as Executive Director of the Institute for Competitiveness and Prosperity for four years and has over thirty years of business and public policy experience.