

Aotearoa, land of the long wide bare cupboard

Part 5: Food Insecurity in New Zealand

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Food Insecurity among Young People in New Zealand

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Food insecurity affects the health and wellbeing of young people in New Zealand

Having easy access to an adequate supply of nutritious foods is critical to the healthy development of children and adolescents. For adolescents specifically, food insecurity may present unique difficulties and challenges that will persist as they move through adulthood.

Yet, young people are not commonly asked about issues of food insecurity directly. This is important as young people are able to access food in places other than their family home and young people's experiences may be different to those of their parents.

This paper looks at the data collected in the Youth2000 national surveys¹. These surveys collected information from young people in New Zealand about aspects of their health and wellbeing, including concerns about household food insecurity. Findings from these data highlight the growing concern of food insecurity among young people in New Zealand overtime and that food insecurity may affect the wellbeing of young people across a wide range of indicators^{2,3}.

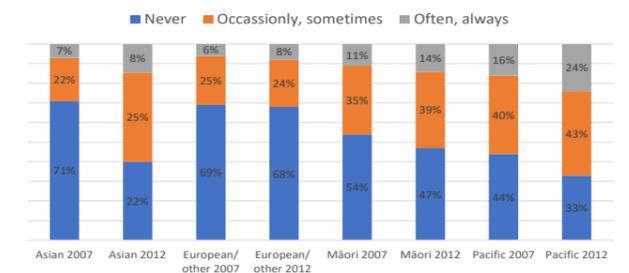
Food insecurity among young people is common and worsening overtime

In 2012, more than 40 percent of secondary school students in New Zealand reported that their parents, or the people who act as their parents, worried about not having enough money to buy food (33 percent occasionally/ sometimes and 11 percent often/

always). This was a marked increase from 2007 where approximately one-third of young people reported food insecurity (28 percent and 8 percent, respectively).

These increases were reported across all ethnic groups, though it is notable that Pacific young people and Māori young people reported the highest levels of food insecurity (Figure 1). In 2012, more than half of Māori young people and two-thirds of Pacific young people reported concerns about household food insecurity.

Figure 1. Changes in food insecurity among New Zealand adolescents between 2007 and 2012.



Food insecurity is associated with poor nutrition among young people

Living with food insecurity makes it difficult for young people to eat well and contributes to excess weight gain. In New Zealand, adolescents who live with food insecurity:

- eat fewer fruits and vegetables;
- eat more snack foods and fast foods;

1. University of Auckland. National youth health and wellbeing surveys. Available online: <https://www.fmhs.auckland.ac.nz/en/faculty/adolescent-health-research-group/youth2000-national-youth-health-survey-series.html> (accessed on 7 June, 2020).
 2. Utter J, Izumi BT, Denny S, Fleming T, Clark T. Rising food security concerns among New Zealand adolescents and association with health and wellbeing. *Kaitiaki: New Zealand Journal of Social Sciences Online*. 2018;13(1):29-38.
 3. Utter J, Denny S, Robinson E, et al. Food Security Concerns Among Young People: Impact on Eating Behaviors and Weight Status. *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition*. 2012;7(1):101-111.

- skip meals;
- have fewer meals with their families; and
- experience a greater burden of overweight and obesity.

The negative impact that food insecurity may have on poor nutrition is significant as the long-term impact of poor nutrition during adolescence persists through adulthood and may impact the next generation. Young people who miss out on the opportunity to eat regular meals and share meals with their families may find it difficult to learn about basic food-related life skills and social customs within their families.

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Food Insecurity is associated with poorer mental health and education

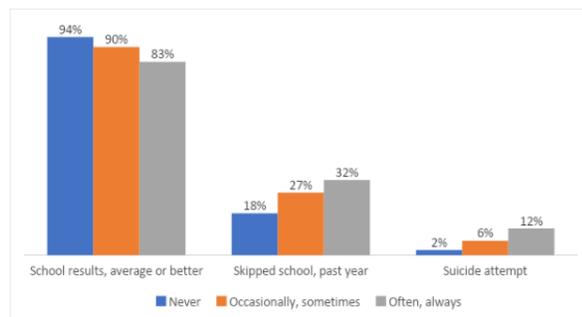
Food insecurity is associated with a range of indicators of health and education for young people in New Zealand.

Young people reporting concerns with food insecurity:

- are more likely to miss school;
- report lower school results;
- report greater depressive symptoms and lower emotional wellbeing; and
- are more likely to have made a suicide attempt in the past year (Figure 2).

When these differences were tested in statistical models that account for the socio-demographic characteristics of the students (e.g. age, sex, ethnicity, economic indicators), food insecurity remained as a significant risk to the education and wellbeing of young people.

Figure 2. Food insecurity and indicators of student education and wellbeing



Ensuring food security among adolescents

Insufficient access to an adequate and nutritious food supply for adolescents has a wide range of negative effects on their nutritional and emotional wellbeing and educational attainment. Undoubtedly, the effects of food insecurity during adolescence are felt long into adulthood.

Apart from the Youth2000 surveys, little is known about how young people experience food insecurity in New Zealand. Traditionally, household food insecurity is measured by parental reports of household resources for food. However, it is not always possible to access parents (particularly in youth-oriented research) and so researchers are reliant on adolescent reports of family experiences.



Moreover, within-family distribution of resources (including food) can vary and an adolescent's experience may differ from that of their parents. Similarly, adolescents can access food in other settings (e.g. schools) which are independent of their home. Understanding adolescent perspectives and experiences with relation to food insecurity will lead to better-informed research and interventions for this age group.

Finally, sharing food and meals with friends and family is part of everyday activity in the lives of young people, and is central to their wellbeing. The Youth2000 data has demonstrated that young people who are food secure and regularly share meals with their families have better indicators of health and emotional wellbeing. Given current concerns over rising levels of mental health problems among young people, addressing food insecurity should be a priority for policy makers and politicians.

Future initiatives to improve food security for young people should engage young people in their design and delivery and reach young people in the settings where they spend time. Specifically, providing healthy and nutritious meals to all young people at school is a logical and promising initiative. Similarly, ensuring young people have the opportunity to learn necessary food-skills (such as cooking, meal planning and gardening) has the potential to create a positive impact into adulthood. As such, supporting families with young people to cook and share meals at home offers unique opportunities for young people to engage positively with their families, eat better, and learn important life skills.

References

1. University of Auckland. National youth health and wellbeing surveys. Available online: <https://www.fmhs.auckland.ac.nz/en/faculty/adolescent-health-research-group/youth2000-national-youth-health-survey-series.html> (accessed on 7 June, 2020).
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