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# Food insecurity, food crimes and structural violence: an Australian perspective

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Household food insecurity, when a person or household has inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial or other constraints, is a growing public health problem in most rich countries with developed economies, particularly where there is inequality.<sup>1</sup> Food insecurity adversely impacts individuals and adds to societal burden due to lost productivity, avoidable healthcare expenditure and the cost of feeding families. Surprisingly, the prevalence and economic burden of food insecurity are not often reported in developed countries, including Australia, but costs in the US in 2011 were estimated at ~US\$167.4 billion.<sup>2</sup>

The causes of food insecurity lay largely outside the influence of the health sector, but the health consequences are serious and substantial. Food insecurity is associated with expensive and avoidable social and chronic disease burden including overweight, obesity, diet-related disease and mental illness in adults, and poor growth and development, dental caries, socioemotional impairment and behavioural issues in children.<sup>3,4</sup> Not only is the experience of being food insecure traumatic, but it is also often accompanied by other poverty-related stressors that amplify its effect.<sup>5</sup> *Given the costs and detrimental public health impact, what action is being undertaken to prevent food insecurity and protect public health in Australia?*

Ultimately, it is a complex web of poverty and financial hardship that renders people vulnerable to food insecurity. Food insecurity can be considered an outcome of 'structural violence'; that is, the "sinful" social structures characterised by poverty and steep gradients of social inequality.<sup>6</sup> Structural violence differs from physical violence in that harms cannot be traced back to an individual; rather, they

are exerted systematically and include racism and unequal access to medical and health care.<sup>7</sup>

Just over half of the 13% of adults living below the poverty line rely on social security as their main income. As an example of structural violence, 80% of recipients of social assistance payments in 2015–16 in Australia were food insecure, and Newstart unemployment payment recipients were about ten times as likely to experience food insecurity than the broader population.<sup>8</sup> Newstart is not indexed to wages and has had no real increases since 1994. Despite Minister Ruston's assertion that a recent Newstart increase of \$0.24/day "will help welfare recipients keep up with increases in living costs and changes in investment returns",<sup>9</sup> it is well below the \$10.71/day 'catch up increase' estimated to meet Australia's fairness and prosperity goals.<sup>10</sup>

It is not just the poorest of the poor who experience food insecurity in Australia; employed middle-income earners are also struggling.<sup>11</sup> One-third of Australian households are single-parent families; as most are at high risk of food stress,<sup>12</sup> even small changes in their financial circumstances can result in food insecurity and can impact the lives of many children.

Food assistance is provided via Federal and State Government emergency relief funding accompanied by a complex non-government, charitable food sector designed around the redistribution of waste food. Numerous well-intended organisations, groups and volunteers dedicate their services to the food relief cause. The undefined cost of this system lies across many government agencies as well as the commercial and voluntary sectors. Resources underpinning the charitable food system are considerable with continuous calls

for more money to meet increasing demand. Outcomes are reported in kilograms of food distributed, not numbers of people accessing services or changes in food insecurity status. There appears to be a lack of governance, coordinated response and government leadership. *How much is being spent on addressing food insecurity in Australia, and where is the cost-benefit analysis?*

Most people say they only use food relief as an absolute last resort due to the shame and stigma involved. The reliance on waste food adds to feelings of unworthiness. Currently, the system is outside the remit of government health and food safety standards. It is time to uncouple food waste mitigation as the main solution to hunger and food insecurity in Australia. For both economic and health reasons, reducing the overproduction and excess consumption of food is the main strategy to reduce food waste. *Why persist in framing food waste as the solution to food insecurity when the real issue is poverty and inequality?*

The lack of effective response to food insecurity could be viewed as a food crime: "not activities that are of a criminal nature or law breaking as such, but rather on those who use their powers to subvert standards of decency and fair play. The use of these powers, especially when turned on those who have no ability to fight back can be considered criminal in a broad sense."<sup>13</sup>(p368) Australian food insecurity crimes include inadequate social protection causing vulnerability, excess food production, processing and advertising fostering over-consumption, and related poor health and excessive use of scarce health system resources. The economic policy failure and relentless redistribution of surplus, unsaleable, inferior food and the formation of an alternative food system is a crime against the most vulnerable. Australia has failed to implement appropriate legal measures to protect the human right to food.<sup>14</sup>

Politicians are pessimistic when debating for changes to Newstart payments, MP Templeman (2019) said, "... community food programs are booming because of the demand, and volunteers are unable to keep up. These are not programs I want to see expanded. I'd like to see them go out of business due to lack of customers, but I can't see it happening any time soon."<sup>15</sup>(p1488)

The authors have stated the following conflict of interest: Dr Pollard is a Board Member of Foodbank WA. The views presented here are her own and do not reflect those of the organisations for which she works. This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License, which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.

Compelling evidence might assist arguments. The US has robust measures of food insecurity, dietary intake and linked health outcomes to report the extent of the impact. As Australia has no comprehensive nutrition monitoring system, food insecurity, its drivers and its consequences remain invisible and excused from the policy table. Political amnesia masks successive failures with numerous short-term attempts to curb food insecurity.<sup>16</sup>

‘Feeding’ people addresses immediate hunger in the short term, but is disempowering, does little to relieve poverty, and takes the focus off the inadequacy of the social protection system. It is necessary in response to shocks and disasters but is not a sustainable or an adequate response to poverty or long-term food insecurity. Structural solutions to address poverty and inequality are the policy responses needed to address food insecurity. *What will it take for Australia to acknowledge the structural determinants of food insecurity, call out food crimes, demonstrate political will and pursue structural solutions to food insecurity?* Reframe the discourse to acknowledge that food insecurity is not so much about food but poverty and ‘changing the mission from hunger relief to creating a hunger-free community’<sup>17(p132)</sup> is a good start. *Isn’t it a crime to keep doing what we are doing when we know it isn’t working?* It’s time to consider a comprehensive Australian Food Security Policy (Figure 1) and we encourage readers to collaborate on advocacy actions set out in the Public Health Association of Australia’s Household Food and Nutrition Security Policy Statement.<sup>18</sup>

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Figure 1: Key elements of a comprehensive Australian Household Food Security Policy.

