

**REALITIES  
OF FOOD  
INSECURITY FOR  
YOUNG PEOPLE**  
INSIGHTS  
FROM THE 2021  
AUSTRALIAN  
YOUTH  
BAROMETER

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**MONASH  
YOUTH POLICY  
AND EDUCATION  
PRACTICE**



**MONASH**  
University

## ABOUT US

The Monash Centre for Youth Policy and Education Practice (CYPEP) is a multi-disciplinary research centre based in the Faculty of Education at Monash University. We undertake research into the social, political and economic factors, forces and trends that affect young people's lives. By focusing on issues that affect young people, and on developing policy and educational interventions to address youth disadvantage and amplify youth advantage, CYPEP aims to identify the challenges to, and opportunities for, building thriving communities for young people today and throughout their lives.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# 01

## PREFACE

When we published the 2021 Australian Youth Barometer last year, we provided only a small sample of data collected from our national survey of 505 young Australians and interviews with 30 more. In that report, we promised to conduct deeper analysis and to dive into particular areas of the findings to examine how they intersected. This is the second such deep dive, which looks into the experiences and realities of food insecurity for young people. This report presents new, as yet unpublished, data and analysis to complement the Youth Barometer.

We think food insecurity is an important topic, not only because the pandemic has amplified experiences of food insecurity across a range of age groups, but because this issue deserves urgent attention and a particular focus on young people. As an issue in Australia, food insecurity is under-researched and often hidden because of the stigma attached to lacking sufficient food.

Too many young Australians have limited or uncertain physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, nutritious, and culturally relevant food. A key finding in the 2021 Australian Youth Barometer was that 20.8% of young Australians had experienced food insecurity at some point in the previous two years. This period encompassed COVID-19, and the associated social and economic impacts of lockdowns. Nonetheless, it may surprise some readers that in a supposedly prosperous country, young people from a wide variety of groups experience food insecurity at various points of their lives.

Food insecurity is also important because it is connected to wider challenges experienced by young people. It can lead to serious adverse health outcomes and depression; it can affect study and workforce productivity; and it can reflect wider issues such as feelings of not belonging, exclusion and isolation. It is also striking that food insecurity is an issue in a country that until recently has experienced unbroken decades of economic growth.

We hope that this report contributes to knowledge and discussion of this important issue, and how we need to work together to respond to it.

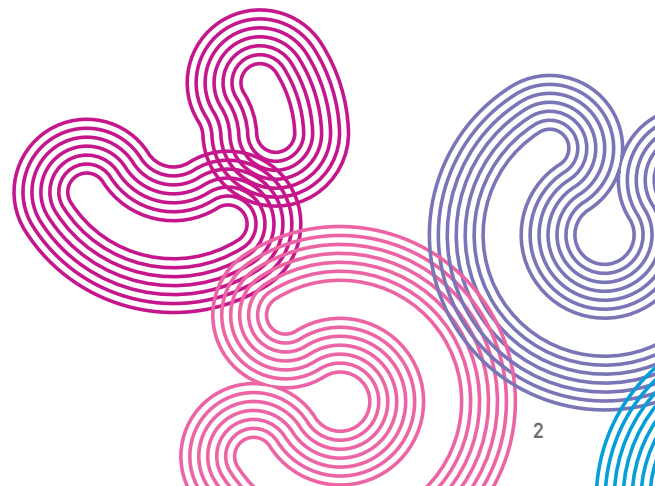


Professor Lucas Walsh  
*Director, Centre for Youth Policy and  
Education Practice*

# 02

## KEY FINDINGS

- Secure access to nutritious and available food is a human right, but **food insecurity** is a multifaceted problem that is **invisible among Australia's youth population**.
- In 2021, **20.8%** of young Australians had **experienced food insecurity** in the previous two years.
- In 2021, **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, and young people with a disability** were **more likely** to experience food insecurity.
- **Financial stability is a key factor:** 75.8% of those who experienced financial difficulties in 2021 also experienced food insecurity.
- **Employment is a key factor:** 35.2% of those who were out of work but looking for a job experienced food insecurity.
- **Where young people live is a key factor:** 50.5% of those who reported that very often the food they wanted to buy was not available in their suburb or town, also reported experiencing food insecurity.
- **COVID-19 intersected multiple dimensions of young people's lives,** shaping their experience of food insecurity: 38.5% of those who reported their mental health was very significantly impacted by COVID-19 also experienced food insecurity.





# 03

## FORWARD

We asked members of the CYPEP Youth Reference Group to reflect on the key findings of this paper and to consider the results in the context of their own experience.

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International students are likely to have particular diet needs, or to consume food materials that are not popular in their host country. During the pandemic, international food supply chains are influenced, meaning that international students have limited access to their preferred food. On top of that, the surge in food price means international students need to develop a tight budget to survive during the pandemic. Moreover, the existing currency rate between Asian students' home countries and Australia means that international students need to bear greater financial pressure on food purchasing.

YUQI: INTERNATIONAL STUDENT EXPERIENCES

“

COVID-19 in particular amplifies the issue of food insecurity. Rising prices for food are one of the causes of food insecurity. When I go out shopping or eating, I feel everything is more expensive than before COVID. This could impact the way people choose food and limit their options to the food they could afford rather than what is healthier for their bodies. University students are very vulnerable to food insecurity. Students, mainly aged between 18-25, are usually full-time students. Cooking is a time-consuming task because you need to go shopping, wash the food, cut it, cook the meal, and wash the dishes. When there are many assignments, it is usually quite hard to cook meals every day. Students may prefer to eat outside to save time. However, it is not cheap to eat outside, so students may choose cheaper but unhealthy places.

CANDICE: COVID-19 AND THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

“

For international students, COVID-19 also exacerbates the issue of food insecurity. Suppose they get COVID, unlike local students having the support from family, international students are far from home. It is hard for them to get food outdoors. University could have the service to deliver vegetables and fruits to their home, so they do not need to worry about getting food or solely rely on Uber. The link between food security and location feels significant. Yes, food security is a big socio-economic issue, but it also speaks to how Australian cities are designed, Melbourne in particular. We need outer suburban hubs that reflect the communities who live there. This is particularly a concern in the North and West (Craigieburn, Greenvale, Werribee, Point Cook etc.), which are increasingly ethnically diverse. People who live there shouldn't have to travel outside of their suburb to find affordable, culturally appropriate food. Glen Waverley/Box Hill/Clayton/Dandenong even are similar areas that might be a bit further along in this regard. Transport is also a clearly interlinked issue. Regarding international students, I'm conscious of pushing back on the widespread assumption that international students are all wealthy. Their families may not be in the position to support them (financially, geographically, emotionally etc.) as much as might be assumed by mainstream Australian society.

MARK: URBAN DESIGN AND ACCESS ISSUES

“

I find it disappointing that it's so easy to access unhealthy food yet so difficult to find cheap and affordable healthy food. There are fast food outlets everywhere, making it difficult not to stop by the drive through and get a quick meal. I can understand that it's not the most affordable business model but I think it's an important investment that private enterprise, government and other stakeholders need to consider as I imagine there are a lot of hidden effects of continually eating unhealthy food (especially for emerging generations, for example, the hidden cost of obesity). Additionally, it's so important to be able to provide all young people with the opportunity to learn about healthy food in a culturally appropriate way as they are making their way through the education system. I remember in primary school we had very little funds as a school to provide cooking classes (which disappeared after I graduated), when in fact it's the best time to teach young people as they can also share what they learn in multi-generational families back home.

ANDREW: HEALTHY FOOD, FOOD ENVIRONMENTS AND EDUCATION

# 04

## INTRODUCTION

One in five young Australians reported experiencing food insecurity during their lives in a 2021 survey<sup>1</sup>. This rate is too high. It is incumbent on researchers to provide a richer, more nuanced understanding of young people's experiences so that targeted policy responses, evidence-based programs and services at the federal, state and local levels can be designed to support young people and reduce this rate. This paper represents an entry point into a deeper, critical investigation of young people and food insecurity, and seeks to locate this issue front and centre in the discussion about young people and their post-COVID recovery.

Despite its high prevalence, food insecurity is hidden behind a veil of shame and stigma and obscured by poor understanding and recognition in the community. Common measurement tools, such as those used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, fail to adequately capture the broad spectrum of food insecurity experiences. Properly measuring the problem is vitally important because such findings are used to justify and inform interventions designed to address the impacts of food insecurity. While COVID-19 has highlighted the phenomena in recent months, there is still a substantial way to go in terms of understanding young people's experiences and coping strategies and identifying effective solutions to the myriad impacts of food insecurity.

This paper represents a 'deep dive' into the data that was collected as part of the 2021 Australian Youth Barometer<sup>1</sup>. The Barometer was a representative, mixed methods study with a sample of over 500 young people living in each Australian state and territory in mid-2021. Food insecurity was a key issue identified by the young participants. This paper provides an exploration into the complexity and significance of young people's experiences sourcing and accessing food in Australia. While financial struggles are a key cause of food insecurity, other exacerbating factors include problems procuring healthy food, geography, limited nutrition literacy, and having insufficient opportunity to cook and prepare ingredients. Accessibility, affordability and availability of healthy food are key dimensions that shape food insecurity.

Food insecurity is an issue not limited to food, nutrition and eating. The complex impacts of food insecurity are diverse, encompassing both the psychological and the physical. There can be stigma attached to food insecurity, which can result in stress and feelings of shame<sup>2</sup>, which in turn can affect belonging, mental health and wellbeing.

In high income countries like Australia, food insecurity is an unseen issue. While young people have been at increased risk of food insecurity since before COVID-19, the issue is beginning to gain visibility after being highlighted by the deprivations of the pandemic. Nonetheless, there is much that is still unknown about the dynamics of food insecurity among young people in Australia. It is not within the scope of this paper to provide an exhaustive analysis of food insecurity among young people; however, it does emphatically show that it is a substantial problem.

Our findings are presented here in a series of themes representing participants' experiences and discussions of food insecurity. These themes include financial challenges, access, relationships and wellbeing, education and work, and COVID-19.

# 05

## BACKGROUND

The most widely accepted definition of food and nutrition security is the one adopted by the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), which states that food security is permanent “physical, social and economic access to food, which is safe and consumed in sufficient quantity and quality to meet their dietary needs and food preferences, and is supported by an environment of adequate sanitation, health services and care, allowing for a healthy and active life”<sup>3</sup>. This definition encompasses four dimensions of food security<sup>4</sup>:

### 1. Availability

The physical existence of sufficient and good quality food that is affordable, nutritious and meets dietary needs and preferences.

### 2. Accessibility

The ability to use physical or financial resources to acquire safe, affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate food.

### 3. Utilisation

The ability to transform food into a safe, nutritionally adequate and culturally appropriate meal that meets all physiological needs.

### 4. Stability

The presence of the three former dimensions at all times.





More recently, the commonly cited FAO definition of food security has been extended to include two additional dimensions: agency (the ability of individuals to maintain control over their own situation) and sustainability (not superseding the requirements of future generations)<sup>5</sup>.

Socio-demographic factors, such as unemployment or under-employment, housing, geographic location and access to financial resources, also shape and inform experiences of food insecurity<sup>6</sup>. Availability and accessibility of healthy food from fresh produce retailers such as supermarkets and greengrocers, versus unhealthy food from fast food chains, are further markers of food insecurity. In Australian cities, residents in inner suburbs have easier access to healthy food than people living on the periphery<sup>7</sup>. Availability and access are also greater in socioeconomically advantaged areas<sup>8</sup>. In most areas, access to food outlets is substantially improved with access to a car<sup>9</sup>.

Challenges obtaining culturally appropriate food are an additional factor in access and availability of food. This is especially pertinent in Australia which has a culturally and ethnically diverse population in which 49% of people are born overseas or have one parent born overseas<sup>10</sup>. Problems accessing culturally appropriate food can be related to limited knowledge about food outlets, transport needed to access food, acquiring appropriate cooking implements, and lack of knowledge about storing and cooking local food<sup>11</sup>. Among University students, food insecurity is a problem on campuses where young people experience an intersection of disadvantages<sup>12</sup>. People with a disability are also more vulnerable to food insecurity, particularly those experiencing mental ill-health, and disabled young adults<sup>13</sup>. Challenges with accessibility, both in the home and beyond, are substantial barriers that contribute to food insecurity among those with a disability.

The dynamics of access and availability are thus related to young people's ability to move within their local spaces freely, the availability of appropriate food nearby, and for those from culturally diverse backgrounds, the ability to procure culturally appropriate food.

During the pandemic, food insecurity has become more visible in Australia<sup>14, 23</sup>. Food stability has been disrupted by a combination of limited availability, accessibility, and ability to adequately prepare foods. Prior to COVID-19, discussions about having enough to eat were often confined to those experiencing the most extreme forms of poverty and disadvantage, but the pandemic has driven new groups into food-vulnerable states<sup>15</sup>. The circumstances of broad-scale social and economic lockdowns have highlighted a new range of disadvantages experienced by young people, including material deprivation<sup>16</sup>. Research from previous economic downturns shows that young people are likely to suffer first, and in the long-term<sup>17</sup>.

Most previous work on young people's food insecurity in Australia reports on data pre-dating COVID-19 and considers ongoing experiences of food insecurity. So, although the impacts of the pandemic are palpable, there is a need to gain a better understanding of food insecurity and coping mechanisms associated with chronic, episodic or cyclical experiences of food vulnerability<sup>18, 19</sup>. Such experiences pre-dated the pandemic and will undoubtedly persist in various forms.



# 06

## FOOD INSECURITY AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE TODAY

Reported rates of food insecurity among young people vary substantially due to the different measures used and how these measures define food insecurity.

Differing results also reflect the profound difficulty associated with understanding and measuring such a complex, hidden phenomena. Food insecurity rates are not regularly measured on a national level in Australia. The most recent Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) National Health Survey which measured food insecurity for which data is available was 2011–12. It identified that 4% of people 'lived in a household that, in the previous 12 months, had run out of food and could not afford to buy more'. In addition, 1.5% were in a household in which 'someone went without food when they couldn't afford to buy any more'. Rates of food insecurity were higher among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Twenty-two per cent reported that they were 'living in a household where someone went without food when household supplies ran out'<sup>20</sup>.

Research conducted among young Australians using a range of longer, more detailed measurement tools indicated that food insecurity rates are higher compared with the general population. While it is difficult to draw direct comparisons due to the different measurement tools used, these results paint a picture of pre-COVID-19 food insecurity among young people in Australia. Drawing on pre-COVID-19 data, one study conducted at the University of Tasmania found that 38% of students had experienced food insecurity<sup>15</sup> while at the University of Newcastle, 48% of students experienced food insecurity<sup>16</sup>. In a study from 2018, 14% of students indicated that they had gone without food or other necessities due to financial hardship. Rates were higher among students from low-socio economic backgrounds (18%); those from regional places (19%); and among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (26.8%)<sup>21</sup>.

The impacts of COVID-19 have had a substantial impact on rates and experiences of food insecurity among young people in Australia. Data published by food aid agencies indicate that greater numbers have sought their support during the pandemic<sup>11</sup>. For instance, between 2019 and 2020, those who accessed food relief at least once a week doubled in number. Young people aged between 18 and 25 years were the group who experienced the greatest impacts during COVID-19, with 65% indicating that they had been unable to afford enough food at least once a week<sup>11</sup>. While demand has mostly come from those on low incomes, those who are unemployed, those with mental ill-health, and those who are experiencing homelessness, others who have not traditionally experienced food insecurity have also sought food aid during COVID-19. For example, 28% of those seeking food aid during the pandemic said they had not experienced food insecurity in the past, and these were most likely to be young people, those casually employed and international students<sup>11</sup>.

# 07

## METHODS

This paper is based on data collected for the 2021 Australian Youth Barometer<sup>1</sup>. The aim of the Barometer was to gain a broad understanding of the pressures young Australians are living under and provide insights into what the post-COVID world might look like for young people.

The research team used a mixed-methods approach, collecting 505 survey responses plus interviews with other 30 young people during August and September 2021. Participants were aged between 18 and 25 years and were living in urban and regional areas in each Australian state and territory (with the exception of Tasmania for interview participants). Both the survey and interviews explored a range of topics of relevance to young people in Australia today, including education, employment, health and wellbeing, finances, housing, civic participation and the impacts of COVID-19. The two datasets were analysed in a complementary, iterative fashion. A subset of interviews with those who reported experiencing food insecurity are reported on in this paper.

The survey asked participants a single question to capture their experience of food insecurity directly: 'In the last two years, was there any time you have run out of food and were unable to purchase more'. According to the answer to this question, in the survey sample, 105 respondents reported experiencing food insecurity, 385 reported not experiencing food insecurity and 15 preferred not to disclose information about food insecurity. The quantitative analysis used statistical tests with probability weights to study if experiences of food insecurity varied among subgroups of the population. All the reported findings are statistically significant.

Only a small number of interview participants disclosed that they had experienced some form of food insecurity, as defined by the FAO. However, even the disclosures reported in this paper are insightful and telling of the vast experience of food insecurity among young people in Australia. Their explanations, and experiences are included below. Please refer to Annexure A for more information about the methods used in this report.

# 08

## FINDINGS

In this paper, we look at how experiences in relation to education, work, finance, wellbeing and COVID-19 impacted experiences of food insecurity among young people in Australia. The conditions of the pandemic have shaped many of these experiences and deepened experiences of food insecurity in some cases. However, ongoing, episodic and cyclical experiences of food security have proved difficult to capture and adequately measure.

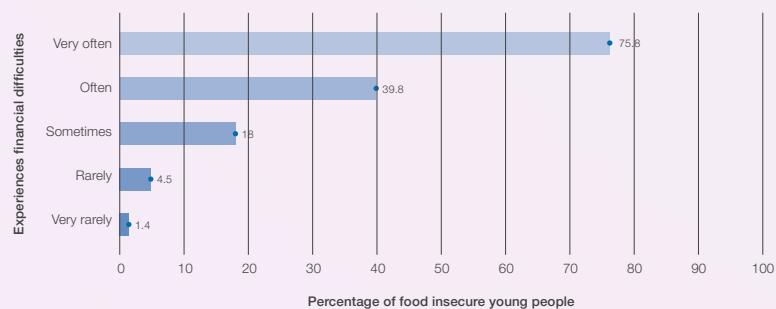
As reported in the Youth Barometer survey, 20.8% of young Australians experienced food insecurity in the last two years<sup>1</sup>. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, and young people with a disability were more likely to experience food insecurity. However, there are no significant differences by age, gender, location (metropolitan or regional/rural), socioeconomic background or country of birth. While it is difficult to extrapolate demographic trends from the interview data, others have reported similar findings regarding those with a disability<sup>13,22</sup>, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people<sup>23</sup>.

Among the total cohort of interview participants, a few indicated having experienced food insecurity in some form. There were no notable trends linked with participants' home state or territory. A small number spoke about more severe forms of food insecurity characterised by previous and ongoing experiences with limited accessibility and stability of food over time<sup>4</sup>. These participants discussed regularly going hungry during periods of food insecurity, and lacking financial resources to maintain a stable connection with accessible food sources. For interviewees, financial deprivation, mental health struggles and living outside the city compounded, resulting in limited opportunity to purchase nutritious food and having to skip meals. Several others articulated a less severe form of food insecurity. For these participants, chronic financial struggles were less an issue; rather time constraints, religious dietary requirements, and maintaining a vegetarian or vegan diet were food preferences that could not always be managed. The pandemic has been a shaping dynamic in participants' physical and economic access to sufficient and nutritious food. This impact was demonstrated in the Youth Barometer data among young people in rural and regional areas, where grocery prices increased and availability of certain products became limited.

## FINANCIAL CHALLENGES

Experiencing financial difficulties is strongly associated with experiencing food insecurity<sup>25</sup>. Specifically, 75.8% of those who experienced financial difficulties also experienced food insecurity. This compares with 4.5% of those who rarely and 1.4% of those who very rarely experienced financial difficulties also experiencing food insecurity.

**FIGURE 1: PROPORTION (PER CENT) OF YOUNG PEOPLE EXPERIENCE FINANCIAL DIFFICULTIES. EFFECTIVE SAMPLE SIZE: 505. SURVEY ASKED: HOW OFTEN HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED FINANCIAL DIFFICULTIES IN THE LAST 2 YEARS?**





Similar findings linking financial struggle with food insecurity were demonstrated in the interviews.

Consistent with the literature<sup>18,1,8</sup>, university students experiencing money challenges have struggled with food insecurity. This finding was demonstrated by one participant who explained that when he was a university student, his diet was characterised by cheaper, less nutritious alternatives due to lack of money. While this was described as a past experience, and lack of availability was not a central concern, his experience exemplifies that of many university students<sup>18,20</sup> with similar, episodic struggles. This was a clear example of the type of food insecurity that is easily dismissed as a 'typical university experience' and therefore more easily ignored. Even if this is not an example of severe food insecurity, having to settle for less nutritious food due to financial constraints is a clear expression of food insecurity irrespective of who is experiencing it, and whether or not they were chronically hungry. Broader implications related to mental health or educational participation are flow-on effects related to such forms of food insecurity.

“

Probably when I was [in my] first year at Uni, because [I was] only able to work five or 10 hours a week with study and stuff ... [I ate] a lot of rubbish ... [because] It was just cheaper. We didn't have a lot of money, but we were never hungry or anything ... we'd be eating, like, food that wasn't as good. Like, quick, easy, that kind of thing.

MAN, 24-YEARS-OLD, METRO

A small group of participants described more severe forms of food insecurity associated with financial hardship, characterised by not having enough money to purchase groceries in local supermarkets. Episodic experiences in which past periods were characterised by unstable access to food<sup>4</sup>, including having to skip meals, or limited availability of suitable food in rural areas, were described by one participant. Careful budgeting, purchasing food while it was cheaper and limiting food purchases when it was more expensive, were strategies to mitigate food insecurity.

“

There've been times where I've been broke, so I'd rather get my daughter and my partner something [to eat], before I get something for myself ... Definitely [there is a] lack of food sources down here [in the country, it's] ... becoming so dear now, so expensive ... I'd rather eat cheaper things so I can at least eat, and not feel sick for not eating ... [This happens] just every now and again, it's not all the time ... when like, things go on special, then I'll be able to buy them. But if it's not on special, I'll get the smallest amount to last us a day or something.

WOMAN, 24-YEARS-OLD, RURAL

Another participant unequivocally answered that they had been in situations where they were not able to eat sufficient and nutritious food. The participant spoke about their background and how their previous experiences of material and financial struggle, alongside family dysfunction, had shaped their experiences of food insecurity.

“

Currently, it's more so having to find cheaper [food] alternatives, or things that are maybe a little bit less nutritious ... growing up, I lived in a home where a lot of the time we didn't have all the food that we needed ... I guess I've always grown up very conscious about food, what's being bought and what's not, if that makes sense.

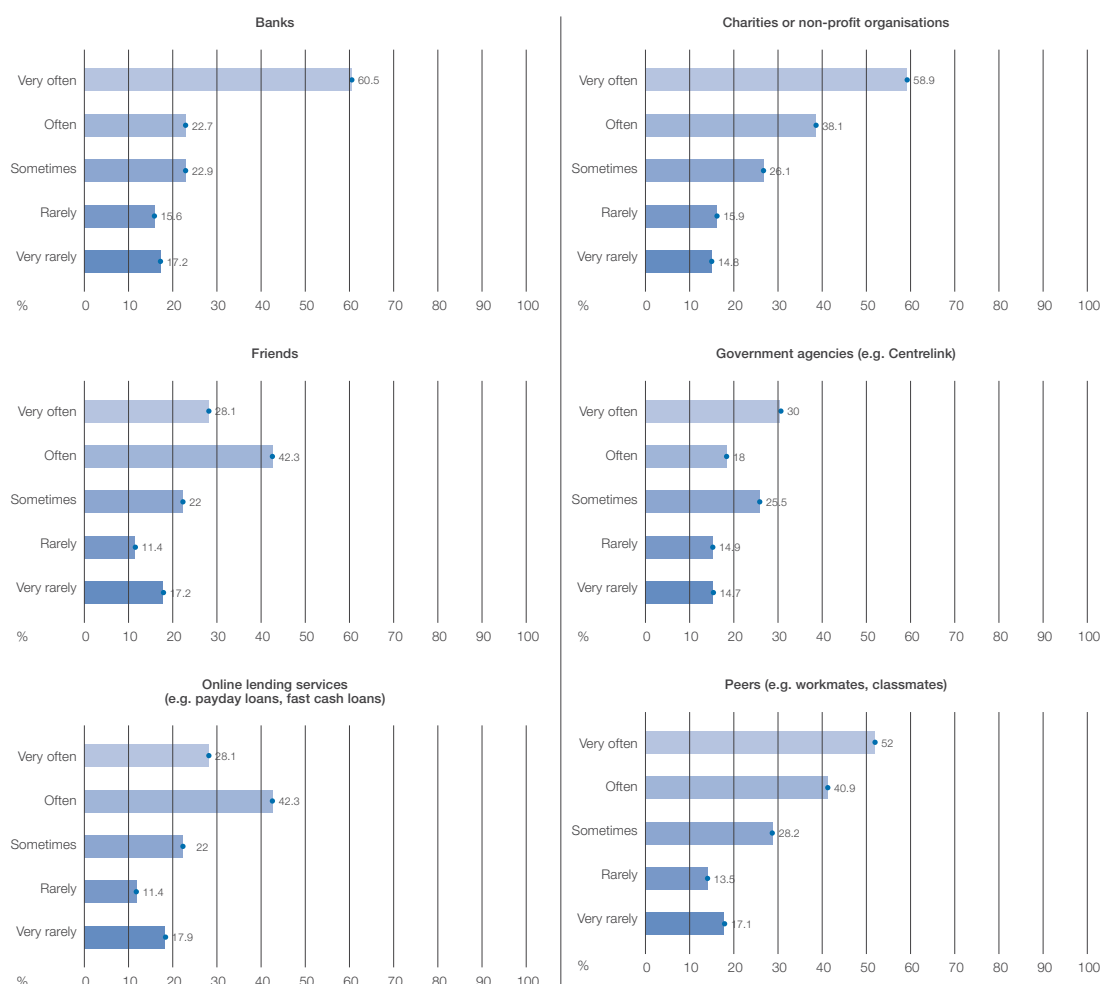
TRANS NON-BINARY, 20-YEARS-OLD, METRO

Having to settle for less nutritious food due to financial constraints is a clear expression of food insecurity irrespective of who is experiencing it, and whether or not they were chronically hungry.



There are differences in the prevalence of food insecurity among young people according to whom they would approach for help during times of financial difficulty. For example, 58.9% of those who said that they would very often approach charities or non-profit organisations for help experienced food insecurity. In comparison, 14.8% of those who said they would only very rarely approach these organisations experienced food insecurity. Similarly, those who would more frequently approach banks, online lending services, peers, friends and government agencies when experiencing financial difficulties are more likely to experience food insecurity. In turn, those who would approach family members often or very often are as likely to be food insecure as those who would only approach them rarely or very rarely. These findings indicate that young people seek help from particular sources when experiencing food insecurity, with charities and non-profit organisations clearly a common avenue for support.

**FIGURE 2: PROPORTION (PER CENT) OF FOOD INSECURE YOUNG PEOPLE WHO USE DIFFERENT SOURCES OF FINANCIAL SUPPORT. EFFECTIVE SAMPLE SIZE: 505. SURVEY ASKED: WHERE WOULD YOU GO FOR HELP IF YOU RAN SHORT OF MONEY?**





## ACCESS

Where people live can be a key determinant in the availability and access to food<sup>5</sup>. Young people who report that very often they do not find the food they want to buy in their suburb or town (50.5%) or who need to travel more than an hour away from home to shop for food (52.2%) are more likely to report experiencing food insecurity than those who are only very rarely in these situations (6.4% and 12.6%, respectively). Food options are more limited for participants who lived in suburbs not well connected to public transport, and where residents are more likely to require cars to get around. The results confirm that location matters in the explanation of food insecurity.

Another aspect of food insecurity is being able to source culturally appropriate food<sup>8</sup>. One participant explained that they were not always able to maintain religious or cultural food requirements due to poor access. Sourcing halal food was unreliable at times, forcing them to resort to vegetarianism or veganism.



I'm a Muslim, so I can only eat halal food, so there are times here and there when obviously I can't eat when I want to because I can't guarantee that it's halal or not. So, for me, it's just safer not to eat it [so] I'll just try to find, nine times out of ten, I just look for a vegetarian or vegan option.

MAN, 20-YEARS-OLD, METRO

Other participants discussed the problem of access while maintaining vegetarian or vegan diets. Quality and nutritious options were not always available, particularly outside the city. One participant noted that they needed to be prepared by bringing their own appropriate foods and snacks in anticipation of not being able to source vegan food.



I'm finding that a lot of places don't provide the same sort of quality and care for vegetarian food, or even vegan food, that they do to [for] things like chicken and beef ... There's a lot of places that just don't cater to vegetarian needs.

NON-BINARY, 24-YEARS-OLD, METRO

## RELATIONSHIPS AND WELLBEING

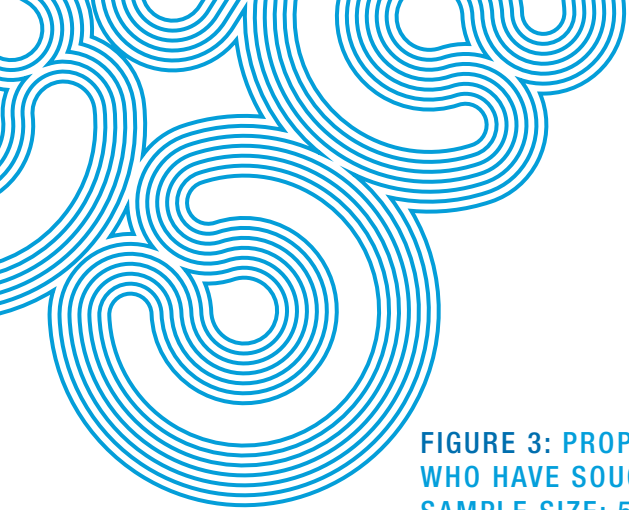
Food insecurity experiences are also linked to social experiences and eating meals with others. For instance, 61% of those who report very often not being able to go out to eat with friends or family due to lack of money, have also experienced food insecurity. In contrast, 3% of those who report very rarely not being able to go out to eat with friends or family due to lack of money experience food insecurity.

Those who report more often feeling stressed about their relationship with friends, family members and romantic partners are also more likely to experience food insecurity. Food insecurity was also higher among those who often feel stressed about their body image.

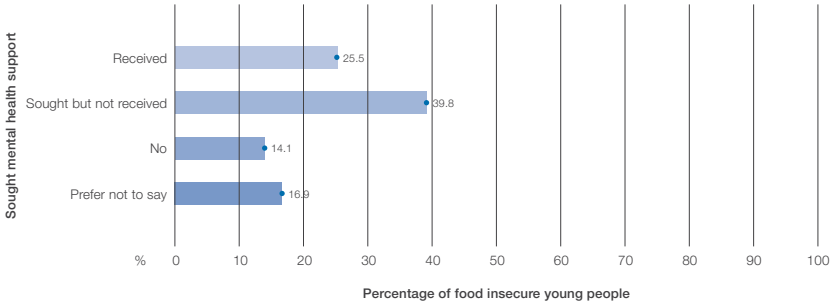
In terms of wellbeing, while there was no clear association between mental health self-ratings and experiencing food insecurity, there were some relationships indicating mental health and food insecurity are interconnected<sup>26</sup>.

For example, over one-quarter of those who report receiving mental health support\* and 39.4% of those who sought it but did not receive it, respectively, also experienced food insecurity. Of those who did not seek mental health support, 14.1% experienced food insecurity.

Those who report more often feeling stressed about their relationship with friends, family members and romantic partners are also more likely to experience food insecurity. Food insecurity was also higher among those who often feel stressed about their body image.



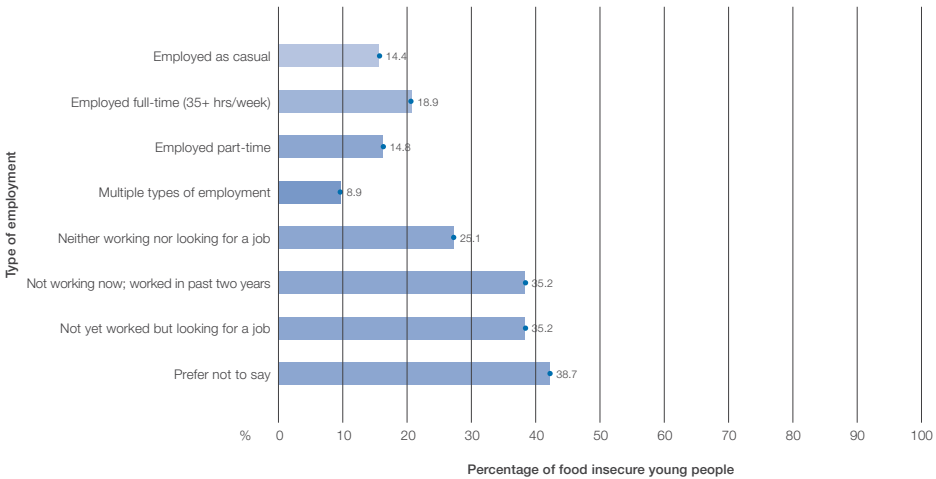
**FIGURE 3: PROPORTION (PER CENT) OF YOUNG PEOPLE WHO HAVE SOUGHT MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT. EFFECTIVE SAMPLE SIZE: 505. SURVEY ASKED: HAVE YOU SOUGHT MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT WITHIN THE LAST 2 YEARS?**



**EDUCATION AND WORK**

According to the Youth Barometer survey, being enrolled in some form of tertiary education does not affect a young person’s likelihood of experiencing food insecurity. However, the prevalence of food insecurity does vary by employment status<sup>27</sup>. For example, 35.2% of those who were out of work but looking for a job experienced food insecurity; 18.9% of those who were employed full-time and 14.8% of those employed part-time also experienced food insecurity. Similarly, 24.9% of those who are underemployed experienced food insecurity, compared with 8.1% of those who were not.

**FIGURE 4: PROPORTION (PER CENT) OF YOUNG PEOPLE BY TYPE OF EMPLOYMENT. EFFECTIVE SAMPLE SIZE: 505. SURVEY ASKED: DO YOU CURRENTLY WORK?**





The impacts of COVID-19 are strongly linked to food insecurity. Half of those who reported their financial situation was very significantly impacted by COVID-19 also experienced food insecurity.

One interviewee attributed occasional skipped or late meals to a lack of time owing to his work and study commitments. Studying a postgraduate degree and working in an exhausting, mentally taxing job, the participant explained that making time to prepare nutritious food was not always possible, leading to not eating at all in some instances.



I like to cook, but I just feel like I don't have as much time to do it at the moment, so probably my eating habits have slipped... sometimes I skip meals or have meals late, because I'm busy doing something... so I just go through with it and just not have lunch or have lunch at 3.00 pm or 4.00 pm, maybe 5.00 pm.

MAN, 24-YEARS-OLD, METRO

We did not identify any correlations between students' living arrangements (at home or independent) and food insecurity.

## COVID-19

The impacts of COVID-19 are strongly linked to food insecurity<sup>11,28</sup>. Half of those who reported their financial situation was very significantly impacted by COVID-19 also experienced food insecurity. In contrast, only 9.1% of those who report their financial situation was not impacted at all, experienced food insecurity. Similarly, only 10% of those who reported their mental health was not impacted by COVID-19 at all experienced food insecurity, whereas 38.5% of those who reported their mental health was very significantly impacted by COVID-19 experienced food insecurity.

COVID-19 and the pandemic also loomed large over interviews which were conducted in the midst of the pandemic, and during lockdown for some. Participants reflected on well documented food supply chain issues in which supermarket shelves were diminished and food choice was limited<sup>29</sup>. The cost of particular foods also became an issue for some participants, as did access and availability outside of metropolitan areas.



During the initial first lockdown in Queensland, [I] absolutely [struggled to access food, it] ... was extremely hard because people were panic buying everything ... I cannot buy anything ... I had to just eat whatever was really there. Sometimes I would have to spend more than I needed to because the one [type of food] I wanted, or even the cheaper one, wasn't available.

WOMAN, 21-YEARS-OLD, RURAL

The impacts of COVID-19 clearly intersected with, and highlighted, already existing dynamics that shape and distil food insecurity, such as financial struggle, mental health, social and familial relationships, as well as cost of, and access to, foods in both urban and rural areas.



# 09

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this study into young Australians' experiences of food insecurity provide some important insights into what can be a hidden, though prevalent, problem in contemporary Australian society. Some groups of young people are much more likely to report experiencing food insecurity than others, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders<sup>23</sup>, and people with a disability<sup>13,22</sup>. Financial difficulties are also strongly associated with food insecurity<sup>18</sup>.

Unsurprisingly, those out of work and looking for work, or who are underemployed, were more likely to experience food insecurity. An important component of the food insecurity experience was the physical access and availability of foods. Those who reported not being able to access suitable food in their local area, or having to travel outside their suburbs or towns to shop for food were more vulnerable to food insecurity.

Social relationships and mental health were additional mitigating circumstances. While there was no association with self-rated mental health, those who indicated seeking mental health support and not receiving it were more likely to report experiencing food insecurity. We infer from our findings that mental ill health and food insecurity were interrelated at different points in participants' lives. The connection between mental ill-health and food insecurity is well supported, and has been established by other researchers<sup>21,30</sup>. Further, feeling stressed about relationships with friends, family and romantic partners was another correlating factor in participants' experiences of food insecurity. It is likely that the link between mental ill health and food insecurity operates in both directions. Young people with mental ill-health are more likely to struggle to maintain a stable source of income and live in places where food is readily available, hence they are also more likely to experience food insecurity. But experiences of food insecurity can also lead to poor mental health.

People experiencing food insecurity were seeking help. Particular institutions and NGOs were cited as support avenues, but friends and family were not directly approached for help with the problems associated with food insecurity.

There are a multitude of food-aid support services accessible to young people, situated within university campuses, as part of community groups, council services, philanthropic organisations or NGOs. Nonetheless, there still appear to be substantial gaps and young people continue to fall through the cracks. The findings presented here highlight the need for local wrap-around solutions to food insecurity: ones that place young people at the centre, cater for people with diverse cultural and ability needs and tailor necessary services and supports that benefit young people.



# 10

## IMPLICATIONS

- **Being employed makes a substantial difference in terms of mitigating the likelihood of young people experiencing food insecurity.** Governments and policy-makers should be prepared to assist young people in times of high unemployment and under-employment. Assistance can take the form of directly securing access to sufficient nutritious and culturally appropriate food, potentially in alliance with food banks, or by increasing unemployment benefits for young people to a level that is in accordance with the cost of living. Similar options should be extended for young people who are underemployed.
- **Structural factors linked to higher rates of food insecurity need to be addressed.** Better support needs to be provided to young people who are not able to find appropriate, adequate food within proximity of home. This might include, for example, improved public transport infrastructure and guaranteeing availability of fresh, nutritious food in local areas.
- **There are services and organisations that are more likely to be approached by people experiencing food insecurity, such as mental health service providers.** These organisations could act as a point of reference to provide additional support for those experiencing food insecurity or direct young people to appropriate services. It is important that such services can provide timely and directed support when needed.
- **Food insecurity is a complex problem experienced by young people, combining financial and physical challenges to accessing food with other exacerbating factors, such as mental ill-health, family or social dysfunction, and location.** This means that wrap-around services that can identify and support young people experiencing a range of challenges would be best suited to address food insecurity.
- **Particular groups are more likely to experience food insecurity, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and those with a disability.** Proactive, strategic, culturally safe support for these groups is crucial.

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# ANNEXURE A

## METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Quotas were established for survey participants so that the composition of the survey sample matched the Australian population of 18 to 24-year-olds in terms of age and gender. Probability weights were used in the analysis to generalise the findings to the population of young people in Australia.

The survey data reported in this paper relies on comparisons between those who reported they had experienced food insecurity according to the validated ABS measure (modified from a 12-month reference period to two years) and those who had not. All the reported survey findings are statistically significant with at least a 90% confidence level.

The survey asked participants a single question to capture their experience of food insecurity directly: 'In the last two years, was there any time you have run out of food and were unable to purchase more?' While this is a single-item measure, it is validated by the ABS in their National Health Survey. A further question asked about other dimensions of food insecurity, such as the availability of food within the respondents' town or suburb, and their experiences of eating socially (see Annexure A for survey questions). The analysis allows us to explore whether those who experienced food insecurity had different experiences in other aspects of their lives, in comparison to those who did not. Responses from interviewees who indicated experiencing some form of food insecurity as defined by the FAO was analysed using the principles of thematic analysis<sup>24</sup>. A broad-brush collection of codes was identified initially, and these were refined throughout the analysis process using an iterative approach as cross-cutting themes were identified and others receded.

This is an exploratory study. Therefore, the differences in the risk of food insecurity between young people with different backgrounds and experiences reported in this paper do not provide any causal evidence.

Instead, the results capture multiple processes and experiences that we cannot separate, and that are compounded for people experiencing food insecurity. For example, those who would ask lending services for help when experiencing financial difficulties might be more likely to be food insecure because food insecurity may push people to borrow money as a way to cope with this experience (food insecurity may cause borrowing money), or because those who often borrow money end up in precarious circumstances that lead to food insecurity (borrowing money may cause food insecurity). Whatever the reason, it is important to activate mechanisms that support young people at risk of food insecurity. While the interview data provides an important complement to the survey data on food insecurity, only a small number of participants disclosed that there had been a time in their lives when they were not able to eat the kinds of food they needed. This small number is likely because this research did not strategically target young people experiencing food insecurity.



## WEIGHTED AND UNWEIGHTED SAMPLE COMPOSITION BY FOOD INSECURITY STATUS

	Food insecure				Food secure			
	Unweighted		Weighted		Unweighted		Weighted	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
<b>Age (years)</b>								
18	9	8.6	8.6	8.3	19	4.9	19	5
19	15	14.3	14.8	14.3	50	13	49	12.8
20	10	9.5	9.5	9.2	43	11.2	43.8	11.5
21	22	21	21.3	20.5	98	25.5	98.7	25.8
22	15	14.3	15.4	14.8	47	12.2	44.8	11.7
23	20	19	20.3	19.6	62	16.1	59	15.4
24	14	13.3	13.9	13.4	66	17.1	67.5	17.7
<b>Gender</b>								
Woman	56	53.3	48.2	46.4	206	53.5	180.8	47.3
Man	47	44.8	53.6	51.6	164	42.6	185.5	48.6
Non-binary/ gender diverse/ agender	2	1.9	2	2	15	3.9	15.6	4.1
<b>State</b>								
VIC	21	20	20	19.3	112	29.1	105.3	27.6
NSW	35	33.3	34.8	33.5	114	29.6	112.6	29.5
QLD	21	20	19.6	18.9	80	20.8	80.3	21
Other	28	26.7	29.4	28.3	79	20.5	83.8	21.9
<b>Location</b>								
Metro	82	78.1	82.6	79.5	319	83.3	318.3	83.8
Regional/Rural	23	21.9	21.3	20.5	64	16.7	61.6	16.2
<b>SES (postcode)</b>								
Low	22	21	20.3	19.5	56	14.7	53.1	14
Medium	41	39	41.3	39.8	142	37.2	145.3	38.3
High	42	40	42.2	40.7	184	48.2	180.6	47.6
<b>Born in Australia</b>								
Australia	94	89.5	92.8	89.4	331	86	330.2	86.4
Abroad	11	10.5	11	10.6	51	13.2	49	12.8
Prefer not to say	0	0	0	0	3	0.8	2.8	0.7
<b>First Nations</b>								
Yes	18	17.1	19.2	18.5	17	4.4	18	4.7
No	82	78.1	80	77	359	93.2	353.7	92.6
Don't know/ prefer not to say	5	4.8	4.6	4.5	9	2.3	10.3	2.7
<b>Disability</b>								
Yes	17	16.2	16.9	16.3	32	8.3	32.1	8.4
No	86	81.9	85.1	81.9	350	90.9	347	90.9
Prefer not to say	2	1.9	1.9	1.8	3	0.8	2.9	0.8

Note: Food insecurity status measured in response to the question: 'In the last 2 years, was there any time you have run out of food and were unable to purchase more?' Information for participants who responded 'Prefer not to say' has been omitted from the table. Effective sample size: 505. n: Number of young people; %: Percentage



## SURVEY QUESTIONS

# 1

In the last 2 years, was there any time you have run out of food and were unable to purchase more?

- ☐ Yes  
☐ No  
☐ Prefer not to say

# 2

In the last 2 years, how often, if ever, did you experience any of the following because of a lack of money?

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very often
1. You were worried you would not have enough to eat.	1	2	3	4	5
2. You were unable to eat healthy and nutritious food.	1	2	3	4	5
3. You ate only a few kinds of foods.	1	2	3	4	5
4. You had to skip meals.	1	2	3	4	5
5. You ate less than you thought you should.	1	2	3	4	5
6. Your household ran out of food.	1	2	3	4	5
7. You were hungry but did not eat.	1	2	3	4	5
8. You went without eating for a whole day.	1	2	3	4	5

# 3

In the last 2 years, how often, if ever, did you experience any of the following because of a lack of money?

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very often
1. You eat meals with family and / or friends	1	2	3	4	5
2. The food you want to buy is not available in the suburb or town where you live.	1	2	3	4	5
3. You could not go out to eat with friends or family due to lack of money.	1	2	3	4	5
4. You shop for food more than an hour from home.	1	2	3	4	5



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