

The right to eat well, no matter where you live

Australia's Right to Food Coalition exists to improve the health and wellbeing of all Australians by working to ensure equitable access to nutritious food. We are a Coalition of organisations, practitioners, researchers and community workers united in our cause.

In this position statement, we summarise challenges many households and communities face regarding *physical* access to nutritious food. We also outline effective policy and programs that can be developed and/or further supported to help everyone in Australia to eat well, no matter where they live.

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The challenge

The location in which people live is a major influence on what they eat, how they shop and what they can afford.

In a wealthy country like Australia where we produce enough food to feed 60 million people, everyone's right to food should be met. No matter the postcode – people in Australia should be free from hunger and able to access sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. Food insecurity is the experience of not being able to access enough affordable healthy food to eat. Conservative national estimates suggest that 4% of households experience food insecurity in Australia (1), although in some disadvantaged communities as many as one in four households are affected (2).



The consequences of food insecurity are far-reaching and long-lived. Food insecurity has been associated with lower household income, poorer general health, increased health-care utilisation and depression. These associations remained after adjustment for age, gender and household income (2). In food insecure households there are increasing risks for developmental issues in children and adverse impacts on family relationships. Food insecurity increases risk of chronic disease for all age groups, especially for women. Costs to the healthcare system related to food insecurity have been conservatively estimated as \$60 million per year in Tasmania alone (3); suggesting the costs are in the hundreds of millions of dollars across the nation.

The Australian government is failing to fulfil its obligation to guarantee the human right to food for at least 1.2 million people who don't have access to safe, affordable and nutritious food.



Regional and remote communities in Australia are at increased risk of food insecurity.

This occurs because:

- There are fewer grocery, convenience and specialised food stores like bakeries and butchers, in less populated regions. Recent research in Tasmania found that people, who live in regions with limited or no access to food shops, are less likely to be buying food consistent with healthy eating guidelines (4).
- Food can cost more in regional and remote settings. For example, in Western Australia, very remote residents pay 26.1% more for the same basket of food as residents in Perth (5).
- The proportion of household income spent on food in regional towns can be higher too. A healthy basket of food frequently costs up to 40% of the budget of low-income household (6).
- Natural disasters, like flooding or fire, can interrupt the long food supply chains we have created to get food into regional and remote communities. This can lead to food shortages and wastage (7).
- Food quality and quantity can be sub-optimal in remote community stores. Outback Stores in Western Australia, South Australia and Northern Territory, for example, have been found to sell poor quality fruit and vegetables and out of date food items (8).
- Regional and remote communities record lower median incomes than capital city areas, which means less money for food and fuel (9).

Urban low-income communities are at risk of food insecurity.

This occurs because:

- Low-income areas/suburbs have been found to have 2.5 times the exposure to fast food outlets and a limited range of healthier foods than higher income suburbs (10). Neighbourhoods in western Sydney have at least [a 3:1] ratio of takeaway shops to fresh food outlets, limiting the healthfulness of local foods (11) – this means increased access to unhealthy cheap food, with ramifications for health and wellbeing.
- Low income areas on the fringes of major cities often have poor transport to shops stocking healthy foods
- Food deserts exist if someone, irrespective of income, lives in a neighbourhood that does not have access to a healthy food source within a one km radius. Recent research in Tasmania showed that food deserts are



wide spread. Of the 353 shops that sell healthy groceries only 19 were located in areas where people on low incomes live. This means people living in these suburbs and towns are impacted (6).

- Gentrification of suburbs and cities can increase cost of living – including food and housing – and local shops that may have once offered affordable and/or culturally diverse foods may be replaced to cater for middle and upper-income residents.

On the ground, many of us struggle in our work to help tackle food insecurity because the human right to food is not universally respected, protected or fulfilled.

Some of the geographic and environmental based challenges we, the members of the Coalition, face include:

- Limited localised profile – there is a need for information about local food growing, food outlets and food costs. These profiles have not been uniformly developed across councils, although robust methodology exists (12).
- A preference for project-based funding for food security work through local and state governments can interrupt projects and/or threaten their sustainability. Efforts to address food insecurity need to be incorporated as core business of government.
- Funding constraints limit who can access emergency food relief. If people seek assistance they may only be granted access to the services in their local community. Emergency food relief work originates from where volunteers and faith-based services exist, rather than being informed by evidence on population based needs and strategy.
- Currently, access to affordable nutritious food is a concern for marginalised communities. This problem will increase and could threaten the population food supply and population health if urgent action is not taken to improve the sustainability and nutrition of the Australian food system (13).



The opportunities

The Coalition calls on all levels of Government to assist in tackling common determinants that impact physical access to affordable healthy food. Opportunities to intervene include:

Locally

- Localised profiles in order to plan, implement and evaluate effective food security policies across local government areas, primary health networks, states and territories.
- Town planning, including transport systems, need to accommodate human need and right to healthy food (14).
- Improve local food systems wherever possible through farm gate sales, investment in innovation and small business, support for local markets and localised food logistics.
- Strategically located emergency food relief and community programs to offer acute support, social inclusion and resilience where needs exist.

Nationally

- Ensure Centrelink payments take a true account of the cost of living and allow healthy food choices to be affordable for all Australians.
- National food plans must integrate knowledge about environmental, agricultural, social and nutrition systems to systemically respect, protect and fulfil the right to food.
- Disrupt complex food chains with unnecessary food miles by supporting regional food systems, food hubs and processing. This will help to maximise economic value captured by the producer and regional food businesses and minimise environmental impacts of food systems.

Overall, we need policies and programs at all levels of government, within and across towns and regions, to enable everyone the right to eat well, no matter the postcode.

To find out more or join our Coalition please get in touch

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