



UNDERSTANDING FOOD INSECURITY

Why families go hungry in an affluent society

Just a developing country problem? Think again...

FOOD INSECURITY is that constant feeling of anxiety that comes from trying to provide enough food for yourself or your family.

The idea that food insecurity exists in an affluent nation like Australia might sound a bit far fetched. Think again:

- in NSW, 6.2 per cent of households had 'run out of food and could not afford to buy more' in the last 12 months (NSW Child Health Survey 2001); the prevalence of food insecurity is even higher in poorer areas.

A 2004 household survey of three low-income suburbs in South West Sydney found:

- 21.9 per cent of households experienced food insecurity
- 30 per cent of households with children were food insecure
- 45 per cent of single parent households were food insecure.

Food insecurity might include episodes of food shortage or constantly feeling hunger.

The situation is caused by many factors, but the main factor is living on or below the poverty line.

When we remember that single parent and two-person households make up a growing portion of Australia's families, statistics such as these make us think a little harder about the future.

Community enterprise for food security: citizens build a raised vegetable garden accessible to disabled people living in a residential centre. The vegetables are for use in the centre's kitchen. The project increased the centre's self-reliance and the nutritional health of residents.



Does food insecurity matter?

In a country like Australia — yes, it does. It is not easy to feel good about our achievements when people go without a basic necessity of life such as food.

Let's think about this:

- adequate nutrition is a fundamental human right — that is, all of us should have guaranteed access to enough good quality food so that we can care for our families
- food insecurity is associated with poor physical and mental health and lack of energy; this places additional burdens on an already-strained public health system
- hungry children find it harder to concentrate, leading to poor educational outcomes
- food insecurity contributes to lifelong inequality and can increase social isolation
- food insecurity and poverty are associated with overweight and obesity — where we live and work has a major impact on food choices and it is not just a lifestyle issue.

Local initiatives

Faced with food insecurity and a lack of a sense of community, people are starting to develop innovative, local solutions:

- school breakfast programs
- community cafes
- food co-ops
- food distribution networks
- local production of fruit and vegetables
- community gardens, school gardens
- food banks and other bulk-buy schemes
- home delivery services.

Providing assistance to ensure that people can access all their entitlements and creating opportunities to share nutrition information and skills are moves in a positive direction.

Improving infrastructure

- ensuring adequate food storage and cooking facilities for those in poor-quality housing
- providing cheap/free public transport to food outlets
- influencing planning decisions and the location of food outlets in new and existing suburbs.

Food systems and policy

Food security has been listed as one of the top five priorities in the national and state health department's nutrition policy. It is included in many local government plans, notably in Victoria.

Further work on food systems and policy development could include:

- co-ordinated advocacy for food equity - for example, the Sydney Food Fairness Alliance
- limiting junk food advertising and promoting fruit and vegetables
- land-use policies that sustain urban agriculture
- access to locally-grown, fresh foods (also good for the environment)
- advocacy for cross-government action at local, state and federal levels to improve food security
- increasing community awareness of problems associated with food security
- advocacy for a living wage and benefits and affordable housing
- advocacy for education and employment initiatives.

Economic & policy issues

- welfare benefits on or below poverty line
- changes in welfare and industrial relations
- low-paid, casual, insecure employment
- lack of cross-government policy on food security
- no mechanism to assess impact on food security of policy change
- the trend away from public services bringing increased pressure on households.

Globalised food systems

- globalised food systems controlled by transnational processing and trading companies
- dominance of supermarkets focused on profits and returns to shareholders
- increasing production of processed foods, fast foods, sugar-rich foods
- very little advertising for healthy food choices compared to junk foods - influences food choices.

FACTORS INFLUENCING ACCESS TO FOOD

Supply & access in neighbourhoods - local issues affect access to affordable, healthy foods:

- poorer areas have more fast food outlets and fewer fresh food and grocery shops
- available food is often poor quality, less variety, higher prices
- culturally accepted foods may not be available.

Lack of resources, capacity = vulnerable households:

- face competing demand on limited funds
- inadequate facilities to store and prepare food
- unpaid bills lead to cutting off gas and electricity
- disabled and low-income people may have difficulty getting to shops
- lack of skills and knowledge of food preparation
- long hours of work and multiple jobs reduce time available to prepare food.



Local solution to food insecurity: Sydney's Food Distribution Network delivers food to residents unable to shop for themselves

Food security has been listed as one of the top five priorities in the national and state health department's nutrition policy.

School breakfast program

I have been involved in the establishment of a breakfast program at Kingswood Park Public School in Penrith local government area, an initiative of the local area health service (Sydney West) and Penrith Council. The school has children from a lower socioeconomic demographic.

When we brought the teachers and parents together, one of the issues that was mentioned by teachers was the number of children who come to school without food or breakfast.

The breakfast program was aimed at these children. It has been running since September 2005 with approximately 20 children attending every day. The children are served cereal and toast by volunteers. Year six students assist in serving and cleaning up. Food is donated by local businesses and is collected by a roster of volunteers.

The school principal noted that there are now fewer suspensions and more-respectful behaviour in the playground. Friendships have formed among the volunteers.

*Monique Desmarchelier , Healthy People Partnership Officer,
Penrith City Council*

Community cafe

In Villawood, a community café run by local residents serves a healthy, hot meal once a week to 35-40 local people, many of whom are homeless or have mental health and substance abuse problems.

A strong community spirit has grown and customers take part in regular fundraising for the café.

Sources of information on FOOD SECURITY:

Food Security Options Paper 2003:

NSW Centre for Public Health Nutrition/ NSW Department of Health; download from www.cphn.biochem.usyd.edu.au

Penrith Food Project Triennial Report:

NSW Centre for Public Health Nutrition; download from www.cphn.biochem.usyd.edu.au

Food security initiatives in Victoria:

www.vichealth.vic.gov.au

Toronto Food Policy Council:

www.city.toronto.on.ca/health/tfpc

THE FOOD BARN — Hawkesbury district NSW

Food security for low income families through the Food for All Project

The *Food for All Project* targets food security and distribution through *The Food Barn*, a food outlet operated by volunteers and employing a manager. The Food Barn is located at South Windsor Baptist Church.

Constructed largely by volunteers using recycled materials and looking like a conventional store, the Food Barn cooperative serves up to 1000 people, who receive benefits, a month, offering prices averaging 12 per cent less than local supermarkets. Fresh food and vegetables are sourced from local growers and cooking classes for people on a limited budget are offered. Discounts for pensioners and health card holders and a voucher exchange system are available.

Lynne Saville, Hawkesbury District Health Service



Creative Commons licence

www.creativecommons.org
Permission to reproduce and redistribute this discussion sheet for non-profit purposes is granted providing content is not changed and the Sydney Food Fairness Alliance is credited as the source. Reproduction and distribution must be under the same Creative Commons licence and carry this notice.