

# One in six Australians experience food insecurity

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Crisis levels of food insecurity have been reached among low income families in Australia. In the last 12 months it is estimated that just over one in six people (18 percent of the population or more than 4 million people) experienced a period when they didn't have enough food for themselves or family members and could not afford to buy any. Of those, 28 percent (more than 1.1 million) report that going without food is a regular occurrence.

Earlier this month, Australia's largest food relief organization, Foodbank, supplier of over half of the food used by charities to provide food relief, released its annual *Hunger Report 2016* prepared with the assistance of Deloitte Access Economics.

The report brought together two areas of research. For the first time with the assistance of Galaxy Research, a survey was conducted in February 2016 of food relief recipients from front-line charities and community groups. Secondly, the annual Foodbank Welfare Agency Survey conducted between December 2015 and March 2016 provided information from the 2,400 charity groups and community organisations that Foodbank supplies.

The *Hunger Report* estimated the number of people seeking food assistance in 2015 increased by 8 percent overall. Almost half of those who reported food insecurity, 49 percent or more than 2 million people, sought food assistance from a charity. Those aged 18 to 34 were almost twice as likely to experience food insecurity.

Monthly, over 644,000 people of which 34 percent were children, accessed food relief from Foodbank agencies, an increase of 25 percent from 2014.

Of the charities surveyed, 60 percent reported an increase in the number of people seeking assistance in the past year. The increase was 6-15 percent for 23

percent of agencies, 16-30 percent for 13 percent of charities, and over 30 percent for 9 percent of agencies.

The report revealed that 75 percent of charity groups and community organizations were unable to meet the rising demand for food assistance. As a result, it estimated 43,000 people, of whom 32 percent were children, were turned away empty-handed every month.

The unemployed and low income families were the highest recipients of food relief, closely followed by single parent families. The most common reasons why people did not have enough food were: not enough money in the first place, unexpected or large bills and having to pay rent or a mortgage.

Of the recipients surveyed, 93 percent said that food insecurity impacted on their emotional wellbeing and reported feeling stressed and depressed, embarrassed and ashamed, and when there were children in the household, guilt.

One respondent declared: "I felt incredibly scared and rocked by the experience of not having enough food for myself and my family." Another respondent explained: "When I didn't have enough to buy food I lived on plain pasta, porridge with no milk and 2 minute noodle seasonings in water to try to make my body think I had eaten."

The Foodbank report pointed to growing social inequality. "Over the past two decades, Australia has experienced strong economic growth and performance," it stated, adding: "This positive economic environment has created an opportunity for Australia to reduce inequality within the population; however, disadvantaged Australians still face significant challenges with respect to affording basics such as food."

The report concluded that "results from the 2016 Foodbank surveys highlight again that the demand for

food relief is rising, irrespective of the growth and performance of the economy.” It identified the high prevalence of “bill shock”—unexpected or large bills—experienced by low economic resource households, that is households with both low wealth and low income.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) states that in 2013–14, just over 4 million of Australia’s estimated population of 23.1 to 23.5 million lived in low income households—830,000 were children under 15 years. These were households with a weekly equivalised disposable income of between \$205 and \$511, which is below the official poverty line.

Two-thirds of those in low income households relied on welfare payments as the main source of household income, with 24 percent identifying employment payments as their main source of income.

The average household wealth for low wealth households in 2013–14 was \$35,600 and for middle wealth households \$462,500, there was little change in wealth in each of these groups between 2011–12 and 2013–14.

The Foodbank report also points to rising inflation. The overall rate of inflation as measured by the consumer price index (CPI) has increased by around 30 percent from 2004 to 2014, with the cost of utilities, health and education increasing by “more than the overall rate of inflation.”

The report illustrates the real impact of the rising cost of living on low income families, citing a 2013 survey by the Deutsche Bank (2013). The survey “found that the cost of a loaf of bread in Sydney rose from \$2.60 to \$6.63 between 2003 and 2013. Compared to the percentage change in the CPI over this time period, the average price of bread has risen nearly five times as much as CPI.”

As the current election campaign draws to a close, both the Liberal/National Coalition and the opposition Labor Party are seeking to reassure the corporate and financial elite that they are committed to implementing austerity measures. Despite election promises to the contrary, the next government, whichever parties form it, will further gut health, education and welfare while boosting military spending by almost \$500 billion over the next decade.

Rising unemployment and the increasing casualization of the workforce particularly among

young workers, cuts to welfare payments and downward pressure on real wages all mean that many more people will struggle to put food on the table for themselves and their families. In a growing number of instances, they will simply go without.

This appalling situation is a damning indictment of the profit system and successive Coalition and Labor governments that are responsible for growing levels of poverty and social inequality. There are more than enough resources to feed the population of Australia and the world, but the dictates of profit ensure that many people cannot buy enough food, are compelled to rely on charities or go without altogether.

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