

Aotearoa, land of the long wide bare cupboard

Food Insecurity in New Zealand Part 2:

Living with hunger: How families manage
when things are tight

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Living with hunger: How families manage when things are tight

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Increasing numbers of New Zealand households are finding it harder and harder to afford enough, nutritious food for themselves and their families. As Emeritus Professor Elaine Rush noted in her piece *'Fat, famished or starved in a land of plenty?'* these households are experiencing food insecurity, food poverty, and hidden hunger.

Survey figures tell us that in 2008/09, 7.3 percent of New Zealanders were experiencing severe food insecurity, and 33 percent moderate food insecurity¹. The recent New Zealand Health Survey indicated that almost one in five children (19 percent) live in households with severe-to-moderate food insecurity.²



The University of Otago's 2018 Cost of Food Survey details the cost of meeting basic food and nutrition guidelines for health and well-being³. The rising cost for Auckland residents for a basic diet is shown below:

	2018 \$	2017 \$	2016 \$	2015 \$
Auckland				
Man	71	65	64	69
Woman	60	55	55	59
Adolescent Boy	74	68	67	72
Adolescent Girl	61	56	55	59
10 yr old	52	48	47	51
5 yr old	44	41	40	44
4 yr old	34	32	31	34
1 yr old	29	28	27	29

Figure 1: Estimated weekly costs for a basic diet.

Data from the Ministry of Social Development in their annual Household Incomes Report indicates that lower income households are finding it increasingly difficult to make ends meet⁴. Taken together these data indicate that more and more New Zealand households are living with food insecurity and poverty in a manner reminiscent of the turn-of-the-century Victorian slums:

"The diet... is obviously chosen for its cheapness, and is of the filling, stodgy kind. There is not enough of anything but bread. There is no variety. Nothing is considered but money"

Maud Pember Reeves
'Round about a pound a week', 1913.

Source: Dept. of Human Nutrition, Information Package for Users of the New Zealand Estimated Food Costs 2018 (Food Cost Survey 2018), in Food Cost Survey, L. Mainvil, Editor. 2018, University of Otago: Dunedin, NZ.

This paper details some of the realities and responses to hunger faced by everyday New Zealanders doing their best to get by on insufficient incomes.

In particular, it quotes from interviews conducted with people experiencing food insecurity in Hamilton and greater Waikato region.

Stretching funds, stretching food

In responding to the challenges associated with food poverty, people prioritise affordable staple items that require minimal cooking, minimal storage costs, are unlikely to spoil, and leave people feeling full and satisfied. These items include “2-minute noodles”, as well as budget bread, pasta and rice.

These pragmatic responses to feeding hungry bellies means that people’s diets, particularly parents, risk being constructed as nutritionally inadequate. However, when all you have is NZ\$25 for food for the week, purchasing food that will last is crucial.

In the image below, Lea*¹ makes her meagre funds stretch as much as possible, purchasing items that don’t require refrigeration and need minimal cooking, such as noodles, eggs, bread, UHT milk, and tinned fruit.



Figure 2: Weekly supermarket shop.

While these items fill up hungry bellies, they add little nutrition. In the case of Anna, cheap loaves of white bread from the store situated within walking distance filled her stomach and alleviated the worst of her hunger. However, the lack of adequate nutrition impacted on her ability to produce enough breast milk to adequately feed her baby, complicating an already difficult situation:

“[People] don’t understand. I can’t afford to go the supermarket ... it’s the dairy [convenience store] and one dollar loaves of bread for me ... I wasn’t eating enough really, to keep the milk going.” - Anna⁵

As Anna found, the absence of enough nutritious food to eat has other health consequences. The grim reality is that surviving on insufficient income requires purchasing cheaper, less nutritious foods. In the quotes below, participants mention prioritising cheap items that will allow constrained family budgets to stretch further:

“Bread as well. We’ll buy the cheapest.” - Daryl⁶

“That’s how I strategically minimise the cost - by going for the cheaper brands, for obvious reasons. There’s no point in going for the two dollar baked beans if I can get them for ninety five cents.” - Christina⁶

“You’ve got to buy what’s cheapest. I mean, if you’re faced with something that’s going to cost you five dollars and something that’s going to cost you three, then you’re going to have to get the thing that costs you three.” - Faye⁶

As well as minimising food costs, electricity is also a luxury that is rationed. Sometimes, people go without heating to save costs⁷. Some choose food items that require minimal storage and cooking costs - instant noodles and precooked meat pies are easily warmed using a kettle and/or a microwave, which costs much less than running an oven⁸. Buddy describes this below:

“I use the jug quite often, make myself a coffee. I put an egg in, boil the egg. So what I do is I’ll boil it up, the jug, for my coffee, boiling myself a couple of eggs... if I have to, I’ll put the toaster on. Because quite often [bread] is free” - Buddy⁹



Figure 3: Electric jug used for cooking

Source: Graham, R., et al., Nutritionism and the construction of ‘poor choices’ in families facing food insecurity. Journal of Health Psychology, 2016. online.

* Pseudonym. All names and quotes sourced from cited works

Source: Graham, R. and P. Atatoa Carr, Homelessness in Hamilton: Case Study Report (unpublished report). 2019, University of Waikato: Hamilton, NZ.

'Making do'

Parents do their best to 'make do' with the resources that they have. This means that children also have to 'make do' with whatever the parents can source, even when such foods are barely edible:

"And then [the puffed wheat] got like all gross and it like, went like hard and stale, and Mum was like, just keep eating it! Keep eating it! And it was like, oh, yuck."

- Ginny's daughter¹⁰

"My son...he don't [sic] like the meat that we cook up ... he'll just eat noodles. He'll live on that or Weetbix"

- Janine¹⁰

The absence of enough good food to eat spills over into family relationships, leaving parents and children alike stressed and anxious. Ginny¹¹ shared her concerns about her daughter's slide into disordered eating and worried a great deal about how best to address it. Daryl⁶ was similarly concerned for his daughter:

"She's not eating any other foods instead [of sandwiches] because we don't have the money to provide them. So she's going hungry ... that worries us. We have wondered if she's not really getting some of the foods she would like to be eating. We're managing with her. We're doing what we can."

- Daryl⁶

Sometimes these tensions spill over into arguments. It is hard to keep eating food that is barely edible, and that is insufficient for health and well-being – yet if there is not enough money, food choices are extremely limited. Lea describes how the absence of resources impacts on her relationship with her daughter:

"Sometimes we'll argue in the supermarket over food items. And I'm like, "no, we can't buy that, it's too expensive". And she [daughter] says, "Well I don't want to eat your crappy food"." - Lea¹¹

The stress of 'making do' adds to the emotional and mental load that parents face when there aren't resources to provide enough to eat. Below Faye remembers how difficult this was to get through:

"You know, it was worse then because we [referring to herself and her children's father] went without a lot to feed the kids. We were always hungry, and quite often so were they. Looking back on it, it was really stressful and it went on for quite a long time" - Faye⁶

For families facing food insecurity and poverty, parents go without food and essential items long before children do^{7,10,12}. The absence of enough to eat adds an additional layer of physical hardship to what is already a highly challenging time:

"If there was only, just say a little bit of meat of something and there was just enough to feed the kids, then I wouldn't eat, I'd go without eating. Just because I'd rather them be fed." - Julye¹¹

"I have sleeping pills because they help me. They take the edge off so that I can go to sleep. Sometimes I've taken extra and just gone to bed for the weekend to sleep the weekend off because there's no food" - Meredith⁶

"We really try to give the kids a balanced main meal. We try to get veggies in our evening meals and we try to have a piece of fruit for them to have every day - even if that means we have to go without." - Daryl⁶

"I just go without and make sure that my son has got what he needs for his school lunches, breakfast, dinner. And if there's not enough then I will skip a meal." - Sheryl⁶

As well as going without enough food, parents do their best to shield children from their fears and worries around food¹³⁻¹⁵. However, children can't help but notice the absence of food at home:

"Where he [son] sees at other people's houses that there's three or four packets of biscuits to choose from, he would be lucky if there's ever one packet at home because I see them as being a luxury, and I know that he notices that difference." - Sandy⁶

"Providing the kids with school lunches is a bit hard. Especially with the two older children that want the bars, they want the cakes, they want the chips...They see everyone else having that at school, and they think: "Why can't we have that?" - Liz⁶

"[The children] went round at the supermarket [with us] one time ... they both said: "But that's not enough food!". They both picked up on it. Within the budget that we had they were both shocked how quickly it went up and they said: "But we still need this and that and the other" and that was a very hard thing." - Daryl⁶

Children are often well aware of the challenges their parents face and do their best to help provide food¹⁵. Sometimes children will bring home leftovers from school or community events for the rest of the family to eat¹¹. Other options include scavenging in rubbish bins, and finding part-time work – and using that money to buy food:

"My youngest son was going out getting food and mowing lawns and bringing it home...it was the rent and power and everything I was worried about" - Diane⁹

"We [the children and I] have had conversations about whether you can take food out of the bin" - Ginny¹⁰

It is important to note that, while all income groups have experiences of eating unpleasant tasting foods, what families living with poverty recount is having to eat dated, rotten, or unpleasant-tasting food as part of everyday survival¹⁰.

Accepting and eating substandard food has become essential for existence.

"If there was only ...
a little bit of meat or
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was just enough to feed
the kids, then I wouldn't
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Just because I'd rather
them be fed."

Julye

Lasting health impacts

Experiences of childhood food insecurity and poverty affect children in different ways, depending on their individual circumstances. Long-term impacts can include increased risk of health-related social problems, such as substance use, anxiety, and behaviour disorders¹⁶; nutritional deficiencies and increased likelihood of diet-associated chronic diseases¹⁷; negative impacts on capacity for learning¹⁸; and developmental problems¹⁹. Insufficient food leaves families vulnerable to the 'double burden' of malnutrition and increased obesity. This double burden contributes to children's poor health outcomes throughout their life course²³.



Figure 4: Lunchtime noodles

As well as physical effects, memories of a childhood without enough to eat reverberate in people's lives. Even as adults, those memories have a deep and lasting effect. Certain foods can be so intertwined with deprivation that as adult, people are unable to eat, cook or serve these foods. Katarina explains:

"those types of food just make me feel like I've failed as a parent if I feed them to my kids. Because, I just think, you know, 'No, we can afford better than that!' ... It goes back to the feelings of, as a child, I always said 'I'm not going to be like [name]. I'm not going to do that ... I can't not give my children what they want to eat because otherwise I'm withholding food from them. It's more ... not wanting to repeat aspects of my childhood and it often comes out in food.'" - Katarina²⁰

The absence of food makes it difficult for children to forge social connections with their peers, and to engage in activities that may require 'bringing a plate' or serving afternoon tea. Janine reflects on her memories of social isolation associated with poverty:

"We never even had friends over because we couldn't, we didn't have enough food to feed them or, yeah. It was rat shit. We couldn't do most of the stuff. We didn't even have like oranges...back then we were like pretty much starving. We were only having like, one meal a day, which was dinner." - Janine²¹

It is not just children who feel the social costs of poverty. Being unable to have people over for dinner, or to make visitors a cup of tea, or bring food to a shared meal leaves people feeling socially isolated and alone²².

Parents need more than pamphlets

While parents are aware of healthy eating messages, and do their best to meet them for their children, inadequate incomes coupled with rising costs of living and housing, leaves parents and children alike without enough to eat.

Families can draw on coping strategies such as making do and stretching meals for a short while, but when food insecurity, food poverty, and hidden hunger become an everyday reality, it has long-term, negative impacts on mental well-being and physical health.

Addressing food insecurity in the lives of children and their families has the potential to address longer-term health consequences throughout their lifetime.

As a society we must ensure that healthy, high-quality that food is available, accessible and affordable for all.

We can do this by setting benefits and subsidies to include sufficient amounts for food, ensuring that our social services treat people in a dignified and humane way, advocating for businesses to adopt the Living Wage minimum rate, and requiring that well-being strategies and policies prioritise food security.

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