

Not just an outcome of personal preferences. A response to the National Food Security Strategy: Discussion Paper.

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While food security is broadly defined as ‘when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets the dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life’; food insecurity exists ‘whenever the availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, or the ability to acquire acceptable food in socially acceptable ways is limited or uncertain.’¹

This paper is a response to the *National Food Security Strategy: Discussion Paper*. Note: This is a compilation from the various texts cited with little editorialising from me. Why go where others dealing directly with the problem have gone so well. I broadly support the recommendations for action at the systemic level which these studies and commentaries detail.

I particularly support the Key Asks of the food and grocery relief organisations:

- *A National Food Plan would provide a comprehensive strategy to address food security challenges.*
- *A Minister for Food would provide a central point of leadership and accountability for addressing food security.*
- *A National Food Council to foster collaboration, develop innovative solutions, and guide the implementation of food security initiatives.*
- *A Food Donation Tax Incentive is needed to encourage businesses that don't already donate food to donate surplus food rather than dispose of it*

I support the seven pillars of food security in the *National Strategy for Food Security In Remote Aboriginal And Torres Strait Islander Communities 2025 - 2035*². ‘

I also support strengthening income support by increasing the amount of JobSeeker and other government payments as crucial to ensure households have enough money to cover food alongside other essentials. The ‘coping strategies’ detailed in the studies from Foodbank’s 2024 *Hunger Report* and the Salvation Army’s *Food Insecurity Report 2025* are unconscionable.

The Problem

The numbers are startling:

- 48% of low income households with less than \$30,000 in income are food secure, up 5% since 2022
- More than half of food - insecure households in Australia are enduring the most severe level of hardship. This means they are often skipping meals, reducing portion sizes or even going an entire day without eating.
- Low income households continue to experience historically high levels of food insecurity. In contrast higher-income households are beginning to see signs of improvement.

¹ Bowden, Mitchell *Understanding food Insecurity in Australia*. Child Family Community Australia (CFCFA) Paper No.55

² Commonwealth of Australia, *National Strategy for Food Security in Remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities 2025* p.10

- Australian households navigate the pressures of rising living costs by cutting back or - relying on credit. Severely food insecure households are over twice as likely to use these coping strategies to mitigate cost of living pressures than average households – reduced purchasing of dairy products; cut back on cleaning or personal care product; reduced purchasing of fresh products; reduced purchasing of protein; deferred payment by spending more on credit cards or buy now pay later.
- Worry about food affordability remains a constant among severely food-insecure households, with 97% concerned about running out of food before having enough money to buy more, and 93% unable to afford balanced meals.
- These households also face challenges such as actually running out of food (79%), skipping meals or cutting meal sizes (97%), and adults not eating for a whole day due to affordability (50%). There are groups that are at greater risk of food insecurity than the general population, in particular, low-income households (below \$30,000), those in regional areas and single parent households (69% experiencing food insecurity, 41% severe).
- Charities across Australia are grappling with surging demand for food relief. Awareness of where to get food relief is higher. This leads to more people accessing food relief. These people are also accessing food relief more often. Less are receiving food relief from family and friends.

These were the findings of the *2024 Hunger Report* from Foodbank.³

The findings from the Salvation Army's *Food Insecurity Report 2025* were also startling if not more so.

Due to a shortage of money:

- 85% of respondents experienced food insecurity in the past year.
- 68% reported affording enough money to eat was one of the greatest challenges in the past year.
- 62% of respondents with children reported admitted going without food so their children could eat.
- 56% said they had to skip meals due to financial hardship.
- 53% reported being unable to afford healthy, nutritious food, with many forced to cut back on key food groups.
- 43% reported that their household ran out of food completely.
- 31% accessed free cooked meals from a community kitchen or van.
- 23% were forced to eat expired food or spoiled food.
- 6% reported from dumpsters or rubbish bins.⁴

These actions and others like them are described as 'Coping Strategies' in *Understanding food insecurity in Australia*.⁵

³ Foodbank is a not-for-profit organisation in Australia, which provides food and grocery relief to 2,929 front-line charities and 3,220 school breakfast programs to help feed people in need. Last year (2024) alone, Foodbank sourced enough food for 92 million meals. This was the eleventh Hunger Report Foodbank has issued.

⁴ Food Security Report Salvation Army

⁵ Bowden, Mitchell *Understanding food Insecurity in Australia*. CFCA Paper No.55

The situation is worse for Indigenous households.

The 2018–19 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey (NATSIHS) found that 31% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households in remote areas had, at some point in the year, run out of food and could not afford to buy more. This figure increased to 43% for very remote areas. Additionally, 52% of very remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households had run out of money for basic living necessities at some point during the year.⁶

The National Nutrition and Physical Activity Survey findings complement that of the three reports above.⁷

Over one in eight (13.2% or 1.3 million) households experienced food insecurity due to a lack of money for food at some time in the last 12 months. Of all households:

- 4.7% experienced marginal food insecurity
- 8.5% experienced moderate or severe food insecurity.
- In 2023, group households were most likely to experience food insecurity (27.8%). Among family households, those with dependent children were more likely to experience food insecurity than those with no dependent children present (16.0% compared to 8.4%)
- Among non-family households, group households and lone person households both experienced higher levels of moderate or severe food insecurity than marginal food insecurity: group households (24.7%) compared to 4.4%) lone person households (11.4% compared to 4.5%).

Suggested Systemic Solutions

The CFCA paper suggests individual and societal actions.

- *For child and family welfare service practitioners, strategies responding to food insecurity typically focus on building food and nutrition literacy through education; alleviating hunger through emerging food relief; and/or partnering to deliver local solutions.*

(However) Attending to the personal or household contributors of food insecurity, while important, does not address the origins of the issue. This is because food insecurity rarely happens in isolation but rather in co-occurrence with economic, health and housing insecurity and other hardships . As such, public policy and community level solutions are required to address food insecurity for all Australians.⁸

The *Vote for Food Campaign* proposed 3 areas for action⁹:

In order to see real action on the cost of living, our food systems must be localised.

- *Supporting direct-to-customer food chains to improve affordability.*
- *Reducing the impact of inflation on food prices.*
- *Reducing costs in remote, indigenous or import-dependent regions by localising food production.*
- *Enabling not-for-profit and local food enterprises*

⁶ National Strategy for Food Security In Remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Communities, Commonwealth of Australia 2025 - 2035

⁷ Food Insecurity, Australian Bureau of Statistics. Reference period 2023.

⁸ CFCA Paper p.11

⁹ *Vote for Food Campaign*

Effective Food System Governance

Enacting the 2023 Federal Parliamentary Inquiry recommendations for a new Minister for Food portfolio and a comprehensive National Food Plan.

Support Farmers in Sustainable Transitions

- *Enabling farmers to transition to regenerative practices.*
- *Public and private financial support to de-risk the 2–3 year transition period*
- *Recognizing the many flow-on effects of regenerative practices*

Katherine Kent, Senior Lecturer in Nutrition and Dietetics, University of Wollongong, writing in the *Conversation* said:

- *Strengthening income support by increasing the amount of JobSeeker and other government payments is crucial. This would ensure households have enough money to cover food alongside other essentials.*
- *Investment in universal school meals, such as free lunch programs, can guarantee children at least one nutritious meal a day.*
- *Policies that make healthy food more affordable and available in disadvantaged areas are also important, whether through subsidies, price regulation, or support for local retailers.*
- *Community-based approaches, such as food co-operatives where members share bulk-buying power and social supermarkets that sell donated or surplus food at low cost can help people buy cheaper food. However, they cannot be a substitute for systemic reform.*
- *Ongoing monitoring of food insecurity must be embedded in national health and social policy frameworks so we can track progress over time.*¹⁰

Teresa Nurdi wrote in *The price is not right: How increasing grocery prices impact food security in Australia*:

As inflation continues to rise and impact grocery prices, the Australian government has a key role in respecting, protecting and fulfilling the realisation of the right to adequate food .

- *A core challenge lies in companies' unfettered ability to price items as they wish.*
- *To protect and fulfil the realisation of the right to food, it is necessary to investigate pricing practices in the food and grocery sector.*
- *To protect and fulfil the realisation of the right to food, it is necessary to investigate pricing practices in the food and grocery sector*
- *A broader issue lies in Australia's highly concentrated food and grocery sector, with Woolworths and Coles accounting for more than 65 per cent of the market. Initiatives to facilitate stronger competition in the grocery sector are key to not only improving the negotiating position of farmers and smaller suppliers but also delivering better prices to consumers. Through robust pro-competition inquiries and policies, the federal government must step up to strengthen and safeguard food security in Australia.*¹¹

¹⁰ Kent, Katherine, '1 in 8 households don't have the money to buy enough food' *The Conversation*

September 8, 2025

¹¹ Nurdi, Teresa, *The price is not right: How increasing grocery prices impact food security in Australia* .Australian Human Rights Institute

Prior to the last Federal election in March 2025 Foodbank, OzHarvest and SecondBite published *Food relief sector – issues brief*. The Key Asks were:

- *A National Food Plan would provide a comprehensive strategy to address food security challenges.*
- *A Minister for Food would provide a central point of leadership and accountability for addressing food security.*
- *A National Food Council to foster collaboration, develop innovative solutions, and guide the implementation of food security initiatives.*
- *A Food Donation Tax Incentive is needed to encourage businesses that don't already donate food to donate surplus food rather than dispose of it.*¹²

In September 2025 the Commonwealth published the *National Strategy for Food Security In Remote Aboriginal And Torres Strait Islander Communities 2025 - 2035*¹³. 'The Strategy identifies seven pillars of food security which reflect advice from, and experience of, these remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities'.

1. *Country and Culture: Increase on-Country activities and knowledge sharing.*
2. *Health and Nutrition: Equitable access to nutrition services and knowledge to improve health and wellbeing.*
3. *Housing, Infrastructure, and Environmental Health: Remote housing and infrastructure are adequate and culturally appropriate.*
4. *Families and Communities: Services and facilities provide culturally appropriate nutritious food.*
5. *Remote Retail: Remote stores and other food outlets are responsive to and meet the needs of community.*
6. *Supply Chains: Supply chains are efficient and resilient and minimise the impact of remoteness.*
7. *Healthy Economies: Remote communities purchasing power, job and economic opportunities are the same as non-remote.*¹⁴

Food Deserts

I asked a cohort what they thought was the most pressing matter for food in Australia. One response in particular caught my attention:

"Food Deserts": particularly in outer suburbs with little or no public transport, where fast food outlets are numerous but fresh produce is hard to find. This has a massive impact on people with disabilities and those on limited and low incomes particularly in terms of contributing to chronic health problems.

This article summarizes what I found. I make an exception and editorialise a tad.

What does the term mean?

There were a number of interpretations of the term of which these are three:

¹² Foodbank, OzHarvest and SecondBite, *Food relief sector – issues brief*. March 2025

¹³ Commonwealth of Australia, *National Strategy for Food Security in Remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities 2025* p.10

¹⁴ Remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities 2025 pp. 8=9

A food desert exists where it is more than 1,600 metres to the nearest grocer, and less than that distance to the nearest takeaway shop.¹⁵

The term is used to describe places where there is limited access to shops that sell healthy food, and an abundance of unhealthy takeaway options.¹⁶

People living in food deserts lack easy access to food shops. This is usually due to combinations of:

- travel distances as a result of low-density suburban sprawl
- limited transport options
- zoning policies that prohibit the scattering of shops throughout residential areas
- retailers' commercial decisions that the household finances of an area won't support a viable food outlet.¹⁷

In 2022 the University of Western Sydney and the University of New South Wales jointly published *A rapid-mapping methodology for local food environments, and associated health actions: the case of Penrith, Australia*. The research was to see whether the Penrith Local Government Area characterised by 'a visibly high concentration of fast food outlets as well as some of the highest rates of obesity in the region, at 64.1%' is a food desert. The LGA also has higher rates of early deaths from cardiovascular disease when compared to greater Sydney and NSW and is characterised by high levels of socio-economic disadvantage within certain (not all) suburbs.¹⁸

They mapped where food outlets were established in Western Sydney providing food – both healthy and unhealthy food – and of local levels of disadvantage and health problems.

Findings were

- There were 220 "non-healthy" food outlets (84% of the total number of outlets) and 42 "healthy" food outlets (16% of the total).
- Further, these outlets (healthy and non-healthy) were all located in 14 suburbs, meaning that 22 suburbs did not contain any food outlets at all. The 14 suburbs with food outlets also commonly have more – at times substantially more – unhealthy than healthy stores.
- The mapping also showed a strong correlation between suburbs with large proportions of unhealthy stores and those with greater levels of disadvantage.

Ruvimbo et. al. are cautious about saying their research finds a food desert in Penrith LGA. However, they come close to saying it in the 2023 article by Morrison and Paine. 'The term "healthy food desert" describes an area where food shops are available, but only a limited

¹⁵ The rise of food deserts. Charlie Fletcher Open Forum 24 August 2022

¹⁶ 'Food deserts': Grocery dead zones have serious health impacts for residents, experts say, Mark Colvin and Angela Lavoipierre Health ABC 8 July 2015

¹⁷ Are you living in a food desert? These maps suggest it can make a big difference to your health. Nicky Morrison, Gregory Paine, 16 Jan 2023 UNSW

¹⁸ *A rapid-mapping methodology for local food environments, and associated health actions: the case of Penrith, Australia*, Ruvimbo Timba, Nicky Morrison, Greg Paine, Published online 4 December 2022

number – or none at all – sell fresh and nutritious food’¹⁹ which sounds to me like their findings in Penrith.

Ruvimbo et. al. say:

Urban policy can be effective in eliminating food deserts. Social, land use and community health actions always need to be on the ball and targeted to need.

*After all, diet-related choices are not just an outcome of personal preferences. The availability of food outlets, and the range of foods they sell, can influence those choices – and, in turn, nutrition and health.*²⁰

Charlie Fletcher said:

There are obvious concerns when it comes to food deserts and food scarcity. Families who don’t have access to nutritious food can suffer in a variety of ways, including developing health issues. Some of the greatest risks for individuals include heart disease; stroke; type 2 diabetes; high blood pressure and obesity.

*These problems tend to be multi-generational for underserved and low-income communities. It’s not just the adults who are suffering, but children have no control over the communities in which they are raised. When kids don’t have access to adequate nutrition, it can stunt their physical and developmental growth. They might struggle in school, develop illnesses, and have shortened lifespans.*²¹

What could be done to ameliorate these findings?

Morrison and Paine said:

‘Urban policy can be effective in eliminating health actions always need to be on the ball and targeted to needy food deserts. Social, land use and community

After all, diet-related choices are not just an outcome of personal preferences. The availability of food outlets, and the range of foods they sell, can influence those choices – and, in turn, nutrition and health.

*Our findings pinpoint where targeted investigations should be directed. Determining the exact nature of this lack of choice will help policymakers work out what can be done about it.*²²

Fletcher said:

*Some of the best ways to fight back against local food deserts include starting or supporting community gardens; encouraging mobile farmers’ markets; improving public transportation options; working with local council members and politicians to encourage change; and appealing to nonprofit organizations to provide help.*²³

Concluding remarks

I like others see fighting food insecurity as primarily requiring a suite of systemic policy and action. These are detailed in this response. I believe they are core issues If there is to be an effective *Feeding Australia: National Food Security Strategy*.

¹⁹ Morrison and Paine 2023

²⁰ Morrison and Paine 2023

²¹ Fletcher 2022

²² Morrison and Paine

²³ Fletcher 2022

