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**CANADIANS ARE GETTING POORER AT AN ALARMING RATE**

By Sylvain Charlebois  
 The high cost of living is affecting Canadians' ability to access healthy food

sector is currently the public service, while private investments have stalled, primarily due to higher interest rates.

Sylvain Charlebois Canada appears to be a "trading-down" market, a trend that may persist for some time. Recent data from Statistics Canada on the food retail and service industries and fresh GDP figures paint a dismal picture, especially for those looking to attract more food companies or grocers to our country.

The gap in GDP per capita between Canada and the U.S. has widened by 106 percent since 2015, and this trend shows no signs of reversing. In other words, despite our growing population, Canada is becoming poorer, not richer. cost of living healthy food

Our population grew by over three percent last year, yet our GDP increased by less than one percent. While other industrialized economies, such as France and Germany, are experiencing worse economic headwinds, Canada's economy is highly integrated with the United States, the world's most robust economy at present.

For those in the food business, this is certainly not good news. Statistics Canada's reports on food and service sales confirm that consumers are less wealthy while facing higher food and menu prices. As of January 2024, the average Canadian spends \$248 a month on food retail sales per capita, down from \$258 in January 2023 to \$282 in February 2017. These figures are all in real dollars, which makes the situation even worse.

Despite our proximity to this economic superpower, the benefits of our geography seem to have stalled. The most alarming aspect of the January GDP numbers is that Canada's hottest economic

Based on Canada's Food Price Report 2024, an individual's monthly expenditure for a healthy diet should be \$339. Again, the current average monthly spending is \$248.



Until July 2021, Canadians spent more on average than the desired budget to support a healthy diet. Since then, it has clearly been a challenge.

cery discounters. Per capita, food expenditures in our country have never been as low as they are now.

Canadians are either wasting less or finding alternative ways to source food outside conventional channels like grocery stores, such as dollar stores and non-traditional gro-

One might think that grocers are struggling with this situation, but they are readjusting their strategies and putting more pressure on suppliers with higher fees and lower prices. These are perfect con-

ditions for a potential price war later this year, so don't be surprised if it happens.

The data on food service provides a different perspective. On average, Canadians spent \$169 at restaurants in January, about the same as last year and an increase from \$149 in January 2018. However, these sums are in real dollars. The current retail/service split in Canada is that about 41 percent of all money spent on food is at restaurants, compared to a split closer to 54 percent in the U.S., favouring food service. Given the market's frugality, it's surprising to witness such substantial spending at restaurants, where you usually get less value for your money.

The days of uncertainty regarding the balance between working from home and working away from home are long gone. The food economy has, for all intents and purposes, normalized. Food inflation is causing Canadians to spend less at grocery stores, which may seem counterintuitive, but this is what the data is telling us.

Currently, about 18 percent of all retail dollars are devoted to food, compared to 21 percent in 2017.

Simply put, the cost of living is a problem for many Canadian households, and trading down is much easier with food. People may be "ordering in" more often to avoid tips and overpriced beverages, for example.

All of this is based on our trust in Statistics Canada, which may not be all that strong. However, Statistics Canada is merely an indicator, and Canadians have no other way to know what is really going on out there other than reading reports from the federal agency. Regardless of how we interpret the data, the numbers are not encouraging.

This is what happens when our population grows, but our collective economic wealth stagnates.

Dr. Sylvain Charlebois is senior director of the agri-food analytics lab and a professor in food distribution and policy at Dalhousie University.

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**DURHAM REGION FINDING NEW WAYS TO TAKE MORE MONEY OUT OF YOUR POCKET**

DURHAM - It is shameful for The Regional Municipality of Durham to be looking for more ways to get money out of taxpayers.

payers at large. The Durham Region can charge you what they want, when they want.

Earlier this year the region announce a huge tax increase with little or no promise to improve the quality of life for citizens.

The region has announced a 7.5 per cent rise in its portion of the 2024 property tax on residents as well as a 7.4 per cent increase in water and sewer charges.

Just this week. The Regional Municipality of Durham has notified that effective May 1, 2024, the user fee at its waste facilities is being increased.

This is outrageous. The Region appears to have no accountability and no real interest in getting public input into such important matters.

A non-published notice and a forced charge without public consultation. What does this mean for consumer and tax-

A municipal notice said minimum user fee for general residential and commercial garbage waste will increase

from \$5 per load to \$7 per load for loads up to 40 kilograms (88 pounds). This has many wondering where the monies from the general 7.5 tax increase is going.

For every eight kilograms greater than 40 kilograms, the fee will increase from \$1 to \$1.40. The flat rate for loads weighing 1,000 kilograms (metric tonne) or more will increase from \$125 to \$175 per 1,000 kilograms.

In addition, fees for fill materials and mixed loads containing fill materials will increase from \$250 to \$375 per 1,000 kilograms.

This is the first increase in fees since 2016, the notice said.

It said the fee increases were approved by Durham Regional Council as part of the 2024 budget, and to help meet rising costs from contracted services while ensuring customer service standards continue to be met. Only loads containing chargeable materials, (including mixed loads containing both free and chargeable materials), will be subject to the fee increases. Loads that only contain the following items are free:

- bulky white polystyrene
- electronic waste

household hazardous waste (a maximum of 50 litres or 25 cans per vehicle)  
 plastic signs  
 tires (a maximum of 10 tires per vehicle).

The Region under the Ontario Municipal Act are obliged to publish these types of notices. So far they have been reluctant to publish any notices in the local newspaper and instead are posting them on electronic formats.

Formats that many citizens never look at or check into it. This unfair approach to notifying the public is not only in contravention of the Provincial

Act but also not fair. As it stands the Region has too much power through the municipalities.

Blaire Coons, said. "I can barely make it as it is. The new tax increase by the Region is just another example of how little these politicians think of the average person struggling.

I propose that if the politicians want to increase our taxes by 7.5%, that the politicians show true leadership and cut their pay by the same amount. You will soon see no more tax increases to pay for their poor judgement. I can't afford to make mistakes then ask my boss to pay for them."