

Empty food baskets

Food poverty in Whangarei

Sherry Carne and Alina Mancini

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Carried out by Sherry Carne (Artemis Research) and Alina Mancini for the Whangarei Child Poverty Action Group.

Whangarei Child Poverty Action Group is a group of Whangarei community members which aligns to the national independent charity Child Poverty Action Group. Whangarei CPAG endorses and supports the aim, guiding principle and objectives of CPAG to eliminate child poverty in Aotearoa / New Zealand. This publication is our first piece of research.

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“It’s outrageous that in the land of milk and honey people just can’t afford healthy food. Food insecurity and its consequences of poor nutrition, obesity, and nutrition related health conditions are affecting families on low incomes. One of the factors contributing to our obesity epidemic is simply that families cannot afford good healthy nourishing food”. Clair Mills, Medical Officer of Health, Northland DHB.

“Families on low income or benefit in some instances can just manage if they don't smoke, drink, gamble, have no car, no debt and don't go out.” Research participant.

Acknowledgements

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Foreword

CHILD POVERTY ACTION GROUP

Being sure that you have enough food and food that is of a good quality is both a basic human right and essential to health and to children's development. A range of illnesses arise from not having enough to eat and we know from a wide range of research over a long period of time that good food is critical for the best possible development of babies from conception. We know too from a range of research activities that it is mothers who most commonly go without food to ensure that the other family members have enough to eat.

In a country that has long been a major food producer it is scandalous that so many New Zealanders report going without food in order to make ends meet. The fact that this is the experience of so many New Zealand children makes the scandal even worse. The effects of this lack of food ('food insecurity' to use the technical phrase) are seen by teachers daily in the school classroom and is experienced by children in both their educational achievements and in their relationships with their peers. One of the most tangible results of the growth in child poverty over the last two decades in New Zealand has been the increase in foodbanks and in school meal programmes and arrangements within schools to provide food for children. This report adds significantly to the literature we now have in New Zealand about foodbanks, food shortage and food insecurity.

One of the worst aspects of the growth in child poverty and in the numbers of children not having enough to eat has been the complete failure of government to respond sensibly and effectively. The failure to put in place effective and appropriate policies to reduce child poverty tells us very clearly that children are not very important. Words are easy, but actions (or perhaps here inaction) is a much clearer signal of how little children really matter, especially if those children are poor.

The work and results reported here show a frightening picture for too many children in Whangarei. The responses of the local communities as schools, community and social service groups provide support and assistance for families and children are clear and well documented and invaluable. The challenge is for government to respond with a range of policies which will make a real and significant contribution to reducing child poverty. I salute the efforts of the researchers and those who encouraged and supported those efforts. Kia kaha me arohanui.

Mike O'Brien

Co-convenor, Child Poverty Action Group

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Executive summary

Northland was significantly impacted by the 2008-9 economic recession resulting in unemployment, mortgage sales, business failures and bankruptcies. Despite the recession being officially 'over' there is a strong sense amongst the Whangarei community that things are not getting better. Tai Tokerau Emergency Housing Charitable Trust, the Salvation Army, Women's Refuge, and several budgeting agencies are all facing increasing demand. Schools and community groups report growing numbers of families who are unable to provide enough food. National policy on matters such as housing and welfare clearly signalled in the Welfare Working Group Report (2011) and in changes to Housing New Zealand Corporation's mandate provide no assurance that the socio-economic conditions for whanau in Whangarei will improve. Children are the most vulnerable part of our society and the most affected by these negative indicators.

Considering these factors, the Whangarei Child Poverty Action Group commissioned this research to specifically examine the key issue of food poverty in our community¹. The ability to feed ourselves and our families is fundamental to health and is a right under Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Quantifying how much food is being provided free to families provides a tangible immediate measure of hardship. Measuring the amount of food poverty in our district would also enable us to assess whether it really was as bad as people were saying. We also aimed to develop a baseline measure that could then be tracked to see if there were changes in food poverty over time.

A survey to identify how much food was being distributed was completed by all identifiable charitable food providers and 24 decile 1-4 schools in the Whangarei district.

We acknowledge that a crucial limitation of this research is the missing voice of the children and families receiving food at school or accessing food providers. This results in the food provider voice being privileged and gives an incomplete picture of the reality of food poverty in our community. This may be an area which could be further explored in future.

It is intended that the current survey findings be used to raise awareness among our community and as evidence of the need for more effective national policy solutions.

Findings

Food in Schools

- All 14 decile 1 and 2 schools and five of those rated 3 and 4 in Whangarei are providing food to their students. Three schools reported there was no need to provide emergency food and two schools reported seldom supplying food.
- Thirteen of the 22 schools surveyed are providing breakfasts, and 12 provide sandwiches or cooked lunch, for about 200 children who arrive at school hungry and / or without lunch each week.
- Eleven schools participate in the "Fruit in Schools" programme.
- Overall at least 1793 children in Whangarei (33% of school population attending these decile 1-4 schools) receive food assistance weekly. Some of these children may be given

¹ The technical term is 'food insecurity' and the common term is 'food poverty'. Generally in this paper the term 'food poverty' is used.

food more than once in any week. Many of these children are in schools participating in the Fruit in Schools programme.

- With the exception of the “Fruit in Schools” programme, which is funded through the Ministry of Health, food in schools is funded by private businesses, charities or from school budgets.
- Many of the schools emphasise the value of the social side of preparing, eating and sharing food and then clearing up afterwards.
- Some schools promote healthy eating programmes for the children while they are at school and other schools focus on engaging with the family in the home.

Food parcels providers

- In Whangarei many people go hungry. This is evidenced by the large numbers of people accessing Special Needs Grants for food (SNG) from Work and Income, and the more than 400 food parcels provided each month through charitable organisations.
- Food parcels in Whangarei are funded through the churches, charities, private donations and additional produce given by local gardeners and growers.
- Accessing food parcels presents barriers for some families. These barriers may include meeting the budgeting requirements for a Work and Income Special Needs Grant for food, or the cost of transport to get to a food bank.
- Due to the level of demand food parcel providers have had to develop criteria and put processes in place to limit the amount of food being distributed.

Recommendations

For government

It is imperative that government policy focuses on measures to raise incomes for families to adequate levels, through employment, equitable taxation and social welfare strategies. In addition, while food poverty remains a challenge, we urge that the government:

- Provide a free, quality breakfast to all children in decile 1 and 2 schools.²
- Continue to support the Fruit in Schools programme and recognise the value of other programmes to hungry children.
- Implement a monitoring process to assess the impact on communities of the changes in social welfare policy/benefit levels.
- Fund community budgeting services for increases in client numbers caused by changes to the criteria for Special Needs Grants for food.

² This was also a recommendation in the report from the Child Poverty Action Group “Hunger for Learning”, Wynd, D., 2011

For food parcel providers

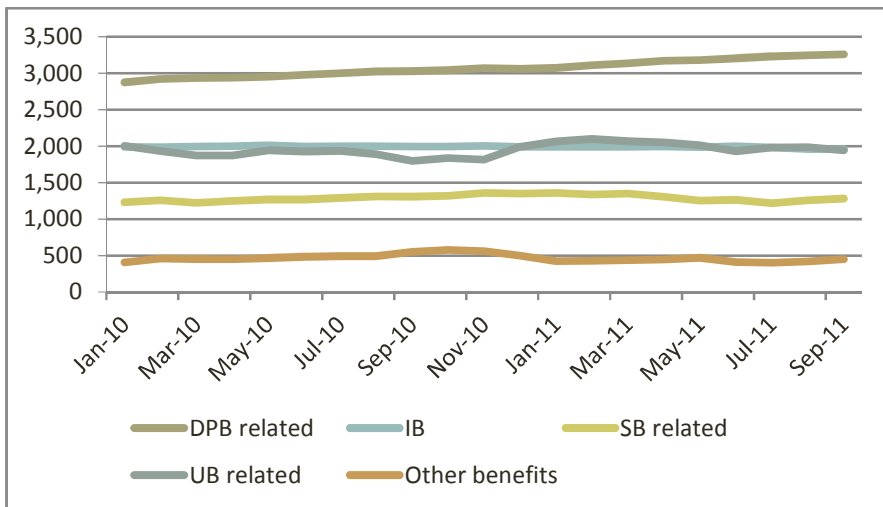
- Establish a “Food Network” for providers of food and/or top-up parcels, and organisations developing food co-operatives or community gardens in Whangarei District.
- Include representation from Ministry of Social Development in the Food Network to encourage the monitoring of trends in Special Needs Grants for food and the impact of other benefit changes on food needs.
- Strongly encourage groups providing food parcels to develop a collated, anonymised reporting of who they distribute food parcels to, in a consistent format which can be shared with the Food Network and assist in monitoring trends over time.

Background: Impact of the recession in Whangarei

Whangarei’s population has lower levels of personal income, lower rates of formal educational qualifications, and higher household crowding levels than the New Zealand average. Data from the 2006 census shows that:

- The median income of those living in Whangarei District was \$22,500 compared to median income of \$24,400 for all of New Zealand.
- In Whangarei District, 29.7% of people aged 15 years and over have no formal qualifications, compared with 25.0% for New Zealand as a whole.
- Household crowding was higher among Maori, and tenanted houses were more likely to be crowded than if owned. 14.4% of those who identified as Maori required an additional bedroom to reduce crowding compared to 3.46% of other groups.
- Recent data on the number of recipients by benefit type for Whangarei show that the numbers of those on unemployment benefit (UB) are relatively flat (2,002 in January 2010, 1,796 in September 2010 and 1,941 in September 2011). But the numbers receiving Domestic Purposes benefit (DPB) show an increase (from 2,874 in January 2010, to 3,030 in September 2010 and 3,259 in September 2011) which is likely to reflect the current lack of employment opportunities.

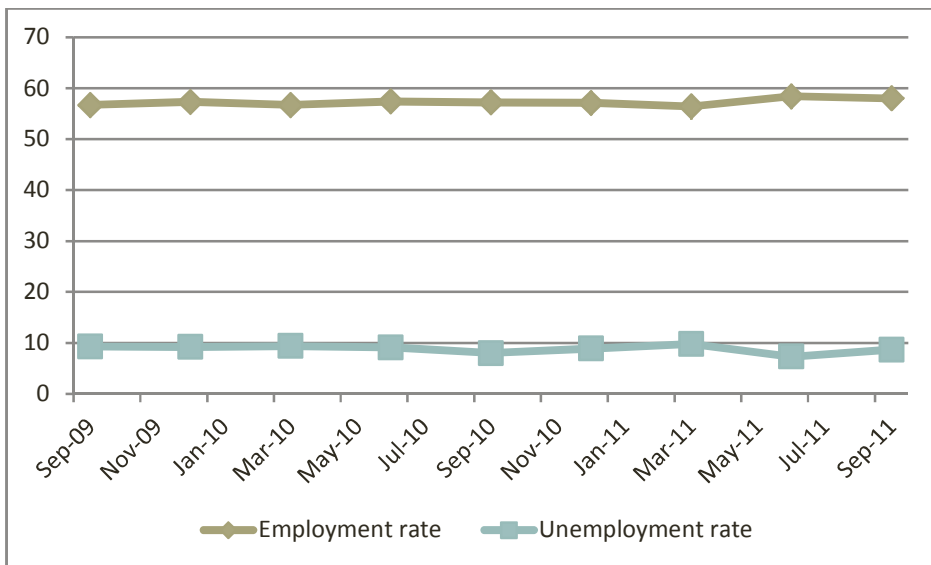
FIGURE 1 NUMBER OF BENEFIT RECIPIENTS IN WHANGAREI BY BENEFIT TYPE



Source: data supplied to Manaia PHO by Ministry of Social Development

The employment rate (the proportion of the working-age population that is employed) in Northland was 57.5% (69,700 people in work) during the year to September 2011 up from 57.2% the year before. In comparison, the national average employment rate was 63.8%.

FIGURE 2 EMPLOYMENT AND UNEMPLOYMENT RATES FOR NORTHLAND

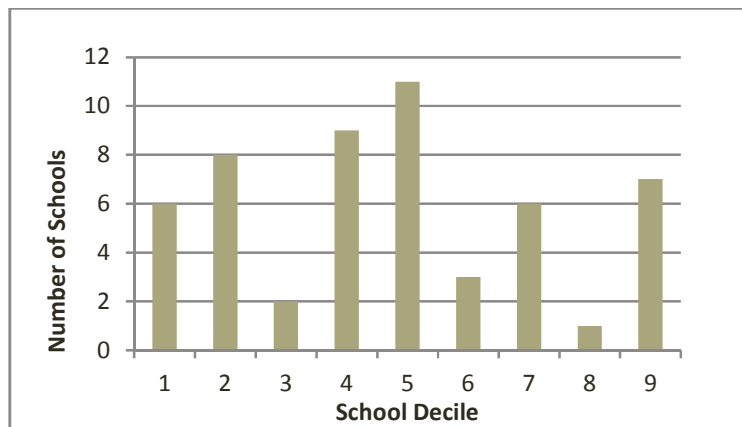


Source: HLFS, Statistics New Zealand

School deciles

Whangarei schools have lower decile ratings than the national average, reflecting the relatively disadvantaged socio-economic situation of many Whangarei families. No schools in Whangarei have a decile 10 rating. Figure 3 shows that 2/3 of our schools are allocated a decile 5 rating or less.³

FIGURE 3 THE NUMBER OF SCHOOLS IN WHANGAREI BY DECILE RATING



Social support: Special Needs Grants for food from Work and Income

Special Needs Grants (SNGs) for food are an indicator of the need in the community for food. 'Work and Income' can provide one-off payments to people/whanau that are in financial hardship, to pay for essential costs including food, power, clothing, furniture and other costs. However, in 2010 the qualification criteria for SNGs were made more stringent for those families applying more than twice in any year.

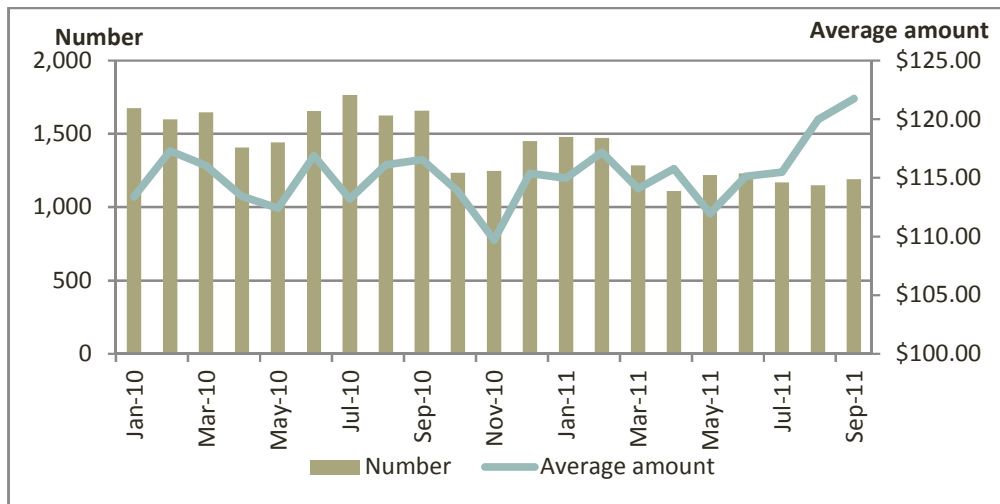
The family is required to show they have taken reasonable steps to increase their income, reduce their costs or improve their financial management, and complete budgeting activities. People who fail to meet these additional requirements may be declined further payments.

When a family requires assistance for a sixth occasion in a 12 month period they must have a 'comprehensive interview' with a case manager and any grants they receive will be signed off by a Service Centre Manager.

The following chart shows the number and the average amount of SNGs for food distributed in Whangarei between January 2010 and September 2011, and illustrates the changes that have occurred since the process for applying for SNGs for food has altered.

³ School deciles are based on the socio-economic characteristic of the parents of the school's student population, not the area where the school is sited.

FIGURE 4 NUMBERS AND AVERAGE AMOUNT OF SNGs FOR FOOD DISTRIBUTED IN WHANGAREI BETWEEN JANUARY 2010 AND SEPTEMBER 2011



SOURCE: DATA SUPPLIED TO MANAIA PHO BY MSD, 28 OCTOBER 2011

After the announcement of more stringent criteria in March 2010, there was a drop by nearly a quarter of families receiving SNGs from an average of just above 1700 to 1200 by October 2010. The number has fluctuated since then but remains high at about 1100 families a month.

The changes have not only affected beneficiaries: in January 2010, 72 non-beneficiaries received SNG for food averaging \$93.76 while in September 2011 only 36 non-beneficiaries were successful in applying for a SNG for food. However, the average amount had increased to \$104. By comparison, a total of 1,674 food grants were issued in January 2010⁴ averaging \$113.39, and in September 2011 the total had dropped to 1,190 but the average amount had increased to \$121.75.

These figures suggest that the changes in criteria for SNG for food have reduced access to emergency food in Whangarei by raising the barriers for people accessing the grants.

⁴ Including the 72 to non-beneficiaries

Literature review: The context of food poverty⁵

"In developed countries food security is defined as having access to nutritionally adequate, safe, and personally acceptable foods" and as "the ability to acquire them in a socially acceptable way" (Parnell and Smith, 2008 cited in Bidwell, 2009, p.3). Food poverty "occurs when people have limited food choices and feel anxious and stressed about how to acquire the food they need..."(Coates et al, 2006 cited in Smith, Parnell & Brown, 2010, p.7).

The three latest national nutrition surveys carried out in New Zealand have all measured household food poverty: the National Nutrition Survey 1997; the National Children's Nutrition Survey 2002 and the New Zealand Adult Nutrition Survey 2008/2009 (Ministry of Health, 2011). In these surveys, household food insecurity has been determined using a series of indicator statements about particular aspects of food poverty – for example how often food runs out in the household.

Recent data available for the New Zealand population (Ministry of Health, 2011) show that many households are affected by food poverty. In 2008/2009:

- 7.3% of households were classified as having *low food security*;
- 33.7 % were classified as being *moderately food secure*;
- 16.4 % could afford to eat properly only *sometimes*;
- 2.5% of New Zealand households' ran out of food *often* and, *sometimes* due to lack of money in 11.5% of households.
- Not being able to eat a variety of food due to lack of money, was reported as an issue occurring *sometimes* by 22.8 % of households and *often* by 7.6%.
- New Zealand families experienced stress due to lack of money for food *sometimes* in 12.4 % of households and *often* in 3.3 %.

Between 1997 and 2008/09 the proportion of households classified as having low food security increased from 4% to 7.3% while households *fully/almost food secure* fell from 72% to 59.1% (Ministry of Health, 2011). There are no regional data available on food poverty in New Zealand.

Those most likely to report food poverty include the youngest section of the population, households living in more deprived areas, Māori and Pacific households, single parent families (especially those with young children), unemployed people, those with chronic illness or disability, larger households and households relying on government benefits as their main source of income (Smith et al, 2010; Bidwell, 2009). However, medium and high-income households may at times also experience food poverty, along with its associated stress and worry (Smith et al, 2010).

Data from the 2008/2009 New Zealand Adult Nutrition Survey shows strikingly higher levels of food poverty amongst Maori and Pacific people. For example:

- 24.1% of Maori female respondents reported running out of food *sometimes* and 7.8% *often*;
- 42% of Pacific females reported running out of food *sometimes* and 5.8% *often*;
- 9.5 % of New Zealand European females ran out of food *sometimes* and 2.3% *often* (Ministry of Health, 2011).

⁵ In this section the term food insecurity is sometimes used to maintain consistency with the reviewed literature.

Research evidence highlights **economic factors** (particularly the cost of housing in relation to total household income) as the most significant influence on food poverty (Parnell & Smith, 2008). This is often combined with other factors, such as distance and transport to shops, lack of cooking skills, food preferences, unavailability of cooking and storage facilities, time, mobility, social support, availability of alternative sources of food (such as a vegetable garden), coping strategies and cultural issues (New South Wales Centre for Public Health Nutrition, 2003 cited in Smith et al, 2010).

An English study carried out in 2005 suggests that when the income of low income families with children increases the extra money is mostly spent on items for the children such as clothing and footwear, fruit and vegetables, books and holidays. Moreover, expenditures on child-related items increase faster than expenditures on other items while there is usually a decrease in the family's spending on alcohol and tobacco. These findings indicate that the material well-being of children in low income families can be improved by welfare reforms that address inadequate family income levels, like the ones promoted by the UK government since 1998. This research clearly dispels the myth that increased income for struggling families will not necessarily translate in benefits for the children involved (Gregg, Waldfogel and Washbrook, 2005). Research from Australia also suggests that increases in the family income of benefit recipients goes towards buying food, and where possible better quality food (Brimblecombe, J., McDonnell, J., Barnes, A., Garnggulkpuy Dhurrkay, J., Thomas, D., & Bailie, R. 2010).

Community gardens, community kitchens, distribution of food boxes at a reduced cost and other community food security programmes can improve diet - particularly if they lead to increased consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables- and psychosocial conditions for families. These initiatives however, do not always reach the families that are more in need and it is difficult to determine their effectiveness (Bidwell 2009; Smith et al., 2010).

Data and information on food bank use are also useful in drawing a picture of food poverty in New Zealand. The main users of food banks in New Zealand belong to the same socio-economic groups mentioned above as experiencing food poverty; namely beneficiaries, low income workers, sole-parent families, ethnic minorities, people living in deprived areas and young people (McPherson, 2006 cited in Smith et al, 2010).

The 2008/2009 New Zealand Adult Nutrition Survey found that "although less than 1% of the New Zealand population reported that they *often* make use of special food grants or food banks when not having enough money for food, 5.4% said that it was *sometimes* an issue" (Ministry of Health, 2011, p.262).

A 2005 report on food bank use in New Zealand (Wynd, 2005) identified some of the main reasons for using food banks as: inadequate income; increase in need for fuel and electricity; housing costs; debt; health and medical costs; gambling losses and childcare costs. 80% of food bank users involved in the study reported that they were in debt, while in July 2011 the Auckland City Mission reported that debt accounted for 34% of requests for food parcels amongst their clients (Collins, 2011).

In July 2011, data from the Salvation Army (54 food banks around New Zealand) and from the Auckland City Mission (70 food banks in Auckland) showed a continued increase in the numbers of families assisted and in the numbers of parcels distributed. A total of 52,897 children have been fed by the two charities in the previous 12 months, or 5% of the country's total child population. Furthermore, since 2002 the number of families receiving food parcels from the two

organisations has nearly doubled and food parcels continue to be distributed, not only to beneficiaries, but also to families receiving a wage or having irregular income (Collins, 2011). The relationship between food poverty, poor nutrition and poor health outcomes and obesity in New Zealand is also well documented. Food poverty has been found to be particularly damaging for child health and development (Public Health Advisory Committee, 2010):

- There are high rates of deficiencies in some nutrients among New Zealand young children.
- Children in families with significant financial hardship are less likely to be able to eat healthy food.
- Obesity is greater and oral health status is poorer in children from food insecure families.

Inadequate nutrition and unhealthy diet are known to be main risk factors for chronic diseases (for example diabetes and cardiovascular diseases). In New Zealand, obesity disproportionately affects Maori and Pacific people (Bidwell, 2009).

A wealth of evidence is available about the association between nutrition, school pupils' performance and cognitive development. It shows that children growing up in households where there is not enough nutritious food do not develop to their full potential. A New Zealand review of the literature about the relationship between nutrition and children's academic performance shows that:

- There is a clear and consistent relationship between nutrition and academic outcomes in the long term.
- Children who eat regular meals and have an adequate nutrient intake do better at school than those who skip meals and have inadequate nutrient intakes.
- While the overall number of malnourished New Zealand children is relatively small, in schools with a high proportion of children from low socio economic backgrounds poor nutritional status may be the norm rather than the exception.
- Nutritional status in turn influences their attendance, health, behaviour and academic outcomes (Quigley and Watts, 2005).

Little is known about the long term effects of sustained food poverty (Parnell & Smith, 2008).

Methodology of this study

Questionnaires were developed for interviewing schools, school programme providers and for those distributing food parcels (see appendices). The questionnaires were used as a guideline during semi-structured interviews. All interviews took place between July and October 2011, with as many food providers as we could identify, and with schools where food was provided for the pupils. The interviews generally lasted between 30 minutes and one hour. Shorter phone interviews were conducted with those who were difficult to reach or not available to be interviewed in person. In general, we tried to interview the person who was in the best position to provide relevant information about the food programme or emergency food distributed.

Information was collected about the 23 decile 1-4 schools in Whangarei, plus a school for teenage parents (decile 1), and an Alternative Education school (unrated). We visited, or had phone interviews with 22 of these schools and 25 charitable and church groups. Information about the remaining school was obtained from the food programme provider website.

Notes were taken during the interviews and, although not verbatim, include all the main points covered during the interviews and do include some direct quotes. Selected quotes from participants are used in this report. Schools have not been identified to protect the privacy of the organisations, and of the students and their families.

For our data analysis, where possible, we triangulated quantitative and qualitative data provided during the interviews with the information provided from the programme providers or the agencies that we interviewed.

Numeric data on the number of children for whom schools provided lunch, breakfast or food snacks during the day varied and the responses are contained in tables. Not all the schools were regularly collecting data, so answers to the questions on the numbers of children fed are not all numeric.

Research findings: Food provided in schools

There are a number of programmes offering food to children attending schools in Whangarei:

- KidsCan reaches potentially 743 pupils in three decile 1 and 2 schools. KidsCan is a charitable trust providing food, shoes and raincoats to schools in low socio-economic areas around New Zealand. The programme provides snack bars, raisins, 'fruit in jelly' pottles, bread and spreads for sandwiches and baked beans to schools. The food items have been chosen because they are easy to deliver, store and distribute at any time of the day, in a discrete way so children are not stigmatised⁶.
- KickStart breakfasts are provided in 13 schools to between 388 to 462 pupils a week. KickStart provides fresh or long life milk and Weet Bix for breakfast up to twice a week. The programme is based on a community partnership model, with the schools providing the bowls, spoons, a venue, food storage facilities and the people to run the breakfast club.
- Two church groups distribute food to seven local low decile schools targeting pupils who don't have enough food for the day. One group is providing 170 lots of sandwiches each week for pupils in six decile 1 and 2 schools, and in another school a local group make lunches for pupils who have arrived at school without any lunch.

⁶ KidsCan Charitable Trust, Full Tummies and Dry Clothes, Massey University Findings, April 2007, P.3

- “Fruit in Schools” are provided in 11 schools for 1671 pupils each day. Fruit in Schools is funded by the Ministry of Health and is an initiative to encourage primary school children in regions of high social and health need to eat more fruit and adopt healthier lifestyles. Fruit is delivered twice a week to schools, providing different types of fruit so that pupils have a variety of fruit across the week. At present the programme is under review and its future is uncertain.
- In addition, there are eight schools participating in the Enviro-schools programme. The Enviro-schools programme is a long-term process that supports schools to develop a holistic approach to education for sustainability, including growing and harvesting food.

Overall, these data suggest that at least 1793 children in Whangarei (or 33% of the school population in decile 1-4 schools) receive food assistance weekly.

A participant from one of the schools commented that:

- *Children are not just coming because it's free. Some children come without having had any breakfast or nothing for lunch.*

Some schools reported a correlation between absenteeism and insufficient food at home to provide children with lunch. A child's absence from school may be an alert to teachers that there is an issue in the family that may require addressing.

- *Some days we know that kids don't come to school because there is not enough food in the house. The breakfast programme is helping a lot in feeding these kids.*

For students in the teen parent school, the provision of food is crucial to them and their babies' well-being.

- *Without the food we provide, the students' nutrition will probably be very poor. We encourage them to bring their own food but most of them don't. Some of them are picked up quite early and it's quite hard to organise themselves and the babies on time.*

Further evidence of an increase in food poverty occurring in a school was linked to the decrease in the amount of food left over by the pupils after lunch.

- *While in the past there were some leftover (fruit) that were used in technology classes, now that times are tougher there is no surplus.*

The school participants also felt that less food and cheaper food options, such as dried noodles, are also being brought to school for lunch.

- *We noticed since the beginning of the year there has been less food brought to school in lunch boxes.*

Another school facilitated:

- *...a large vegetable garden... run by the PolyTech as a course for parents for two years with making pickles etc.*

A further school reinforced parental responsibility for feeding their own children, by focusing on developing the skills of the parents.

- *A Manaia PHO employee is going to use the school kitchen to run 'cooking on a shoestring' courses for parents.*

- *Children can't create the change - the parents have to, which is why it was important to get the family to garden at home – not at the school. It was encouraging to see a family sitting down to Christmas lunch with vegetables from their own garden.*

Other school participants were focused on developing self-sufficient children.

- *We're trying to get to the point that the children are 'self-managing': some children don't get any support from their parents, so what we're trying to do is teach the kids with a focus on their independence.*

One of the participants spoke of avoiding the notion of 'creating dependency' on the school food programmes.

- *We had a breakfast programme in the past but I consider it unnecessary and as creating dependency.*

The reluctance to create parental dependency on the provision of food at school was used to promote other food options and possibly justify other expenditure.

- *[The school was] reluctant to establish a breakfast programme that might take away that responsibility from parents and create a dependency. We would rather buy a fridge and be able to provide fresh milk.*

However, although the school participants may have been divided over where to focus their efforts in supplementing food, most schools used the food programmes as an opportunity to open and maintain communication with families; the objective being to have an open and good relationship with the parents so that the child benefited.

- *[The school does] talk to families and aims at getting parents to ring if they're having problems. The aim is to keep communication open.*

The link to nutrition

The impact that a nutritious diet makes on children's health and behaviour was noted and this observation may indicate the extent of the need for more nutritious food in the community.

- *Over time, I have been converted [to the Fruit in Schools Programme] and I have noticed a difference in class performance and in parents' attitudes. Children take home new attitudes and knowledge about the value of good nutrition.*

The importance of the Fruit in Schools programme was frequently mentioned, particularly in terms of the positive impact on children's learning, along with concerns that the programme could cease in the near future. The value of the programme was seen as beneficial and linked to general health improvements overall.

- *There has been a huge reduction in school sores since we have been part of the Fruit in Schools programme.*

The schools also sought to increase parents' knowledge about the nutritional requirements of their children.

- *We also put nutritional notices from the kids in the school's newsletter. We also grow fruit trees at the school. It's a gradual process of education to change the kids' attitude.*

Concerns about stigma, and who gets food is “delicate”

Some concerns were expressed by some food parcel providers about ‘stigma’ being attached to the children who took advantage of the food that was being provided. However, most schools emphasised the social aspect of eating and made meal-times social occasions by ensuring that any children could join in sharing the food.

- *The Breakfast Club is open and informal and the kids aren’t identified. Many pupils use it as a social time.*
- *Kids aren’t embarrassed if they don’t have food.*

Two of the schools included in the survey, Te Kaakano O Taniwharau School and He Mataariki School (for Teen Parents), provide both breakfast and lunch because their students have particular needs that make the provision of food necessary:

- *...because our students are pregnant or very young mums breastfeeding, good nutrition and food provision is essential to their, and their babies’, wellbeing.*

To further prevent any stigma being attached to children who do not have enough to eat, many of the schools foster an atmosphere where children can approach a teacher or the school office and get food, or just help themselves from the fruit bowl in the classroom. This attitude was reinforced by the Fruit in Schools programme.

- *We have created an atmosphere where kids can say they need food. We do get some kids knocking on the door and saying they are hungry. The objective is to make certain that the kids are fed.*

Food in schools: Summary

The objective of most of those interviewed was to ensure that children were sufficiently nourished so their learning could be effective. Many of the schools maintain an informal approach to the various food programmes to avoid any stigma being attached to any child attending school with insufficient food. The social aspects of eating are reinforced, along with the tidying up afterwards. To encourage the social aspect, those who may have had breakfast at home are not discouraged from eating with their friends who may be hungry and need the supplied breakfast. In other schools, the teachers eat breakfast along with the children who are in their classes.

The food programmes that are offered are valued and, in discussing the number of children fed and the frequency, participants raised questions about the sustainability of the programmes. Some of the nervousness about the programmes’ continuing viability was linked to the recent withdrawal of the Red Cross programme due to losing the sponsorship of Countdown supermarkets.

Many of the teachers note which children arrive at school without breakfast or food for lunch and then contact their parents to identify any issues that may require addressing. Other schools create an environment where a parent can contact the school if some event occurs to prevent them from providing breakfast or lunch for their children.

Research findings: Food parcel and supplementary food providers

There are a number of food parcel providers operating in Whangarei, and their guiding philosophies and management practices vary widely. They fall into three groups: those who;

- provide food parcels to any person or family meeting their criteria, without regard for their religious or agency affiliation,
- focus on providing food parcels to their parishioners or existing clients for whom they are providing budgeting or whanau support, or
- provide top-up parcels⁷.

Some of the groups expect those getting a food parcel, who are capable of doing some work, to do so in return for the food. Many of the providers reported that they give any excess food, not required by their clients, to the Salvation Army or to local Women's Refuges.

The providers with broad client bases tend to be reasonably lenient with the first food parcel and impose stricter criteria for subsequent applications for assistance with food. Many providers have adopted the criteria used by the Salvation Army, or have a requirement that the person prove that they have tried to access Work and Income Special Needs Grants for food.⁸

Two groups regularly run weekly community dinners attended by an average of 150 people per week between the two groups.

Why are families and children hungry?

Inadequate household income

The most frequently mentioned reason for families having insufficient food was **low income**.

- *Most of our clients in the past were on a benefit. Now we also see people on low income or who have been made redundant.*
- *Another real factor is that they have not enough money coming in.*

One respondent summed up the situation about people's ability to manage as:

- *Families on low income or benefit in some instances can just manage if they don't smoke, drink, gamble, have no car, no debt and don't go out.*

Other participants noted that medical costs, illness or other adverse life events affected families' ability to buy food.

Responses from those interviewed about why people and children were hungry reflected a wide range of attitudes and opinion, and many were linked to the reasons why so many people had low incomes. The reasons ranged across social and economic factors evident in Whangarei, including the loss of employment and job opportunities.

⁷ Top up parcels include basic groceries and provisions that are bought in bulk and repackaged for clients and sold to them at cost price. One provider makes up boxes of fresh vegetables.

⁸ The Salvation Army clients have 'used-up' their SNG for food from Work and income. A letter to this effect from Work and Income is used to assess need for assistance. However, if the client is engaged with budgeting organisations and appear to be taking charge of their debt the Salvation Army will assist with food parcels.

- *We talk to people about their circumstances. The main reasons are hardship, job loss, sickness and other emergency situations, and all age groups and family compositions are represented. [We had an] example of two young families last year with young children: they lost employment and have a mortgage. We provided continuous support to them (for approximately one year), because we knew they were really in need, until their situation improved.*

Debt

Among the structural causes affecting people's ability to regularly purchase food for their families is the amount of debt incurred by some families. The easy access to credit and hire purchase deals for low-income people is the cause of much of the debt. The debt is then inflated by penalty interest rate charges considerably increasing the total amount owed.

- *People borrow or buy more than they can afford. Often people are lured by deceptively good deals offered to them. For example, I'm aware of one shop in town which offers deals that are unrealistic, and accepts contracts without prior checking to ascertain the client's real ability to repay the debt.*
- *'Sale trucks' are also quite bad for tempting people into bad debts.⁹ Also, people often lie about their circumstances in order to obtain credit.*

Some of those interviewed acknowledged that debts were entered into at the beginning of the school year when families had to purchase uniforms and school supplies for their children.

- *There are a lot of pressures with increasing school costs. Our agency will work with parents to go to school to negotiate payments. We will act as an advocate if we have to, but we prefer to accompany the family to the school so that they get used to having to deal with the school and build up that relationship.*

Budgeting

Providers supported increasing client's budgeting skills, but this was tempered with recognition that people require sufficient money to cover the basic costs. Some families faced a crisis and needed food immediately.

- *The first time a family asks for food there are very few questions; subsequently we take more of a look into budgeting.*

Many commented on the changes in the procedures and criteria of 'Work and Income' on eligibility for assistance for Special Needs Grants for food, and particularly the need for applicants to prove that their costs have decreased. This criterion has put a strain on budgeting services, which have not been funded to provide for the increase in numbers attending budgeting courses and programmes. Consequently when families approach an agency for food, both the inability to get a prompt budgeting appointment, and the need to tie this appointment in with a 'Work and Income' appointment were commented on.

- *May tie into Work and Income but the delays cause a problem - it usually takes two weeks after budgeting to get an appointment. Usually try to get [people in need of assistance] to budgeting pretty quickly because they will have had to do that before going to Work and Income.*

⁹'Sale tracks' are mobile retailers with easy, but expensive, credit options, generally targeting low income areas.

Some of the agencies we interviewed provide budgeting services. In working with clients on their weekly budgets, some providers offered food parcels, or referred them to other food parcel providers because they saw that the family did not have enough money.

- *If we do a budget and we see that there is not enough money to buy food and essentials, an urgent bill or other emergency situations then we will support that client with a food parcel. We assess each situation on a case by case basis. We will distribute a repeat food parcel to the same client if necessary.*

With insufficient resources, budgeting was a necessity but sometimes food providers felt some choices were unwise:

- *...there may not be enough food in the house, depending on the day of the week. [There seems to be] less need for breakfast on Monday, not sure why. Also, families make poor choices: they may give children money to buy food for two days and then run out of money to provide food for the rest of the week.*

The discussions with the food providers and budgeters indicated that sometimes families were faced with unexpected expenditure that they had not budgeted for and, when this occurs, the family runs out of money.

- *For example, a child gets asthma, is put in hospital and the expense of having to feed the family up at the hospital while one child is in hospital means that they run out of money.*

The provision of food parcels from a myriad of sources and types is indicative of the need for additional food from agencies that support families. Four of the church groups that were interviewed only provide food to their congregations, and focus on the distribution to people that they know.

- *We distribute food parcels, but not to people just walking in the door - it is mainly to people who belong to our congregation or are known to us. We help families we have a personal relationship with. We have been offering food parcels for about four years. All food is donated to the church or purchased with money donated to the church.*

Some groups offer budget services or whanau support: for them the constraints on the budget or on the family are readily apparent and food parcels are given on the basis of that knowledge.

Housing costs

Many families were perceived as assuming that food was the item of expenditure where they could make savings – food became the discretionary item in a household budget, when non-discretionary costs, such as housing, consumed larger proportions of the family income. Increases in housing costs, with no compensatory increases in Accommodation Supplement (AS) or Temporary Additional Assistance (TAS) to help cover the added expenditure, were being felt by those on low incomes or reliant on benefit payments. Increased housing costs were considered by some providers to be the reason why families could not buy food.

- *High rent: Housing New Zealand clients are better off, in general, than others.*
- *Private rental costs, lack of Housing New Zealand housing and then, even if people get Housing New Zealand housing, there are safety concerns in these areas. Clients are no longer getting TAS, so get AS, (only aware of two or three getting maximum) as Work and Income are stricter now in granting that. Rental is \$300.*

Lack of access to full and correct entitlements

Moving house, or moving from one form of income to another, such as from employment to New Zealand Super, was also cited as a reason for needing a food parcel.

- *Usually moving from one form of benefit to another – or having to apply for a house bond.*

Other food parcel providers complained of the inability to adequately prove particular family situations to ‘Work and Income’ before receiving their ‘full and correct entitlement’ for more money.

- *Another real factor is that they have not enough money coming in, [when there is] an increase in family members: maybe children are joining the family and they are waiting to receive the unsupported child benefit and this is a long process.*

Community garden and food initiatives

In Whangarei, there is an emerging focus on developing sustainability and self-sufficiency skills within families and within the community. The local initiatives relate to improved access to affordable and nutritious food through food co-ops, community, school and home gardens, chicken raising, bee-keeping, sharing of plants and seeds, and courses on how to grow and preserve fresh produce and how to feed families on a shoestring.

The group that were developing a food co-op made the link to improving nutrition.

- *We have just started a Food Cooperative in our community: people can pre-order and purchase \$ 15 and \$ 30 food boxes full of fruit and vegies. [We] started this initiative because we want to see people in our community, especially children, eating less junk food. We want to improve the nutritional habits of our community and also reduce the financial stress experienced by families. The main aims are to promote consumption of fresh produce, healthy cooking habits and saving.*

Food parcel providers: Summary

The discussants about food poverty were all unanimous about the key issue: there is an unmet need for food in the community. The evidence for this was clear from the number of churches who provided or redistributed food that ‘came into’ their church to their parishioners, by the budgeting agencies who are referring people to food parcel providers, and by the increases in the size of the food parcels being provided by the Salvation Army.

Unfortunately, the data on the number of food parcels distributed was incomplete and therefore it is not possible to fully quantify total food provision or to assess trends. A very conservative estimate suggests that about 400 food parcels are given out each month in Whangarei. Appendix nine provides a summary of food parcel provision in Whangarei.

Most of the food parcel providers interviewed kept data, but the degree to which the data was systematically collected varied. Some kept little information, and many were unwilling to share data.

Discussion

Despite some improvements since 2009 in key macroeconomic indicators, there is conclusive evidence in New Zealand that a significant number of children live in families who regularly face a situation of food poverty. This research confirms that food poverty in Whangarei is a major problem, particularly affecting children living in low income families – who in Te Tai Tokerau are disproportionately Maori. In addition to more than 1100 families receiving Special Needs grants for food and 400 families receiving food parcels per month, over 1700 children are receiving food at school each week.

The number of churches and social agencies who provide or redistribute food, the budgeting agencies who are referring people to food parcel providers, the school programmes, and the increases in the size of food parcels being provided by the Salvation Army, all provide unambiguous evidence of the problem facing many whanau in our town.

Although participants had varied philosophies and attitudes as to why food provision was important, the discussions about food poverty with participants were unanimous on a key issue: there is an unmet need for food. In our survey, the most frequently mentioned reason for families having insufficient food was low income. This is unsurprising given the international and national evidence on the issue, the economic recession and ensuing increase in unemployment rates, and the socio-economic profile of Whangarei. Other factors such as ill health, high housing costs, debt and unexpected expenditure were also important.

Given the precarious situation of many families, the negative impacts on children of current (and future) economic and social policies on household income need to be closely monitored. Any changes to social benefits which tighten criteria for assistance need to be analysed, as they are likely to have further detrimental impacts on children. In addition, rising food and commodity prices in the face of fixed low incomes will add to the pressures families are facing to put adequate food on the table.

Schools value the food programmes offered because they see positive impacts on children's learning and behaviour. The school programmes also focus on improving students' knowledge of healthy eating and in some cases, supporting initiatives involving families. However there is anxiety about the continuing viability of such programmes, given the recent withdrawal of the Red Cross programme and the lack of clarity about Government's on-going commitment to the 'Fruit in Schools' programme.

This study has limitations. We did not measure food insecurity at an individual household level or describe the experiences of these families, but rather obtained information through the food providers and schools. We acknowledge that this means the voice of families is not heard, while those of providers is privileged.

Additionally, while most of the food parcel providers interviewed kept data, the degree to which the data was comparable, systematically collected and complete varied considerably. Some kept little information, and others were unwilling to share data. The lack of available and consistent data means that the assessment of food poverty levels in Whangarei is not as comprehensive as anticipated and is often limited to a qualitative analysis of food availability. However, it is probable that our estimates are at the lower end of the volume of food actually being distributed. Moreover, there is sufficient, clear data here to clearly indicate the need for urgent and sustained action.

Overall, the quantitative and qualitative findings in this study present a compelling picture of food poverty and its effects on children in Whangarei. A significant proportion of children would be going hungry without the current level of food assistance. Given the well-established evidence for the negative impacts of food poverty on children’s learning, health and well-being, and the alarming number of children affected in Whangarei, this situation does not bode well for the future health and wellbeing of our community.

Conclusion

Given the current situation for families and children, it is imperative that government policy focuses on measures to raise incomes for families to adequate levels, through employment, equitable taxation, action in relation to housing supply and social welfare strategies. In addition, while food poverty remains a challenge, we urge that:

- The government provide a free, quality breakfast to all children in decile 1 and 2 schools, and continue to support the Fruit in Schools programme;
- Work and Income implement a transparent and open monitoring process to assess the impact on communities of the changes in social welfare policy and benefit levels;
- Ministry of Social Development fund community budgeting services adequately so that they can cope with increases in client numbers caused by changes to the criteria for Special Needs Grants for food;
- Locally, a “Food Network” be established and supported to assist food providers, and other organisations developing food co-operatives and community gardens in Whangarei District, to share experience and information and monitor trends in food poverty.
- All organisations providing food to families and schools in Whangarei develop comparable reporting of their programmes in a consistent format which can be shared with the Food Network, and used to monitor food poverty in our district.

Our children only grow up once, and that is NOW. It is outrageous that so many of the children in our town should be regularly hungry or face daily poor nutritional options due to poverty – a situation over which they have no choice or control. This is preventable. We urge that our children, our future, be made a top priority now by local and national leaders.

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Appendices

APPENDIX 1 FOOD IN SCHOOLS QUESTIONNAIRE

We are visiting your school because you have indicated that you are offering supplementary food to your pupils.

1. Which programmes are you running?
2. Do you keep data on the number of children fed and the frequency?
3. How many children are fed each day/week/ or frequency/
4. How many children attend the school
5. How are the children targeted? Or is the food for all pupils?
6. How are the programmes managed at your school? Managed, delivered, funded?
7. Why do you think children are arriving at school hungry, or without lunch?
8. Have you noticed a trend over time?
9. How would you describe the level of need for food in your community?
10. Are there any interventions that you would like to pursue, or considering pursuing- such as creating vegetable gardens?
11. Is there any other initiative that you think could help address this need in your school or community?
12. Who are, or could be your partners in any initiative?
13. Are you aware of any families moving frequently or children moving schools frequently?

APPENDIX 2 FOOD PARCEL PROVIDERS QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Do you distribute food parcels?
2. What are the criteria that are used to offer a food parcel?
3. Do you keep data on either the food parcels or the people to whom the food parcels are given? Yes / No
4. The Salvation Army keeps data. Is any of the data you keep in this or a similar format?
5. Would you be willing to share your data with us so that we can understand the level of need in Whangarei?
6. Are there any interventions that you would like to pursue but have been unable to because of limited resources?
7. Do you think that your clients are using other food banks?
8. Are you aware of any unmet need for food among the people you work with?
9. Why do you think your clients are running out of food? Do you keep any data on this aspect?
10. Do you work with any other agencies?

APPENDIX 3 FOOD PROGRAMME PROVIDERS QUESTIONNAIRE

1. What's the history and background of the programme?
2. What is the scope and aim of the programme?
3. Who are the current partner organisations involved and what are their roles?
4. What are the eligibility criteria and the engagement process?
5. How is the programme planned, managed, delivered and evaluated?
6. What local schools are currently part of the programme and how long have they been involved?
7. Is there any available data about Whangarei that you may want to share with us?
8. What's the role of schools and of the community at present?
9. What's the future of the programme?
10. What's your assessment of the impact of the programme in our area? Is there any available information on this?

Is there any other relevant information or data about the programme being delivered in Whangarei that you will like to share with us?

APPENDIX 4 KIDSCAN

Name	Roll September 2011
Decile 1 School	237
Decile 2 School	270
Decile 2 School	235
Total	743

APPENDIX 5 KICKSTART

Numbers and period specified

Decile	Member Since	School Level	Pupils Involved (weekly)
Decile 1	Term 1, 2010	Teen Parent Unit	50
Decile 1	Term 3, 2011	Primary	50-60
Decile 1	Term 3, 2011	Primary	40-60
Decile 1	Term 1 2009	Other	1 family
Decile 1	Term 3, 2011	Primary	6-30
Decile 2	Term 1, 2010	Primary	Not provided (9)
Decile 2	Term 1, 2010	Other	Not provided (60)
Decile 2	Term 3, 2011	Primary	40
Decile 2	Term 1, 2009	Other	Not provided (13)
Decile 3	Term 1, 2009	Other	20
Decile 4	Term 1, 2009	Secondary	60
Decile 4	Term 4, 2010	Primary	16-20
Alternative	Term 3, 2011	Other	24
			388-462

1. Numbers in brackets refer to data extracted from Fonterra website

APPENDIX 6 FRUIT IN SCHOOLS

Decile	Pupils involved
Decile 1	181
Decile 1	237
Decile 1	202
Decile 1	137
Decile 1	42
Decile 2	29
Decile 2	40
Decile 2	87
Decile 2	211
Decile 2	270
Decile 2	235
Total	1671

APPENDIX 7 ENVIRO SCHOOLS

Decile	Pupils involved
Decile 1	137
Decile 1	202
Decile 1	42
Decile 2	270
Decile 3	130
Decile 4	413
Decile 4	114
Decile 4	146
Total	1454

APPENDIX 8 LOCAL PROVIDER

School	Number of lunches
School 1	30 weekly
School 2	25 weekly
School 3	25 fortnightly
School 4	35 weekly
School 5	25 weekly
School 6	30 weekly
Total	170 weekly

APPENDIX 9 FOOD PARCEL DISTRIBUTION

Agency	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep
Salvation Army: food parcel service	274	297	300	216	249	257	261	252	243
Salvation Army: budgeting	17	13	13	22	12	17	19	11	17
Provider 2	No data available								
Provider 3		8	5	2	9	7	10	5	7
Provider 4		7	1	3	3	5	6	2	
Provider 5	11	25	21	17	21	16	See below		
Provider 6	7/10 week								
Provider 7	7/8 month								
Provider 8	3-4 a month - sometimes more in school holidays								
Provider 9	8 food parcels								
Provider 10	20-30 since beginning of year								
3 Provider groups	Re-distribute to their membership								
2 Provider groups	Distribute Top-up food parcels, recipients charged \$10								
	Up to 50 a week								
Gardens	Distribute food from their gardens when or as required								

Provider 4: July to September activity 547 budgeting clients (500 previous three months) 205 new clients, (compared to 217 in the previous three months) and spent \$2,260 on emergency food assistance (\$1725 previous three months). So less people but a greater need.

APPENDIX 9 FOOD IN SCHOOLS

Decile	Kickstart (weekly)	Lunches (weekly)	Fruit in schools (daily)	KidsCan	Other	Roll
Decile 1		15-25	181		Casual breakfast 12-15 weekly	181
Decile 1	50-60	30	237	On demand		237
Decile 1	50	All			Morning tea	25
Decile 1	1 family	25	202		Enviro school	202
Decile 1	40-60	25	137		Enviro-school	137
Decile 1	6-30		42		Enviro school	42
Decile 2		30				255
Decile 2	Not provided (9)		29			29
Decile 2			40		Garden, fruit trees, chickens	40
Decile 2		30	87		Garden	87
Decile 2	Not provided (60)					482
Decile 2		10-15	211			211
Decile 2	40	24-35	270	On demand	Enviro-school, garden	270
Decile 2	Not provided (13)		235	On demand		235
Decile 3	20				Soup in winter Enviro-school garden, fruit trees	130
Decile 3						192
Decile 4						203
Decile 4		1-3			Enviro-school	413
Decile 4					Enviro-school	114
Decile 4	16-20				Enviro school, cook produce	146
Decile 4	60					446
Decile 4						39
Decile 4	No longer provided					608
Decile 4		5				549
Alternative	24	All			Cooked lunch	12
Total	388-462	232-260	1671	743		5285