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 or other resources.

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, malnutrition and diet-related chronic diseases (such as obesity, diabetes and mental illness) exacerbate healthcare costs.

Emergency food relief, the dominant Australian response, is failing in Australia due to the chronicity of the food insecurity, increasing demand, and a lack of focus on pathways to food security.

Key policy positions:

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

1. Address inadequate social security payments, particularly Newstart, disability, and single parent allowances
2. Reform the emergency food relief system to ensure it is nutrition-focussed and provides pathways to food security
3. Uncouple food waste strategies/legislation from emergency food procurement to prioritise food waste prevention
4. Implement routine monitoring and surveillance of food insecurity, its drivers and impacts
5. Develop, fund and trial nutrition sensitive specific actions to ameliorate food insecurity.

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, with nation states obligated to protect, respect and fulfil (Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights 1966).\(^1\) Human dignity, implicit in the right to food, includes the ability to provide for oneself.\(^2\)

2. An under-recognised social determinant of health, food insecurity relates to at least four Sustainable Development Goals: (1) no poverty, (2) no hunger, (3) good health, and (13) climate action.\(^3\)

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”\(^4\).

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.\(^5,^6\)

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 emergency food relief.

6. Nothing about us without us - involve those affected by food insecurity in the response. Indigenous peoples must be key stakeholders in policy action to address food insecurity with the right to participate in all decisions affecting them\(^7\) including protecting and acknowledging their connection to the land.\(^8\)

7. The solutions to address food insecurity include both nutrition-sensitive (e.g. non-health actors regulating labour and employment conditions) and nutrition-specific (e.g. laws, policies and programs for food affordability, nutrition quality, including the GST exemption on fresh food, nutrition-focused food banking policies, and More than food strategies.\(^9,^11\)

8. 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.\(^12\) 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.\(^13\)

PHAA notes the following evidence:

9. In 2011-12, 4% of Australian households overall and 22-31% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households were food insecure.\(^14,^15\) This is likely an underestimate by 5-10% in the general population,\(^16\) and 50% in very remote Aboriginal communities.\(^17\)

10. Population sub-groups experience higher rates of food insecurity: 92-100% among homeless,\(^18,^19\) 70% refugee and asylum seeker households;\(^20,^21\) 13% older households;\(^22,^23\) 20-25% low to middle income;\(^24\) and people living with disabilities.\(^25\)
11. 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.26

12. The Australian welfare system is comprehensive, yet inadequate. Newstart Allowance recipients are 10 times more likely to be food insecure27 and 100% of single mothers are likely to suffer food stress.28

13. Food charity is Australia’s dominant response to food insecurity.29 Food banks, food rescue organisations and services report increasing demand and an inability to provide food relief to all.30

14. The organisational capacity of the Australian charitable food system is precarious due to unreliable, insufficient and inappropriate financial, human and food resources and structures.31

15. Food provided by emergency food relief agencies is not always nutritious and can exacerbate health disparities.32, 33

16. 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.34-36

17. The social and public health burden of food insecurity includes increased risk of: diet-related chronic disease,37 obesity,38 mental health service utilisation,39 healthcare costs,40, 41 impaired child development,42-44 and lost economic productivity.45

18. The economic burden of food insecurity in Australia has not been measured. Food insecurity cost the US ~$167.5 billion in 2011 due to lost productivity, public education expenses, avoidable healthcare costs, and the cost of charity to keep families fed.45

PHAA seeks the following actions:

19. 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.

20. Social security payments should be increased to a liveable income to lift Australians out of poverty and reduce food insecurity – raising the rate of Newstart, Youth Allowance and related payments and indexing them to wage and price movements are the priorities.46

21. 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.

22. Reform the emergency 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

23. Australia’s National Waste Policy to halve food waste by 203047 should uncouple food waste strategies and legislation from emergency food procurement to prioritise food waste prevention.

24. 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.

25. Develop, fund and trial nutrition-sensitive and nutrition-specific approaches to ameliorate food insecurity.
PHAA resolves to:

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

ADOPTED September 2019

References