



# Inquiry into Food Security in Victoria

Submission by Deakin University's Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition and Institute for Health Transformation



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# Inquiry into Food Security in Victoria

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We commend the Victorian Government Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee for undertaking this Inquiry and welcome the opportunity for ongoing input and participation to ensure the recommendations and action that stem from this inquiry are evidence based and where possible rigorously evaluated to ensure impact in the community

## Overall Recommendations to the Legal and Social Issues Committee:

1. Victoria should develop a food security strategy, with an associated implementation and investment plan, with the vision of ensuring equitable, sustainable and healthy food (page 9).
2. The food security strategy should be developed using participatory methods and coordinate actions to support the food security of all and at every life stage, now and into the future. These actions, described in TOR 2, include evidence-informed interventions to lower the cost of food (pages 10 – 12) and improve access to affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate food (pages 12 – 17). Guiding principles for actions are needed to guide a statewide approach (page 12).
3. Victoria requires better data on food insecurity at the household level. Regular state-wide surveillance of household food security is needed and should be measured using the USDA Household Food Security Survey Module 18-item questionnaire (pages 7-8).
4. Advocate to the Federal Government to increase income support payments to be above the poverty line and all support payment types should be indexed to wage growth to ensure food security for all Victorians and Australians (pages 7-8).

## Introduction

Deakin University welcomes this opportunity to provide a submission into the Parliamentary Inquiry into food security in Victoria. A critical element of sovereign security and a national priority, the food security of Australians and Victorians represents an urgent challenge in the post-COVID-19 era. Deakin University's strategic plan Deakin 2030: Ideas to Impact has identified strengthening and safeguarding Australia's food security as a priority issue for research through three of our nominated impact themes: building safe and secure communities; enabling a sustainable world and improving health and wellbeing.

Deakin University is a global leader in nutrition and dietetics research via the Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition (IPAN), which supports the development of evidence-informed food security policy and practice. The University's School of Exercise and Nutrition Sciences performs well above world standard with a rating of 5/5 as assessed by the 2018 Excellence in Research for Australia in the disciplines of Nutrition and Dietetics and Public Health and Health Services. In addition, the University's School of Health and Social Development hosts world-leading public health researchers whose work has contributed to Deakin University being named the top public health Institute by the Australian's 2023 Research Magazine. The Institute for Health Transformation (IHT) at Deakin University comprises a network of multi-disciplinary researchers and our partners, pursuing translational research excellence integrating prevention and population health, health systems and services, health economics and financing, data and digital health. Our work aims to transform design and delivery of prevention and care to enhance health and wellbeing and improve health system sustainability. We have expertise in key methodologies required to support improved policy and practice such as health economics analysis and evaluation, health data analytics, complex problem solving, systems science, health policy and program evaluation, and implementation science.

In the submission below we utilise our quantitative and qualitative research conducted in Victoria, supplemented with additional authoritative sources, to provide information relevant to the terms of reference and to provide the evidence which supports our recommendations above.

### What is food security?

Food security is a fundamental pre-requisite for the prosperity of Australia. Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. A commonly accepted definition of food security by the United Nations and informed by food as a human right for all, comprises six 'dimensions'[1]:

food availability (enough food of appropriate quality)	stability (stability in the other pillars over time)
food access (including financial and physical access)	agency (the capacity to make decisions about food)
food utilisation (processing and consumption of food)	sustainability (viability of food systems)

### What is food insecurity and what is driving this problem?

Food *in*security occurs when all or some of these dimensions break down. Food insecurity can impact a person, a household or even a whole community. It may be chronic, cyclical or occasional and in severe circumstances people may experience regular hunger and skip meals. Conservative household

measures conducted by the state government agencies estimate 8.1% of non-Indigenous adults [2] and 14.4% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults [3] experience food insecurity – notably some community reports and studies indicate even higher rates.

In a high-income, food-producing country like Australia, economic hardship, and housing insecurity and high living costs are the biggest drivers of food insecurity. For regional and remote communities, there are substantive geographical determinants that also affect food security. The modern resource-intensive industrial food systems provide cheap and widely available ultra-processed food products, which threaten access to nutritious food for current and future generations. Australia’s population is projected to increase at a rate that will outstrip local production of many core foods, suggesting reduced net food exports and increased dependence on imports in our future. In sum, the causes of food insecurity are multi-dimensional and tackling these drivers and threats to food security require multi-dimensional responses.

Currently, Victorian food systems are experiencing once-in-a generation acute and chronic shocks and stressors. These include supply chain problems stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian war on Ukraine, and the cost of living crisis. Australia is also impacted by climate-related and natural disasters such as floods and fires, many impacting the nation’s most productive food-growing regions. The ongoing loss of biodiversity and climate change is threatening food production everywhere. These food system shocks have culminated into a ‘food price crisis’ over the last few years. Such crises are exacerbated by long-term drivers of social and economic inequalities, notably stretched welfare systems and housing unaffordability, coupled with economic downturns and cost-of-living and cost-of-farming pressures, which majorly threaten food security for Victorians. Future concerns about climate change’s impact on food productivity, projected population growth and loss of agricultural land in growth corridors, underscores the urgency of action and suggests food security ‘shocks’ could become more common. As shocks to food systems increase, governments need to plan for more resilient food systems and the potential for rising food insecurity.

As such, a combination of both short-term actions to address existing problems, as well as restructuring / mitigating long-term issues, is required. There is a critical need to address existing food security problems, building resilience to emerging environmental, social and political determinants of food insecurity to strengthen and safeguard food security for all Victorians.

Below, we provide recommendations to the inquiry, relevant across the terms of reference and to support a transformation of our food and social systems for a food secure future for all Victorians. There is no silver bullet solution. A constellation of synergistic actions is required. Evidence to support our recommendations is provided in the remainder of this document.

*... no one should be disadvantaged by the food that they have to eat, to be able to live in their house... You have to choose between food or your house, or your warmth, or the internet for your children because they have to do schooling as well. Like, you shouldn't have to choose that. You should be able to do it all. You know, we don't live in a third world country, but sometimes parts of it feel like it is.*

(Single mother of three, Regional Victoria)

## Terms of Reference 1. The impact of food insecurity in Victoria

It is difficult to describe the impact of food insecurity, without knowing how many people, and which people, are experiencing this problem. In the UK, USA and Canada, household food insecurity is measured regularly at the national level, to date, this has not regularly occurred in Australia.

Victoria needs to regularly and reliably monitor household food security status with a validated and efficient questionnaire, administered through government health or social surveillance agencies. For example, through the Victorian Population Health Survey. [Experts have endorsed](#) the USDA 18-item food security survey for use in Australia, which will provide insights on adult and children's food security status [4]. This 18-item tool has recently informed national health surveillance efforts by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

In the meantime, there are, high quality sources and compelling evidence, which suggests food insecurity is on the rise and it is more present for particular populations. Table 1 (adapted from[5]), summarised the factors and populations relevant to food insecurity in Australia.

*Table 1. Factors and populations relevant to food insecurity in Australia*

<b>Communities most at risk of food insecurity in Australia</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• people reliant on low-wages and/or income support payments</li> <li>• Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples</li> <li>• single-parent households</li> <li>• people living in regional and remote areas</li> <li>• people experiencing homelessness</li> <li>• infants, children or adolescents from low-income households</li> <li>• people from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds, particularly refugees and people seeking asylum</li> <li>• students in higher education/training, living on a low-income, including international students</li> </ul>	
<b>Non-demographic factors that increase the risks for food insecurity</b>	
<b>Factors associated with health including diagnosed disorders and disabilities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• mental illness</li> <li>• disability</li> <li>• serious illness or chronic conditions</li> </ul>
<b>Factors associated with social conditions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• violence (witnessing or experiencing)</li> <li>• removal of children</li> <li>• relationship breakdown</li> <li>• trouble with the police</li> <li>• racism and discrimination</li> <li>• intergenerational or childhood trauma</li> <li>• reintegration after incarceration</li> <li>• unemployment/under-employment</li> </ul>

Particularly high levels of food insecurity have been found among Australian households in receipt of income support payments including Unemployment, Student, Carer, and Disability payments,

underscoring the inadequacy of these transfers [6]. Specifically, in 2019 when examined by payment types, individuals in receipt of Newstart Allowance (11% food insecure), Austudy/Abstudy (14% food insecure), Disability Support Pension (12% food insecure), the Carer Payment (11% food insecure), and Parenting Payment (9% food insecure) were at significantly higher risk of food insecurity compared to those in receipt of the more adequate income-support payment type: the Age Pension (<1%) or no income support at all (1.3%). Conversely, the temporary up-lifts in income support over the pandemic [provided evidence](#) of increased food security.

According to the 2022 Victorian Population Health Survey [2]:

- Severe food insecurity was measured by asking a single-item question ‘In the last 12 months, were there any times that you ran out of food, and couldn’t afford to buy more?’
- While the prevalence of severe food insecurity in Victorian adults did not change between surveys conducted in 2017 and 2020, there was a substantial rise from 5.8% in 2020 to 8.1% in 2022, representing a relative increase of 40%.
- Severe food insecurity in both men and women declined with age. Food insecurity was highest in those aged 18 to 34 years. Noting children were not measured.
- Severe food insecurity was associated with poor mental and physical health in both men and women.
- Severe food insecurity was strongly associated with obesity in women, but not men (often referred to as the food insecurity-obesity paradox).

Men and women who experienced severe food insecurity in the past year were also more likely to:

be financially stressed	have low or no civic and social trust
be unemployed or not in the labour force	have low or no social support
live in the Gippsland LPHU area	live in rented private or public housing
have experienced racism in the past year	Identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander
be a smoker	

According to the report ‘The health and wellbeing of Aboriginal Victorians’ using 2017 data and prepared by the Victorian Agency for Health Information [3]:

- Aboriginal adults were significantly more likely to experience food insecurity than their non-Aboriginal people – 14.4% of Aboriginal adults in Victoria ran out of food and could not afford to buy more, compared with 6.2% of non-Aboriginal adults.
- A higher proportion of Aboriginal parents experienced food insecurity – 25.4% of Aboriginal parents sometimes or always relied on a restricted range of low-cost food for their children to avoid running out of money to buy food, compared with 14.5% of non-Aboriginal parents.
- Two-thirds (66.8%) of Aboriginal adults who experienced food insecurity had fair or poor health
- Just over one-half (52.1%) of Aboriginal adults who experienced food insecurity had high or very high psychological distress
- Just under two-thirds (64.0%) of Aboriginal adults who experienced food insecurity had current or previous diagnosis of depression or anxiety.

***We recommend to the committee and Victorian government:***

1. *Regular state-wide surveillance of household food security is needed and should be measured using the USDA Household Food Security Survey Module 18-item questionnaire*
2. *To undertake consultation with community members at increased risk of food insecurity, and peak agencies that represent these communities, through the process of this inquiry*
3. *To undertake consultation and participatory methods in the development of a food security strategy for Victoria, with community members most affected by food insecurity and the peak agencies that represent these communities*
4. *Advocate to the Federal Government to increase income support payments to be above the poverty line and all support payment types should be indexed to wage growth*

## Impact of food insecurity on physical and mental health

*So we would have students come out of class ... and say they haven't had anything all day and they're starving and or they might have not had much at home over the weekend. It's not unusual for students to come and say there was nothing for them to eat the day before*

(School Nurse, Victorian school)

Household food insecurity is linked with a range of negative health outcomes [7], and chronic health conditions for both adults and children [8, 9]. A recent study of a nationally representative sample of adults in the US [10] found that food insecurity was positively associated with multiple chronic conditions and lower self-reported health status. Food insecurity during pregnancy is of particular concern with food insecure pregnant women found to be more likely to have excessive gestational weight gain [11, 12], develop gestational diabetes and enter preterm labour [13], and experience mental health concerns [14]. The children born

of women who are food insecure are more likely to experience birth defects, cognitive problems, and anxiety, and when compared to children in food secure households are two to three times more likely to develop anaemia, two times more likely to be in fair to poor health and are more likely to have asthma [9, 15].

Children who grow up with the stress of food insecurity are more likely to develop chronic health conditions as adults, including obstructive pulmonary disease, depression, autoimmune diseases, and cancers [16, 17], and among some groups, they are more likely to experience obesity [18]. A systematic found that even marginal levels of food insecurity in children living in high-income countries, was associated with impaired academic performance, hyperactivity, inattention, increased absences from school, and mental health concerns [19]. Among adults, food insecurity is associated with increased risk of some chronic conditions including type 2 diabetes [20, 21], and cardiovascular disease [22], and is strongly linked with overweight and obesity [23].

## Impact of food insecurity on poverty and hardship

Households that experience financial, or cost of living, pressures can also experience food insecurity. These pressures have increased over recent years as major global disruptions such as the Great Recession (2007 to 2009), the Coronavirus pandemic (2020 to 2023), and the period of high inflation during 2022 and 2023, have led to increased inequality and to the increased risk of household food insecurity. Households manage their food security in a variety of ways including changing food preferences and behaviours. As income is reduced, so too is the ability to afford nutrient rich foods, forcing many food-insecure households to incorporate more highly processed, energy dense foods

[24]. Ongoing consumption of a lower quality diet, particularly one that includes ultra-processed foods, results in further risk of developing chronic health conditions including obesity, type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and some cancers[25, 26].

*I get my bread for nothing. I get most of my greens for nothing. The only thing I've got to buy then now is some meat, cheese, and milk powder because that works out to 56 cents a litre. See when I buy cheese, I buy a kilo block and it costs me \$6.49 and its beautiful tasty cheese from Aldi and you slice it thin ... and it'll last me for a month, a kilo of cheese! A kilo of skim milk powder will last me a month. You know, everything I work out that it lasts me a month...  
You pay a bit more to start off with but if you work it out over the long term you save a lot of money*

(Male, aged 71, Victorian client of food charities).

## Terms of Reference 2. Options available to lower the cost of food and improve access to affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate food

### Governance

As a signatory to and member of the working group for, the Victorian Consensus 'Towards a Healthy, Regenerative and Equitable Food System in Victoria' we re-iterate the importance of good governance and a coordinated approach to address food insecurity in our state. This requires, as highlighted in the consensus statement, a human right to food informed approach and a Victorian food security strategy, with an associated implementation and investment plan. The strategy, developed using participatory methods, could sensibly coordinate and support the uptake of the options described below. The strategy must include implementation, for e.g. have clear objectives, measurable targets, action plans, and be subject to regular review. Actions taken by many different government departments influence food security, so effective policy requires a coordinated 'whole of government' approach. All of this was recognised and was recommendation number 1, from the recent National Inquiry into Food Security [27]. Recommendation number 2, which we also support, is the appointment of a Minister for Food. The food security strategy should establish clear accountability for addressing food insecurity - across government departments and in State and Local governments. The Australian Government has obligations to realise the right to adequate food in cooperation with states and territories, but responsibilities for ensuring access to adequate food are unclear at all levels of government, which has contributed to failure to adequately address this problem to date.

#### ***We recommend to the committee and Victorian government:***

1. *Victoria should develop a food security strategy, with an associated implementation and investment plan, with the vision of ensuring equitable, sustainable and healthy food*

## Options to lower the cost of food

Access to affordable, healthy food and drinks for all is undermined by the power of major supermarkets, which set prices that are out-of-reach for a growing number of the Australian population. Research has indicated that the price of foods and drinks is one of the most influential determinants of what people choose to eat and therefore their health and wellbeing across the life course [28]. The price of foods and drinks can also influence health and well-being indirectly by increasing the overall price of a food shop, meaning shoppers have less budget available for other living costs like rent, fuel and bills. Specifically, research by Deakin University's team at GLOBE and the University of Queensland has shown that the cost of basic healthy foods and drinks:

- Is perceived by consumers to be more expensive than unhealthy food and drink options – therefore encouraging excessive consumption of these foods [28].
- In major Australian cities, can cost a family of four > \$600 per fortnight [29, 30]. This is equivalent to approximately one-fifth of the median family income and one-third of the incomes of families on low-incomes in Australia.
- In remote areas can cost a family of four >\$800 per fortnight [29].
- In remote Aboriginal communities can cost 40-50% of family incomes[31].
- Can be reduced by price promotions (i.e., specials) and generic brands [32] but price promotions are less frequent (half as much), and smaller in magnitude for healthy compared to unhealthy food and drinks [33, 34]

Additionally, data since the COVID-19 pandemic and cost-of-living crises tell us that:

- Food and drink prices steadily rose after 2020 – with the Consumer Price Index for grocery products peaking at 9.4% in late 2022 compared to the previous year [35]
- The supermarket prices of many healthy food groups have increased more than unhealthy foods since the COVID-19 pandemic and associated economic downturn [36]
- According to community reports, an estimated 1 in 2 Australians in 2023 experienced some difficulty being to access or afford basic foods [37]

***We recommend the committee and Victorian government consider the following policy options to ensure nutritious food and beverage products are kept at affordable prices:***

1. *Enhanced food price regulatory frameworks (for both urban and online formats of the supermarket) that are mandatory and Government-led, ensuring all Australians have access to healthy and affordable foods now and into the future.*
2. *These frameworks should include Government-led compliance-based monitoring and enforcement processes (e.g., financial penalties for supermarkets failing to lower food prices have been put forward in Greece and France). The ABS should regularly monitor and survey the CPI for healthy foods according to the Australian Dietary Guidelines (see the 2024 release) as well as CPI for specific categories of groceries to track supermarket food pricing practices.*
3. *Ensure the GST exemption on basic healthy foods is retained in Australia, which has wide support from public health agencies [38] and was a key recommendation from Victorian Aboriginal Communities [39].*
4. *Consider subsidy programs that lower or discount the price of healthy foods and beverages[40].*

5. *Repurposing agricultural and other food subsidies to ensure primary producers of staple foods are adequately supported and compensated for food production [41].*
6. *Whilst long-term policy strategies that improve food price regulation are required, immediate measures such as cash transfer schemes are needed to mitigate any short-term negative implications for small-scale farmers and producers [42] and consumers who are experiencing food insecurity – addressing current inadequacies in income supports for priority populations [43].*

## Supermarket power remains ineffectively unregulated

In 2022, Coles and Woolworths [ranked #23 and #35](#) of 250 global powers in retailing, boasting consistent profits in the hundreds of millions of dollars. It is known in the literature that supermarkets and other food industry actors use their ‘unprecedented political and economic power’ to influence efforts to regulate their practices and therefore minimise public health benefits [44].

The grocery retail sector has a clear conflict of interest when it comes to regulating practices that will affect their profitability (such as prices). Clear evidence across the world shows that when these conflicts exist, self-regulation is almost always ineffective [45, 46]. Other work by Pulker and colleagues demonstrating supermarkets’ inability to self-regulate their practices at the risk of public health and wellbeing includes:

- Not setting meaningful nutrition and affordability targets for their own brands and supermarket policies [47]
- Placing junk food such as confectionary, snacks and sugary drinks on special and in prominent locations to promote their sale and consumption [48]
- Inconsistent use of Health Star Ratings and Front-Of-Pack Nutrition labelling systems [49]
- Not transparently reporting on food waste [48]

Some other problematic issues exemplifying issues with the inadequate supermarket regulation within the Australian context include Coles and Woolworths obtaining produce from [only a few major producers](#), thereby pushing out smaller growers from the market; [supermarkets setting new definitions and standards](#) for ‘free-range’ eggs to suit their profitability; and [supermarket own brands being sourced overseas and pushing out local brands](#).

## Regulating supermarket power to address rising food prices – the need for policy action

Australian families think that supermarkets should assist them to purchase and consume healthy, affordable foods and drinks [50]. There is a clear need to set better regulatory standards to ensure supermarkets are not jeopardising the health of our nation. A 2022 study by Deakin University [51] that interviewed supermarket representatives found that supermarket price promotions were most likely to be supportive of public health if: (i) mandatory regulation was enforced; (ii) compliance was extensively monitored; (iii) additional emphasis was placed on discounting the price of healthier food and beverage options; and (iv) sufficient lead time and retailer support was given to enable implementation. However, the interviewees also reported several barriers that hindered implementation of policies to regulate supermarket specials, including: (i) fear of losing competitive

advantage; (ii) perceived financial losses to retailers and consumers; and (iii) a perceived lack of impact on public health – none of which are supported by a robust evidentiary basis [52].

Evidence from Deakin University shows that grocery settings can shift towards healthy and affordable retailing by prioritising their efforts to disrupt the supply-side status quo. This includes through (i) sourcing healthier and sustainable products from a more diverse range of suppliers and (ii) demonstrating leadership through responsible environmental, social, governance (ESG) actions that genuinely respond to the concerns of consumers and stakeholders (e.g., small-scale producers) who have been most marginalised by their profit-making practices [52]. For example, this can include investing in initiatives that improve the availability and affordability of healthy options for all and reporting on the sale of affordable healthy foods using evidence-based definitions and metrics [48].

## Options to improve access to affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate food

As described above, more and more Victorians are being priced out of the supermarkets and ‘mainstream’ food systems and with limited alternative options, they are turning to charity. According to FoodBank Victoria, an estimated 276,000 households each month, access emergency and community food assistance to meet all or part of their food needs. The emergency and community food sector has grown in Australia since the 1990s, with a rapid increase in the past two decades [53]. This increasing demand placed on the charitable sector is unsustainable. Victorians urgently need program and policy options to ensure they have access to dignified (as opposed to charity) settings that support affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate food.

### Guiding principles

From our recent work with the state government of South Australia [54], we recommended when planning a statewide approach to coordinate and implement actions to improve access to affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate food, the following principles should be adopted.

#### ***We recommend these Guiding Principles to the committee and Victorian government:***

1. *Actions that tackle the underlying drivers of food insecurity, including economic hardship, are preferable as the most effective.*
2. *Actions should be the result of community consultation, co-design, and leadership. This helps*
  - a. *to tackle the power inequities that give rise to food insecurity in the first place*
  - b. *and ensures ‘lived experience’ and local context is elevated in decision making.*
3. *Actions are a mix of universal measures (e.g., adequate income support, protection of fruit and vegetables from GST) and targeted measures (e.g., remote food security strategies) proportionate to the different levels of need and barriers/enablers that communities face in ensuring food security status.*
4. *Actions are planned strategically, evaluated regularly, and implemented alongside complementary activities.*
5. *Actions must be implemented at an appropriate duration for the population and context. There are situations where acute food insecurity requires short term-emergency relief (e.g., after a bushfire in a regional town). For most actions, however, these need to be designed for the chronic nature of food insecurity.*
6. *Actions support people’s dignity and do not perpetuate stigma.*

7. *Actions to address food security need to reflect the local context, which is likely to be different in urban and regional/remote environments.*
8. *Actions that involve the food supply or enabling people's food access, support nutritious (aligned with dietary guidelines), sufficient and safe foods for people's dietary needs and food preferences (including cultural and spiritual); promote reciprocity; social connection; trauma-informed and offer people choice.*
9. *Actions that involve the food supply or enabling people's food access, support ecologically sustainable systems and diets. This includes food sourcing that promotes diversity; local and regional food systems; and regenerative and adaptive agriculture and food supply chains.*
10. *Actions are focused on outcomes and designed for collective impact – hence collaborations and partnerships are key.*
11. *Actions need to move beyond the philanthropic and charitable food sector, where food insecurity work has been traditionally conducted. All levels of government, the commercial food chain, health care, communities and citizens, educational institutions and social services/agencies all have a role.*

## Supplemental nutrition and economic policy options

Economic policy interventions are improving financial access to healthy food for people living on low incomes around the world [55, 56]. Prominent examples of Government funded national food subsidy interventions include Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which provides food purchasing assistance for people on a low income in the USA. Farmers markets, community food stores and 'mainstream' food shops are eligible for people to redeem SNAP assistance in. The Scottish Government has pioneered a "Cash-first – towards ending the need for food banks" plan, which targets financial hardship as the underlying driver of food insecurity and implements a suite of policies and programs to bolster secure and sufficient liveable-incomes [57].

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) in the USA, and the Healthy Start Scheme in the UK are targeted towards low-income families during pregnancy and early childhood. These voucher-like programs help families purchase foods and essentials for the best start in life.

Our interviews with Victorian pregnant women and women with children aged 0-5 years, underscore food insecurity as a salient issue for some vulnerable households in this population [58]. Our research [59] has established:

- Life-stage specific costs and pressures threaten household food security status including the cost of pregnancy supplements, nappies, formula and catering for food preferences in the toddler and early childhood years
- Access to paid parental leave, childcare arrangements/costs, household size and other socio-demographic factors can also play a role in food security status
- Young families that are at increased risks of food insecurity can include households with no/low-income, single-mother households, families with 3 or more children, presence of

*'there doesn't seem to be a coordinated response to make sure that women and young children and babies are well fed and that strikes me as just poor public policy, really.'*

*'... (in) the U.S....they have the program which is the women's, infants and children's and food security...things like baby formula, I believe are covered by that..., it would be really fantastic to have a way that we could guarantee supply to vulnerable communities and things...'*

(Woman in Melbourne, during her pregnancy).

maternal depression/mental health conditions, lack of social support, lower levels of educational attainment and/or immigrant background.

- In the USA food security and nutrition is a policy priority for this life-stage, unlike Australia
- Ensuring food security in the pregnancy and early years of life is vitally important and can shape life-long behaviours and disease risk

***Policy options we recommend the inquiry and Victorian government consider include:***

1. *Piloting of a WIC-like program in collaboration with Maternal and Child Health services, to support households with young children (0-5) and pregnant people.*
2. *Piloting of SNAP-like program or 'Cash-First' plan in Victoria, to support all Victorians experiencing food insecurity*

## Education settings - Early Childhood

In Australia, according to the Department of Education, there is a substantial uptake of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), with 1,425,210 children attending approved childcare in the March quarter of 2024, including 62,670 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Centre-based care is the most frequently utilised type of ECEC, with 59.7% of all children (69.1% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children) attending these services for an average of 27.3 hours per week, equating to four full 9am-5pm days. After NSW, Victoria is the second largest provider of ECEC services, with 215,720 children attending 2,012 centre-based care services across the state. It is recommended that children receive at least 50% of their daily nutritional needs whilst attending childcare during normal work hours, however ECEC services can provide up to 67% [60] of a child's recommended dietary intake when attending for longer hours. The significant attendance rates, and percentage of daily food consumed whilst in ECEC, makes this an ideal setting for government initiatives to tackle food insecurity in early childhood.

Whilst there is limited evidence of how many ECEC services provide food, in Victoria it is estimated that almost 60% of services do so [61]. Recent research has found that ECEC services in low SES areas were **less** likely to provide food and would ask parents to bring food from home [62]. This presents multiple challenges for ECEC and families, including an additional financial burden on parents to provide food if they can, a reduction in 'control' in the type of food that is offered to children and the burden placed on services when children are not provided with food. At present, cost is a major barrier to meal provision ECEC services, particularly in disadvantaged communities[63]. A recent study found that participation in a US child care food program was associated with fewer barriers to the provision of healthy foods to children in ECEC [64]. In addition to the benefits to children receiving nutritious foods in childcare, the program reduced household food insecurity for those participating. Apportioning some of the childcare subsidy for food provision could be a similar approach to consider for Australia.

Local food incentive programs for ECEC have also been successfully implemented in the USA [65], and a similar approach could be implemented in Australia to encourage purchasing of locally and ethically produced foods through incentivisation. Whilst such programs are not in place in Australia, a recent school lunch trial in Tasmania[66] aimed to purchase 50% of lunch food locally, and succeeded in purchasing 75% locally, indicating that this type of approach is feasible, and could be adapted for the ECEC setting. Establishing a 'food hub' for ECEC/local schools for food procurement has also been shown to support families on low income and overcome many of the typical barriers faced by ECEC to

food provision, such as time, cost and knowledge barriers. This has been successfully integrated into the USA, via “FRESHFARM” [67].

Children need a nutrient rich diet to grow develop and thrive, therefore, meal provision needs to be a foundational requirement of ECEC services, and ECEC staff need appropriate training in food provision and food safety [68]. This is even more important when considering vulnerable children who may not be able to access healthy food at home or be food insecure [62]. Thorpe et al also shows that services in remote and lower socioeconomic areas are less likely to provide food. This means that families are required to bring food from home in lunch boxes but maybe least equipped to do this due to lack of food availability and cost. Services in these areas need financial support to be able to provide nutritious meals to children while remaining affordable for families. This also includes support for the wellbeing of the ECEC workforce: i.e., organisational supports to enable ECEC staff to eat with the children to role model healthy eating behaviours, and to have access to food themselves given food insecurity is a current issue for some staff [69]. Victoria currently funds the Healthy Eating Advisory Service, providing free, on-the-ground, statewide support to ECEC settings, however this funding is not recurrent, and if removed would result in inequitable access to essential support.

### Education settings – Schools

State-provided school meal programs are present in many countries around the world and improve access to healthy, culturally appropriate food to primary and secondary school students [70]. They can also provide local employment and support micro- and local food business and improve the sustainability of food systems through short supply chains and seasonal produce. The World Food Program report suggests every \$1 invested in school meals communities receive a \$9 in economic return [71]. The Tasmanian government is investing in the health of children and young people by funding the scale-up of the successful pilot School Lunch Program [72] and the Victorian government invests in a school breakfast program with FoodBank. Through our research with 15 Victorian schools in collaboration with [Eat Up Australia](#) [73], results suggest schools aim to address food insecurity in various ways – through holiday parcel programs, school meals/snacks, gardening and canteens. In the short-term, these vital charitable food programs in educational settings require investment and support. In line with the recommendations from the national inquiry into food security [27], we encourage Victorian and National governments to urgently plan for scalable, sustainable and nutritious schools meals for all students.

Adequate nutrient and food intake play a vital role in general health and wellbeing of children, including brain development, cognitive function, school attendance and school achievement. Yet sadly, FoodBank reports two-thirds (67%) of Australian teachers report having students come to school hungry or without having eaten breakfast and estimate that these students lose more than two hours a day in learning. While some schools provide free breakfast and/or lunches to some students in need via food charity programs such as Foodbank (e.g. free breakfast is provided to just under half of all schools in Victoria) and Eat Up Australia (lunches), there are still a substantial number of children missing out on essential food and nutrients.

Even when food is brought to school, children do not receive sufficient time to finish their lunch (in a Deakin study more than 60% of parents reported children who attend primary school receive 10 minutes or less) [74] and many bring unhealthy, energy dense, nutrient poor foods to consume. Providing healthy sustainable lunches to Victorian school students will provide all children fair and

equitable access to essential nourishment during a school day that has potential to impact attendance[75], academic achievement [76], attention, behaviour and concentration [75] and mental health and wellbeing. Benefits go beyond the School, with the school meal program in [New Zealand](#) demonstrating positive impacts to the local communities including job creation and benefits to families, with the average family saving \$2000NZD per year. In the UK, [PwC cost-benefit-analysis](#) found for every £1 invested in pupils receiving school meals at state-funded (ie universal school meals) £1.71 core benefits were generated (including education, employment, nutrition and health system outcomes).

***We recommend to the committee and Victorian government that:***

1. *All education settings work towards universal access to nutritious culturally appropriate food for Victorian children by 2030*
2. *Funded piloting and then scaling of school meal programs and ECEC food services to support the roll out of universal access to food security for Victorian children*
3. *At least 50% of the food in these settings should be procured locally and investment is required to support this sustainable local nutritious food procurement systems*
4. *The Healthy Eating Advisory Service needs re-current funding to support education settings*

## Community food hubs and social enterprises

In light of major and inter-linked challenges from diet-related diseases, social inequities, and environmentally unsustainable food systems, there is growing momentum for ‘alternative food systems’. A broad term for food systems that aim to support sustainable healthy diets, which include environmentally responsible and regenerative practices, and equitable access to nutritious, culturally appropriate foods. Food hubs are one way to strengthen local food systems and offer an alternative marketplace that promotes human and planetary health. Whilst there are varied models of food hubs, through a VicHealth funded and current research project, we work closely with community-led ‘food hubs’ that source local food and sell this to local people.

Victoria has demonstrated innovation and leadership in food hubs for more than 20 years. Several feasibility studies have been conducted, and a range of food hub models have been implemented and evaluated across the state, including: [The Community Grocer](#), [Open Food Network](#) and the [Future Healthy Food Hubs](#). Our evidence review (available on request) highlights that food hubs can have positive impacts in local food economies, for the environment, for people’s diets and wellbeing, and be a setting through which people can feel and take, empowerment.

***We recommend to the Victorian government that:***

1. *Support and invest in community food hubs and social enterprises that provide ‘alternative food systems’, supporting human and planetary health and local business and people.*

## Co-designed solutions with priority communities

### Young migrant people in Victoria

Migrant communities in Australia and other high-income countries can often face major barriers to accessing healthy, culturally appropriate and affordable food. In 2024, Deakin’s African Youth Food Policy Study was co-led with young people from African Australian communities to produce a list of policy priorities that give voice to people and communities typically overlooked in food security policy

decisions. From our interviews with community members, we found that young African Australians are calling for:

1. Governments to improve policy engagement and collaboration efforts to co-design food security actions with migrant communities,
2. Government-led actions to improve availability of affordable, culturally appropriate. This includes making culturally appropriate foods more available in their neighbourhoods, through local community grocers, supermarkets and reducing trade barriers.
3. Food businesses to be seen as a way to support economic prosperity and self-determination of migrant communities. Communities could benefit from accessible grant programs to set up community-led food businesses that support better food security and social connection.
4. Additional social and cash supports and food vouchers to help reduce the financial pressures of buying food.

### Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Victoria

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are disproportionately affected by food insecurity, both nationally and in Victoria. Consultations are currently underway for a national strategy for food security in remote First Nations communities. However, because the 66,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Victoria predominantly live in urban areas, regional centres and rural towns, rather than remote communities, they are excluded from this strategy. Notwithstanding the very specific and pressing issues in remote communities, food insecurity is a major challenge for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Victoria, that requires specific attention. During 2022, Deakin University worked with the [Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation](#) and five of its member ACCOs to map the key drivers of food choice for Victorian Aboriginal communities and co-design actions to improve food environments and nutrition. Food access and affordability was identified as a key issue at all six of the Aboriginal communities we visited. Improving food security in Victorian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities requires urgent action at both Community and Governments levels. The FoodPATH policy recommendations are divided into five Community actions and five Government actions[39]:

**Community Recommendations** | These should be Community-led, but need sustainable funding:

1. ACCO-led self-determined Community nutrition programs (these could include anything from nutrition education, meal preparation, cooking, youth programs- whatever the ACCO identifies is needed).
2. Community gardens to grow and share food among Community members; these could be linked to food packages or cooking programs.
3. Workshops/Yarning circles with Elders to educate Community about traditional foods.
4. Community based parenting programs, incorporating nutrition and cooking healthy meals.
5. ACCO early years programs around healthy eating in pregnancy and early childhood nutrition.

**Government Recommendations** | These should be implemented by Governments, in consultation with the Community:

1. Ban junk food marketing (in all its forms), including unhealthy sport sponsorship.
2. Mandate nutrition & cooking education in schools.
3. Make the health star food labelling system mandatory across all packaged food.

4. Set limits on the amount of sugar/salt/saturated fat allowed in packaged food.
5. Keep the GST off fresh food.

***We recommend to the Victorian government that:***

1. *Community-defined and community co-designed programs and policies be included in a food security strategy for the state*

*What would help me right now is access to quality food relief, not old, after, best before or pantry items for example – meats, fresh food*

(Norlane community member)

Sources for quotes in boxes:

Box 1. [77]

Box 2. [73]

Box 3. [78]

Box 4. Not yet published, US-Australia families and food security study, available on request

Box 5. Norlane Neighbourhood Survey 2022

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