

## Household Food and Nutrition Security

### Policy Position Statement

#### Key messages:

Food insecurity is defined as inconsistent access to adequate nutritious food due to a lack of money (either due to low income and/or combined with the high cost of living) or other resources (including but not limited to transport, affordable housing with food preparation and storage facilities in working order).

Food insecurity and hunger are persistent social and public health issues. Food insecurity affects over 4 million Australians a year. Poverty is the main determinant.

Health consequences associated with food insecurity, including malnutrition, diet-related chronic diseases (such as obesity and diabetes), mental illness and sub-optimal child development<sup>1</sup>, exacerbate healthcare costs.

Charitable food relief, the dominant Australian response to food insecurity, is failing due to the chronicity of the problem, increasing demand for assistance, short and long-term circumstantial shocks (such as natural disasters and pandemics) that have highlighted the fragility of food supply chains, and a lack of focus on long-term pathways to food security.

#### Key policy positions:

A government-led, comprehensive, system-wide, cross-sectoral response across all relevant Ministerial portfolios is urgently needed to reduce food insecurity. This response should:

1. Address inadequate social protection payments, particularly JobSeeker, disability, and single parent allowances
2. Address the lack of affordable housing and the increasing costs of essential utilities, fuel and basic foods.
3. Attend to inadequate wages growth in the light of this increased cost of living.
4. Reform the charitable food relief system to ensure it is nutrition-focused, maintains human dignity and provides pathways to food security.
5. Uncouple food waste strategies/legislation from charitable food procurement to prioritise food waste prevention
6. Transform the remote workfare Community Development Program that actively undermines Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander food sovereignty and security
7. Provide continued investment and action to improve mental health via prevention and management (in time, in place) strategies, as well as mitigation strategies for domestic, family and personal violence, and the prevention of racism, all of which are linked with food insecurity<sup>2, 3</sup>.

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8. Implement routine monitoring and surveillance of food insecurity, its drivers and its impacts
9. Develop, fund and trial nutrition-sensitive specific actions to ameliorate food insecurity. This includes repairing fragilities in the food supply system and preparing for the impact and challenges of short and long-term circumstantial shocks.

**Audience:** Federal, State and Territory Governments, policymakers and program managers, PHAA members, media.

**Responsibility:** PHAA Food and Nutrition Special Interest Group

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# Household Food and Nutrition Security

## Policy position statement

### PHAA affirms the following principles:

1. Food is a human right under international law, that nation states are obligated to protect, respect and fulfil (Article 11 of the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* 1966).<sup>4</sup> Human dignity, implicit in the right to food, includes the ability to provide for oneself.<sup>5</sup>
2. An under-recognised social determinant of health, food insecurity relates to almost all of the Sustainable Development Goals: (1) no poverty, (2) zero hunger, (3) good health and well-being, (5) gender equality, (6) clean water and sanitation, (7) affordable and clean energy, (8) decent work and economic growth, (13) climate action, and (16) peace, justice and strong institutions.<sup>6</sup>
3. Food and nutrition security exists “when all people at all times have 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>7</sup>
4. Food insecurity, is the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate or safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire foods in socially acceptable ways and can be transitory or chronic and varies in severity.<sup>8,9</sup>
5. Australia has the economic resources to ensure all citizens are food secure, so it is unacceptable that any Australian has to experience food insecurity and rely on charitable food relief.
6. Nothing about us without us - involve those affected by food insecurity in the response. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples must be key stakeholders in policy action to address food insecurity with the right to participate in all decisions affecting them<sup>10</sup> including protecting and acknowledging their spiritual connection to the land and the food that it provides.<sup>11</sup> This includes transforming programs such as the Community Development workfare program that actively undermines Indigenous food sovereignty and security<sup>12,13</sup>
7. The solutions to address food insecurity include both nutrition-sensitive (e.g. non-health actors regulating labour and employment conditions, economic reform) and nutrition-specific (e.g. laws, policies and programs for food affordability, nutrition quality, including the GST exemption on fresh food, nutrition-focussed food banking policies, and *More than food* strategies).<sup>14-16</sup>
8. Food insecurity is exacerbated by both short and long-term shocks. Chronic food insecurity is experienced by households with low incomes and/or combined with a high cost of living<sup>17</sup>. However, recent natural disasters and the COVID-19 pandemics have highlighted the fragility of food supply chains, affecting food price and availability. This, along with the impact of a sudden loss of income, lockdowns, border closures and travel restrictions, has increased the risk of food insecurity among previously food secure households, but has particularly impacted those with more chronic food insecurity<sup>18-21</sup>.
9. Legislating the diversion of supermarket food waste to food charities is not the solution. Supermarkets’ zero waste initiatives push unsaleable food onto other actors without addressing waste throughout the

whole food system.<sup>22</sup> Supermarket food waste solutions should rationalise, reorganise and increase efficacy of their primary markets to be more effective and not create a secondary food market.<sup>23</sup>

10. Implementing this policy would contribute towards the achievement of [UN Sustainable Development Goals 3 and 12 – Good Health and Wellbeing](#) and [Sustainable Consumption and Production Patterns](#), respectively.

### PHAA notes the following evidence:

11. In 2011-12, 4% of Australian households overall and 22-31% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households were food insecure.<sup>24, 25</sup> This is likely an underestimate by 5-10% in the general population,<sup>26</sup> and 50% in very remote Aboriginal communities.<sup>27</sup>
12. Population sub-groups experience higher rates of food insecurity: 92-100% among homeless;<sup>28, 29</sup> 70% refugee and asylum seeker households;<sup>30-32</sup> 13% older households;<sup>33, 34</sup> 20-25% low to middle income<sup>35-37</sup>; 25-50% university students<sup>38-40</sup> and people living on social protection payments<sup>41</sup> and those living with disabilities.<sup>42</sup>
13. Poverty is the underlying determinant of food insecurity. In 2018 just over 3 million lived below the poverty line representing one in eight adults and one in six children<sup>43</sup>.
14. Food insecurity is linked with adverse childhood experiences, trauma, structural violence and mental health disorders. Food insecurity can only be managed if there is continued investment and action to improve mental health via prevention and management (in time, in place) strategies, as well as mitigation strategies for domestic, family and personal violence, and the prevention of racism<sup>2, 3</sup>.
15. The Australian welfare system is comprehensive, yet inadequate. JobSeeker recipients are 10 times more likely to be food insecure<sup>41</sup> and 100% of single mothers are likely to suffer food stress.<sup>44</sup>
16. Food charity is Australia's dominant response to food insecurity.<sup>45</sup> Although unsubstantiated with independent data, food banks, food rescue organisations and services report increasing demand and an inability to provide food relief to all.<sup>46, 47</sup>
17. The organisational capacity of the Australian charitable food system is precarious due to unreliable, insufficient and inappropriate financial, human and food resources and structures.<sup>48</sup>
18. Food provided by emergency food relief agencies is not always nutritious and can exacerbate health disparities.<sup>49, 50</sup>
19. Food charity recipients are grateful yet resigned to the monotony and poor quality of the food and the stigmatising and disempowering ways in which it is delivered.<sup>51-54</sup>
20. The social and public health burden of food insecurity includes increased risk of: all-cause and cardiovascular mortality<sup>55</sup>, diet-related chronic disease,<sup>56</sup> obesity,<sup>57</sup> mental health service utilisation,<sup>58</sup> healthcare costs,<sup>59, 60</sup> impaired child development,<sup>1, 36, 61, 62</sup> and lost economic productivity.<sup>63</sup>
21. The economic burden of food insecurity in Australia has not been measured. Food insecurity cost the US approximately \$167.5 billion in 2011 due to lost productivity, public education expenses, avoidable healthcare costs, and the cost of charity to keep families fed.<sup>63</sup>

## PHAA seeks the following actions:

22. Urgently develop an Australian Household Food and Nutrition Security Strategy to action the Sustainable Development Goals. The comprehensive, system-wide, cross-sectoral strategy is required across relevant government portfolios including Prime Minister and Cabinet (lead), Health, Finance, Treasury, Social Services, Agriculture and Water, Veterans Affairs, Environment and Energy.
23. Social protection payments should be increased to a liveable income to lift Australians out of poverty and reduce food insecurity. The JobSeeker rate was increased temporarily during COVID-19 lockdowns, but then subsequently decreased, resulting in increased food insecurity<sup>64</sup>. This was exacerbated by other factors such as a lack of affordable housing and the increasing cost of essential utilities (electricity, water, gas, communications) and transport<sup>65, 66</sup>. Thus, a permanent increase in JobSeeker by at least \$65 per day to ensure everyone has enough for the basics of their life is necessary<sup>67</sup>.
24. Extend the effectiveness of government food relief funding by exploring alternative options including partnering with the commercial sector, for example encouraging supermarkets to provide further discount on GST-exempt foods for food insecure shoppers.
25. Reform the charitable food relief system to ensure its efficiency and effectiveness, by reorienting to nutrition-focussed food relief and client-focussed services providing pathways to food security that address the underlying determinants of food insecurity beyond food.
26. Australia's *National Waste Policy* to halve food waste by 2030<sup>68</sup> should uncouple food waste strategies and legislation from emergency food procurement to prioritise food waste prevention.
27. Implement routine, robust food insecurity monitoring and surveillance system to identify drivers, impacts and effective strategies. Include the USDA 18 question Household Food security module in government health surveillance systems and Australian Health Surveys.
28. Develop, fund and trial nutrition-sensitive and nutrition-specific approaches to ameliorate food insecurity. This includes repairing fragilities in the food supply system and preparing for the impact and challenges of short and long-term circumstantial shocks.

## PHAA resolves to:

29. Advocate for the above steps to be taken based on the principles in this position statement.

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