

# If You're Struggling in Ontario, You're On Your Own

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Food insecurity in Ontario is no accident. It is the result of deliberate policy choices that prioritize profit over people. Behind every food bank line, every skipped meal, and every underpaid worker lies a clear message from those in power: if you're struggling, you're on your own.

This isn't just my analysis; it's also my lived experience. As someone who has accessed charitable services and now advocates for systemic change as a fundraiser, poverty reduction advocate, and board member of the Ontario Living Wage Network (OLWN), I have seen firsthand the

devastation caused by systemic neglect. This neglect works [Against the People](#). Ontario's social safety net is not just inadequate – it's been systematically eroded, leaving countless families to fend for themselves.

Since coming to power in 2018, Doug Ford has kept social assistance rates and wages low. Ontario's general minimum wage at \$17.20 per hour may look like progress on paper, but it leaves full-time workers earning just \$33,500 annually. In Toronto, that is \$5,000 below the [disposable income](#) needed to live above Canada's Official Poverty Line.

Social assistance rates like those offered through the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) remain woefully inadequate, having lost some 16% of their [purchasing power](#). In Toronto, these rates leave recipients \$12,000 to \$19,000 below Ontario's Deep Poverty Line. Meanwhile, the Ontario Conservative government's [Poverty Reduction Strategy](#) has been likened to [social murder](#).

Worse, the OLWN's [latest data](#) shows that the living wage in the Greater Toronto Area is now \$26 per hour, translating to an annual shortfall of \$17,200 for minimum wage workers. A [living wage](#), as calculated by the OLWN, reflects the actual costs of living – covering essentials like housing, food, childcare, and transportation. It enables families not just to survive but to thrive. The benefits extend beyond workers. Certified living wage employers in Ontario report reduced turnover, higher morale, and improved productivity. History also shows that higher wages do not harm the economy. After Ontario raised the minimum wage to \$14 in 2018, employment rose by 2.8% the following year, and racialized wage gaps, particularly for Black women, [narrowed significantly](#). Critics claim higher wages hurt small businesses, but nearly half of Ontario's minimum wage workers are employed by large corporations with over [500 employees](#)—companies well-equipped to absorb the costs, particularly at a time of [record profits](#). Shockingly, almost [two-thirds of food-insecure households](#) in Canada rely primarily on employment income, showing how low wages directly fuel food insecurity.



The Ford government has abdicated its responsibility to alleviate poverty and thus put the onus of addressing hunger on charities and corporations. Non-profits, while critical in providing immediate relief, are often forced to compete for resources and rely on donations. After years of high inflation and a growing cost-of-living crisis, this is an increasingly insurmountable task.

Corporate partnerships further complicate the issue. Grocers, for instance, donate unsellable food to organizations, thus avoiding a [per-pound garbage pick-up fee](#). This cycle perpetuates a system where dignity is secondary to convenience, leaving the root causes of hunger to persist.

Non-profits often have no choice but to accept subpar donations, fearing they will be passed over for future donations. This leaves organizations scrambling to provide temporary relief while the root causes of the affordability crisis – low waged work, inequality, government indifference– are left unchallenged.

The solution is clear: the Ontario government needs to implement radical increases to social assistance rates and minimum wages. Hunger in a province as wealthy as Ontario is a moral failure, as much as it is a political and economic one. We need bold action: income indexed to inflation, strengthened labour protections, expanded union rights, increased social assistance programs, and corporations that are held accountable for fair wages and ethical practices.

As someone who has lived these realities and now works to drive change, I know we can do better. By bridging the gap between minimum and living wages and reimagining our approach to poverty reduction, we can create a province where, at a minimum, everyone has enough to eat. □

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#### About Perspectives

Perspectives are concise opinion pieces meant to spark public dialogue and encourage new ways of thinking on a range of work and labour related issues. These articles are meant to inform and promote worker perspectives in a manner that challenges the current state of knowledge in a particular field.

#### About the Centre

The Global Labour Research Centre confronts the major challenges and injustices encountered by workers, families and communities within the global economy. The GLRC engages in the study of work, employment and labour, organizing its activities around: the impact of the changing nature of work and employment on labour rights; interrelationships between migration, citizenship and work; gender and race relations in work and labour movements; the revitalization of workers’ movements; and work and health. The GLRC is a hub for pan-university collaboration with a community engagement model that encompasses a range of labour and community partners.