Shining the light on food insecurity in Aotearoa

Auckland City Mission’s Call To Action
Over the last few years, the demand for food at the Auckland City Mission has continually and dramatically increased. Moved by the reality that tens of thousands of Aucklanders – and in increasing numbers – don’t have enough food and are forced to seek support, the Auckland City Mission worked with community partners and researchers at the University of Auckland to better understand how we might more effectively respond.

Over 650 people who were accessing the Mission’s foodbank services were surveyed. The research, led by the Mission’s GM of Social Services, Helen Robinson, uncovered a clear relationship between food insecurity, emotional wellbeing, and psychological distress.

What is food insecurity?

Food insecurity is about more than hunger. Hunger is a physiological experience caused by a lack of food – a person can feel hungry if they are running late and skip breakfast. Food insecurity, which is also called food poverty, is not having enough appropriate food.

How many Kiwis are experiencing food insecurity?

Information about food insecurity in New Zealand is outdated and sparse. What we can say is:

- In 2008/2009, 7.3% of our population was food insecure.
- 10 years later, the Mission estimates 10% of New Zealand’s population is affected – about 500,000 people.
- Predominantly, women are the face of food insecurity and are bearing the greatest burden of poverty.
- Māori and Pasifika people are over-represented in those living with food insecurity.

According to the Ministry of Social Development, from 2014-19 food remained the main reason for needing hardship assistance. In the March 2019 quarter, 212,871 food grants were provided. This is more than double the number provided in March 2014 (91,301).
Food insecurity causes distress and reduced wellbeing.

Food insecurity is intrinsically linked to poverty.

The reality is, once housing costs are paid, low-income individuals and families are often forced to choose between buying food and other essential costs.

When there’s no money for food, people either eat poorly or miss meals completely. They have no choice but to rely on foodbanks to provide them with enough food.

We know that people living with food insecurity are doing the very best they can on a low income. We see that asking for help by coming into a foodbank or seeking an emergency food grant from Work and Income can leave them feeling embarrassed or ashamed.

Until now, we have not had sufficient New Zealand data to back up our assumptions of how food insecurity impacts people’s wellbeing.

Measuring the effects of food insecurity

Our survey included two measurement tools:

- The World Health Organisation-5 (WHO-5) scale, which asked people to rate their emotional wellbeing over the past two weeks, and included statements like:
  - “I have felt cheerful and in good spirits”
  - “I have felt calm and relaxed”
  - “My daily life has been filled with things that interest me”

- The Kessler-6 (K-6) distress scale, which asked people to rate their level of psychological distress during the past 30 days, and included questions like:
  - “How often did you feel hopeless?”
  - “How often did you feel so depressed that nothing could cheer you up?”
  - “How often did you feel that everything was an effort?”

What we learned:

Our research showed that about once a week, survey participants experienced a high level of food insecurity. Nearly 40% of those surveyed have struggled to access enough appropriate food for them and their household for two years or more.

For people experiencing food insecurity, much of their day-to-day lives (about two-thirds) is lived in an unwell state of being. Not only are people who are food insecure emotionally unwell much of the time, they are also distressed some of the time. Moreover, women experienced higher levels of distress.
To respond appropriately and effectively to food insecurity, we need to better understand who is experiencing it and how best to create positive change. Here are some actions we want New Zealanders to take – immediately – to address food insecurity:

**Action**
- Hold an annual survey to gather information about how adults and children are affected by food insecurity.

**Action**
- Develop a national food strategy giving vision and direction, cohesion and coordination to ensure all people in New Zealand have enough appropriate food.

**Action**
- Consider women-oriented interventions, such as raising the level of the Sole Parent Support payment, and providing further financial assistance to women raising children.

**Action**
- Raise income levels and ensure a living wage for all.

Above all, we must ensure that all of our actions toward addressing food insecurity enhance mana; that is, they uphold the dignity of both the individual and the whānau.
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