

Aotearoa, land of the long wide bare cupboard

Part 4: Food Insecurity in New Zealand

This paper focuses on the high rates of Māori food insecurity and argues that several different strategies must be implemented to address the impact of food insecurity for tamariki Māori.

An outbreak of hunger: the spread of food insecurity in a time of Covid-19

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Why do one in four tamariki Māori live in food-insecure households?

In 2015/16 it was estimated:

- Over one third (38.8%) of children in food insecure households were Māori¹; and
- Over one in four (28.6%) tamariki Māori lived in food-insecure households. This was estimated to be 68,000 children¹.

As noted by the Ministry of Health, the relatively high rate of tamariki Māori living in food-insecure households, could be explained by Māori households being over-represented in low income groups, and being among households with more children.

But that does not get to the heart of the issue. That Māori experience food-insecurity is not new. It has been reported on in National Nutrition surveys since 1997²⁻⁴. Historically, Māori food insecurity has been linked to New Zealand's history of colonisation. However, the recent rise in food insecurity can also be attributed to neo-liberal economic policies introduced in the late 1980s and 1990s, that have resulted in income inequity and high levels of poverty⁵.

Today the income differences between Māori and non-Māori are stark. A 2018 report by BERL economists found incomes for Māori aged 40 to 60 years old averaged NZ\$10,000 less per year than non-Māori in the same age group. In total, the Māori population earned \$2.6 billion per year less than they would if Māori all earned the average income for their age group⁶. A lower rate of income for hours worked, rather than fewer hours worked by Māori, explained the differences in income.

This income inequity means that about one quarter of tamariki Māori are growing up with inadequate nutrition, due to the higher costs of healthy food. As highlighted in Part 3 of this series, this translates to lower intakes of fruits and vegetables, and higher intakes of fast food and fizzy drinks⁷. While it seems counterintuitive that the experience of food insecurity can lead to excess weight gain, energy dense foods are cheap and easy to access, and if a child lives through a period of hunger, then they may be more likely to fill up on unhealthy foods⁷. This impacts hauora, through impacting growth and development, learning and behavior, and can have long-term consequences on physical and mental health^{8,9}.

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Māori experiences of food insecurity

In part 2 of this series, Dr Rebekah Graham detailed the experiences of a range of families living with inadequate money for food. To add to this, there are some studies that have focused on the specific experiences of Māori living with food insecurity. These are discussed below.

Beavis et al, conducted in an in-depth study with four Māori households and found that for Māori, food insecurity negatively impacted on mothers with some reporting skipping meals in order to prioritise the needs of their tamariki⁵. Our research also described how food insecurity affected events, for example, limiting birthday parties for tamariki. Some adults described the experience of food insecurity in childhood impacted on eating behaviours throughout life with a tendency to 'fill up' when food was available. Households in this study talked about their strategies to manage on tight budgets, including gardening, and relying on extended whānau networks for support, however the experience of food insecurity was an ongoing daily stress⁵.

Tapera et al, described the experiences of five Māori and two Pacific grandparents looking after their mokopuna¹⁰. The grandparents described financial struggles they faced as they tried to live on their pensions and support the infants and young children in their care. They noted the impact of the rising cost of food, and described tight budgeting strategies such as purchasing cheap food in bulk and freezing. They also described going without food, including meat, in order to prioritise food for their mokopuna¹⁰. In this study, all of these grandparents had gardening knowledge and gardens to some degree in order to provide fresh vegetables. All the grandparents commented on the relative high cost of healthy food, and the plethora of easily available cheap takeaway outlets in the low-income suburbs in which they lived. For these grandparents, being unable to provide sufficient food created feelings of guilt, shame, sadness, anger and distress. Some hid their financial and food insecurity from whānau.

Finally, the 'A Better Start-E Tipu E Rea' Science challenge, included research with five focus groups made up of 32 Māori and 5 Pasifika parents and caregivers of children ages 6 months to 5 years¹¹. The focus groups discussed the factors influencing decisions related to the provision of healthy food for tamariki. For these parents, insufficient money was a major factor in decisions about what food to provide. Other factors that interacted with cost were: time, the number of people to feed, food preferences and allergies. This study found that the urban participants were unlikely to have a garden, due to many factors including insecure housing tenure, as well as not having

the time and resources required to garden.

The rhetoric and the racism

To solve the problem of food insecurity, politicians and media commentators regularly suggest various solutions, often based on anecdotes rather than evidence. A recent example of this was the National party spokesperson for Māori development Joanne Hayes suggesting that a reduction in benefit levels for Māori was necessary, as Māori needed 'to become more resourceful with what they have and learn how to grow vegetables'¹².

However, as outlined in the previous section, and by other authors in this series, Māori who experience food insecurity are already resourceful. Whānau are already gardening or if they are not, it is often because of insecure housing tenure. After all, there is little point putting in a vegetable patch when you have a temporary housing situation. Furthermore, people are already sharing kai, and parents (especially mothers) are already going without kai, in order to prioritise the needs of their tamariki. Benefit cuts would only increase the burden on whānau and exacerbate existing stress, which is likely to manifest in increased negative mental health statistics. Suggestions like these are clearly not the answer to food insecurity.

There is also the problem of racism in public support for any possible solutions. In 2013, a proposed Breakfast in Schools programme resulted in racist cartoons that appeared in the Christchurch Press and the Marlborough Express newspapers. The cartoons stereotyped poverty as being the result of gambling, drinking, smoking and overspending. Therefore, according to the narrative inherent in the cartoons, if people (especially non-white people) experienced food insecurity it was, 'all their own fault'.

The human right to food

Inequitable Māori health outcomes, including food insecurity, can be framed as a breach of human rights.¹³

The right to food is a human right first declared in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948¹⁴ and re-affirmed in the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)¹⁵. The Aotearoa Human Rights Lawyers Association have advocated for New Zealand to consider ICESCR rights in New Zealand's Human Rights Law¹⁶ and that the Human Rights Commission be given greater scope and resource to explore pathways to strengthen the right to food.

It is not acceptable in a country that prides itself to have been founded on a Treaty partnership with its indigenous

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citizens, that one in four indigenous children are growing up without adequate food.

We need action

**A marker of institutional racism is inaction in the face of need¹⁷.
Tamariki need healthy food - now. We need action.**

Other authors in this series have argued for a range of solutions including:

- A national food strategy to address food poverty;⁸
- The cost of healthy food to be reduced;⁷
- Setting benefits and subsidies to include sufficient amounts for food;
- Ensuring social services treat people humanely; and
- Requiring businesses to adopt a 'living wage'.⁹

The current government is also piloting a food in schools programme to introduce school food lunches in some schools.

We need to implement all these strategies to address the impact of food insecurity for tamariki Māori.

17. Jones C. Levels of racism: a theoretic framework and a gardener's tale. *American Journal of Public Health*. 2000;90:1212-5.

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