

# Aotearoa, land of the long wide bare cupboard

Part 6: Food Insecurity in New Zealand

For a growing proportion of New Zealanders they are finding it increasingly difficult to provide enough, appropriate food to feed themselves and their families.

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

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The Covid-19 lockdown presented new and unfamiliar territory for many of us in our day-to-day realities. Be it managing childcare in the home office or adjusting to time apart from loved ones, there were changes in all our lives that stretched us through this period. For a growing proportion of New Zealanders, however, the challenges that they faced - and continue to face - are severe, in that they are finding it increasingly difficult to provide enough, appropriate food to feed themselves and their families.

## Covid-19 has exacerbated already-high levels of food insecurity in Aotearoa.

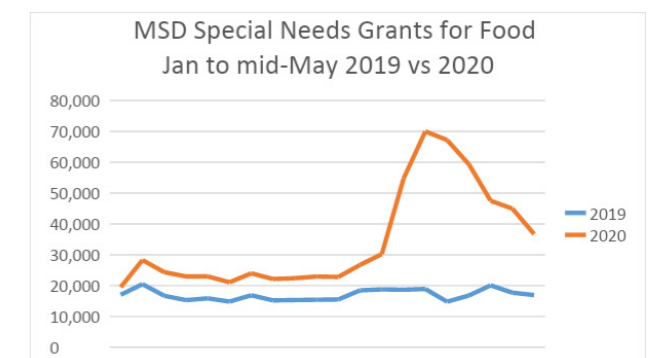
Research released in 2019 by the Auckland City Mission estimated that 10 percent of New Zealand's population was food insecure, a burden borne disproportionately by women, Māori and Pasifika<sup>1</sup>. If such levels of food insecurity were our baseline entering into this crisis, it is hardly surprising that this crisis has exacerbated challenges of access to food. The Auckland City Mission estimates that this figure has now doubled to 20 percent, or one million New Zealanders<sup>2</sup>.

Demand for emergency food assistance since the beginning of the Covid-19 lockdown has skyrocketed, demonstrating the difficulties that many more households are facing in meeting their basic needs. As we moved into the Level Four lockdown in late March, the Christchurch City Missioner reported a three-fold increase in food parcel demand, and Wellington's City Missioner recorded increased demand of 400 percent<sup>3</sup>. The Salvation Army reported handing out close to 6,000 food parcels in one week during lockdown, the same number it would usually hand out in a month<sup>4</sup>. Recognising this significant increase in demand through the lockdown period, the Government and the Auckland Council even transformed Spark Arena,

New Zealand's largest indoor stadium, into a giant foodbank<sup>5</sup>.

Heightened food insecurity at this time was also evident in the spike in demand for emergency food grants from Work and Income. During lockdown in the three weeks from March 27th to April 17th, the number of Special Needs Grants issued for food by MSD more than doubled from roughly 30,000 to over 67,000<sup>6</sup>. This demand is almost five times what it was this time last year (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Number of Special Needs Grants issued for food by MSD from January to mid-May 2019 vs 2020. Data sourced from MSD Covid-19 Resources.



Inadequate incomes made people particularly vulnerable under lockdown conditions. For those families who rely on food-in-schools programmes, the closure of schools put extra pressure on already-stretched resources. While charities such as KidsCan sought alternative means of reaching families during this period<sup>7</sup>, such a disruption has inevitably meant that many more children have gone without food for extended periods of time. A lack of resources to provide for themselves means that families are dependent on charity, making their food sources less

1. Auckland City Mission. Shining the light on food insecurity in Aotearoa: Auckland City Mission's Call To Action. 2019. Retrieved from [https://www.aucklandcitymission.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/org07307-ACM-world-food-day-A5\\_web.pdf](https://www.aucklandcitymission.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/org07307-ACM-world-food-day-A5_web.pdf)  
 2. Robson, S. 'It's Christmas on steroids' - foodbanks in huge demand across NZ. RNZ. 22 April 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/covid-19/414809/it-s-christmas-on-steroids-foodbanks-in-huge-demand-across-nz>  
 3. Kronast, H. Coronavirus: Foodbank demand soars during COVID-19 pandemic. Newshub. 6 April 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/new-zealand/2020/04/coronavirus-foodbank-demand-soars-during-covid-19-pandemic.html>  
 4. Robson, S. Most people turning to Salvation Army are doing so for first time. RNZ. 24 April 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/415009/most-people-turning-to-salvation-army-are-doing-so-for-first-time>

5. Blake-Persen, Nita. Auckland's Spark Arena becomes huge foodbank during lockdown. RNZ. 7 April 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.rnz.co.nz/national/programmes/checkpoint/audio/2018741875/auckland-s-spark-arena-becomes-huge-foodbank-during-lockdown>  
 6. Ministry of Social Development. Covid-19 Reporting. 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.msd.govt.nz/about-msd-and-our-work/publications-resources/statistics/covid-19/index.html>  
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resilient in the face of disaster.

Those who live on low incomes have a limited capacity to stock up on supermarket supplies. As the virus began to emerge in Aotearoa, widespread panic buying meant that many supermarkets found themselves cleared out of staples such as canned goods, pasta and toilet paper<sup>8</sup>. Despite official advice to 'shop normally', some living paycheck-to-paycheck found themselves unable to access basic supplies.

In time, panic buying ceased and shelves were restocked, with New Zealanders urged to shop as infrequently as possible to minimize contact with others. Those that could not buy in bulk were unable to afford this luxury, instead having to visit the supermarket each time they received a paycheck. This made those on low-incomes particularly vulnerable to exposure, an issue compounded by the fact that many of the chronic illnesses that make people susceptible to Covid-19 - such as cardiovascular disease, and diabetes - are more prevalent among the food insecure. As one Wellington-based woman reflected,

*"Living on \$80 a week and having no fridge means I can't stock up and I haven't the resources anyway. I have to go to the supermarket more often than 'rich' people and risk my own and other people's health."*

### **Food insecurity is about more than food, it is about insufficient income**

As Covid-19 has affected continuity of income for many, it follows that many families are now finding themselves struggling to provide adequate food for their children. Social service providers have reported that many people who accessed food assistance during the lockdown period had never used their services before, having lost income due to Covid-19<sup>9</sup>. For instance, as a social service provider in Auckland reported:

*"Some of our Māori leaders and kaumātua, whose income predominantly comes from koha and speaking engagements, have lost most of their income during this time and were connected to us. We have been supporting them with kai over the lockdown period, but it has been humbling to see our community leaders put in this place."*

Current modelling from the Treasury projects unemployment will rise to around 9% in September 2020, reflecting the redundancies and business closures that are affecting, and will continue to affect, a significant proportion of New Zealanders<sup>10</sup>. Further, many who have

retained employment are affected by reductions in hours and/or levels of pay, facing a significant reduction in income without a significant reduction in living costs.

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As jobs are lost, more of us are becoming reliant on welfare payments. Almost 30,000 people went on the Jobseeker Support benefit in the four weeks following the lockdown announcement<sup>11</sup>. As at May 15th 2020, roughly 190,000 people were receiving Jobseeker Support, an

8. Oshiri, I. and Kotlarsky, J. How COVID-19 is disrupting the food supply chain in New Zealand. CIO. 25 March 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.cio.com/article/3534052/how-covid-19-is-disrupting-the-food-supply-chain-in-new-zealand.html>

9. Robson, S. Most people turning to Salvation Army are doing so for first time. RNZ. 24 April 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/415009/most-people-turning-to-salvation-army-are-doing-so-for-first-time>

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12. Ministry of Social Development. Covid-19 Reporting. 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.msd.govt.nz/about-msd-and-our-work/publications-resources/statistics/covid-19/index.html>

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increase of almost 60,000 on this time last year<sup>12</sup>. This increase is in spite of 450,000 individuals being covered by the wage subsidy. As wage subsidies finish and some workers are inevitably let go by their employers, recipient numbers will only grow; economist Shamubeel Eaqub is projecting that the number of New Zealanders on benefits this year will double<sup>13</sup>.

And as more of us become reliant on welfare payments, we will begin to discover for ourselves the gross inadequacy of our social safety net. Benefit rates have declined steadily in relation to the average wage over the past 30 years, with current benefit levels insufficient for families in meeting basic needs of food, clothing and housing.

It appears that this crisis has provided impetus for some small steps towards addressing this inadequacy; the Government's March Covid-19 economic stimulus package raised benefit levels by \$25, which came into effect on April 1st. However, while a boost, this increase of between 6.4 and 10 percent<sup>14</sup> falls short of the Welfare Expert Advisory Group's 2019 recommendations of increases to core benefits of between 12 and 47 percent<sup>15</sup>. In light of housing costs, benefit rates remain unlivable for many, meaning that people must access emergency food assistance even while receiving support from Work and Income. As an Auckland social service provider reported to us:

*“One of our team delivered food parcels to a couple late last week. Both the husband and wife had been made redundant as a result of Covid. He had worked for a tech company and had a role in offering business some products directly related to tourism. As a result of the closed borders, his role was disestablished and he wasn't offered the wage subsidy at any stage. He talked about him and his wife losing their livelihood and only getting enough support from WINZ to cover their basic living costs. They literally had no money for food.”*

Even among those who have retained full employment throughout this period, the minimum wage remains inadequate in enabling people to make ends meet. Social service agencies frequently report engaging with clients who, despite working full-time, struggle to afford food and other basic necessities after paying housing costs<sup>16</sup>. This pandemic has shone a light on the irony and sheer injustice of paying some of our most essential workers – our cleaners, warehouse packers, security guards and supermarket cashiers – anything below a Living Wage.

14. Fletcher, M. The case for a huge Covid-19 benefit reform. The Spinoff. 24 March 2020. Retrieved from <https://thespinoff.co.nz/politics/24-03-2020/the-case-for-a-huge-covid-19-benefit-reform/>

15. Welfare Expert Advisory Group. Appendix D: Full list of recommendations. 2019. Retrieved from <http://www.weag.govt.nz/weag-report/whakamana-tangata/appendices/appendix-d-full-list-of-recommendations/>

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While the majority of the country remained at home, essential workers were expected to leave their bubble each day to ensure the continuation of basic infrastructure. The difference between the current minimum wage (as at 1 April 2020) and the Living Wage rate amounts to \$90 per week – which for some families may be the difference between independently accessing adequate food for the week, and being forced to access a food bank.

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## Budget 2020

The increased scale of food insecurity through this period has thrust the issue into the spotlight, opening up space for constructive conversations about how best to enact systemic change. The Government's much-anticipated

2020 Budget signaled a recognition of the immediacy of this issue, announcing an extension to the Food in Schools programme. A \$220 million expansion over two years is anticipated to provide free school lunches to 200,000 children in low-decile schools, with the programme currently feeding 8,000 children<sup>17</sup>. Further, social services have received a boost through this budget, with food banks receiving a \$32 million allocation in response to increased demand.

These measures are important in meeting immediate and urgent need. The provision of food parcels and school lunches can alleviate those children and their families reached by these services from the immediate stresses of hunger. However, these measures are mere Band-Aids on a large, deep wound. Without further policies to address income inadequacy – in particular, crippling low core benefit levels – families will continue to be reliant on a patchwork of charitable hand-outs to feed their children.

## Covid-19 has renewed the urgency for change

Crises amplify inequalities. At present, we are faced with a crisis, but this has also opened up a significant opportunity to reassess the efficacy and humanity of our economic system. In a 'land of plenty' that produces enough food for 20 million people<sup>18</sup>, strong leadership and coordination is needed to address inadequate access to appropriate

17. Manch, T. Budget 2020: Free school lunches to feed 200,000 kids, as part of \$1b Government support package. Stuff. 14 May 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/politics/121506513/budget-2020-free-school-lunches-to-feed-200000-kids-as-part-of-1b-government-support-package>

18. Rush, E. Food Insecurity in New Zealand Part 1: Fat, famished, or starved in a land of

food among 20 percent of our population<sup>19</sup>. In light of the effects of Covid-19, the following calls – echoing Part One and Two of this series – are more pertinent than ever:

- Benefit levels must be raised further to meet the Welfare Expert Advisory Group's recommendations, enabling beneficiaries – the numbers of whom are growing by the day – a dignified standard of living.
- A Living Wage must be implemented so that those working full-time are not having to access emergency food assistance.
- A National Food Strategy that provides direction and vision for Aotearoa's food system must be developed.

We must be intentional and strategic. While the world is changing, the transformation of our economic system for the better is not inevitable. Lockdown restrictions have now been lifted, and the spectacle of a stadium-sized food bank has largely faded from public consciousness. However, for many families, the impacts of this crisis will reverberate for many months to come.

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