

Dumpster diving: It's a natural thing to do to check for resources that would go to waste otherwise.

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Now dumpster diving has actually become a resource of food for people.¹

While it's considered extreme by most people, advocates say bin diving is a solution to both the issue of food waste and food insecurity felt by many.

Every night across Australia people with an empty bag or two gloves, sanitiser and a reach extender head for the dumpsters and garbage bins of supermarkets, restaurants, cafes or other food related businesses and residential streets. They are looking for food that has been tossed in these. They go through it and select anything that looks edible either loose or still in its wrapping, can, or bottle. They apply their own criteria for what they will take. They will take this home and use it to make a meal tonight or store it for later use. They are dumpster divers.

This article looks at dumpster diving in the context of food insecurity and food wastage. The material is drawn from newspapers and articles online.

Who Dumpster Dives?

There are three main groups of divers:

- Those who are chronically food insecure for example, those on government benefit which is inadequate.
- Those who are temporarily food insecure, for example where the wage earner is temporarily out of work.
- Those who want to reduce their environmental footprint.

At the heart of the first two is the impact of the cost of living on their capacity to feed themselves and their family.

Like many Australian families, the 39-year-old was struggling with the rising cost of living and was inspired to see what was being thrown away with the intention to use discarded produce to feed her family.²

Ann, who lives in Sydney, considers herself a novice when it comes to dumpster diving — but says it can be a lifesaver when she's struggling financially. "Knowing that retail giants, as well as smaller companies, discard ridiculous amounts of waste daily, made me think I could use it to ... stay afloat."³

Our recent (OzHarvest) community needs survey found that, on average, our charities report that 30 per cent of their clients are new in the last six months ... There is a growing cohort of people who are seeking food support for the first time.⁴

¹Lexanne, Garcia *Australians are dumpster diving for groceries—here's what you should know before trying*. Your Life Style Choices 14 April 2025

²Swain, Sarah *The Aussies trawling through trash to get free groceries* Nine News 6 April 2023

³Myers 2023

⁴ *As the cost-of-living crisis continues, dumpster diving has become a lifesaver for some families doing it tough* ABC 25 July 2022

At the heart of the third is reducing waste.

Dumpster divers like Mr Schuldig aim to minimise their impact on the environment by reclaiming food destined to bloat already overflowing rubbish tips. “It’s a natural thing to do to check for resources that would go to waste otherwise. (We) spread them out and do something better with them.”⁵

Cohort comment: Great idea. To create a sustainable plant that will survive, we will have to be a lot less precious about everything. For those who are able & want to dumpster dive – mighty fine.

What do they find?

A dive for a night could include any of beer, ready-to-eat meals, tinned food, bread, fresh fruit, vegetables, eggs, potatoes, carrots, leeks, bakery items chocolate bars, cans of drink, grapes, apples, boxes of almond snacks, potato chips, multi-packs of yoghurt and even some ham (separately packaged).

I recently hauled a garbage bin full of boutique beers, wines and ciders from a recycling centre skip while looking for empty jars for jam! ⁶

Cohort comment: My daughter used to dumpster dive up to about 5 – 10 years ago and used to bring home lots of good food. The bakeries like Bourke Street were great and some of the supermarkets also. I’m hoping they are giving most of it to places like the Pantry (a foodbank) now as there some risks with dumpster diving. I made some fantastic aioli one time as she came back with dozens of eggs.

How much money do they save?

Dumpster divers save varying amounts of money.

James, 28, can barely afford to buy groceries and cover his phone bill after paying his \$300 weekly rent. The shadow of the 4.8 per cent HECS debt indexation is looming — he says he has \$90,000 in HECS debt to pay off. He estimates he saves about \$50 a week in food bills.⁷

Last year a Sydney dumpster diver claimed it had been years since she’d paid for groceries. Similarly, an Adelaide man said up to ‘80 percent’ of his food is found in bins around South Australia. ‘All I buy is my soy milk and bananas’ he told Yahoo News, while everything else comes from the bins of major retailers who are food businesses’.⁸

Reaching beyond the family

Some pass on their finds to foodbanks or to individuals who are food insecure.

Once I found 10 25-kilogram boxes of bananas, three 5-kilogram trays of avocado, and 10 10-kilogram boxes of peaches in one dumpster. I donated them to the food bank [and it] fed 50 families.⁹

⁵ Lang, Adelaide *Dumpster diving hailed as cost-saving alternative lifestyle*, The Australian 31 January 2026

⁶ *Dumpster diving 101: Frank eats out of bins* Green Peace Australia, 15 July 2015

⁷ ‘James eats most of his meals from food collected in bins. But is ‘dumpster diving’ legal? SBS

⁸ Lexanne 2025

⁹ Myers 2023

While Mr Rikihana said he and his wife spent very little on groceries these days thanks to scavenging from industrial bins, he said the majority of the food he collects is donated to people in need. He has a network of elderly people and families in his area to who he passes food to, and said they were always so thankful and relieved to have a little bit of financial pressure taken off of them.¹⁰

Is dumpster diving legal?

The laws in each state are similar. Dumpster divers could be charged with stealing, trespass, or theft.¹¹

Rikihana admits what he does is illegal, but claims his interactions with police have always been "positive."¹²

Betty reckons as long as she sticks to bins which aren't locked, don't have any "no trespassing signs", belong to the council or involve trespassing on private property, she's doing nothing wrong.¹³

Getting data on the number of charges for dumpster diving is difficult to tease out from figures for theft generally.

Cohort comment: My partner does it almost weekly. He goes does it to collect ingredients for his compost bins but often but finds food that is OK. It's not unusual for to have 100kg of fruit and vegetables in his ute. The two stores he collects from know him because he's been doing it for a decade, so they now give him close to expiry food. It's not unusual for him to arrive at my place with rescued food, so I alert the neighbours and they come and collect what they want. I puree mangoes, pickle vegetables and try any other type of food preservation I can find. He has rescued tons of food from landfill!

Supermarket views on dumpster diving

The three main supermarkets in Australia Woolworths, Aldi, and Coles say they have programmes in place to send waste to food bank charities like OzHarvest. They don't condone diving.

Woolworths Group says it's bins are generally locked, unless they're managed by a shopping centre, when they might not be. It says it's not allowed to give away out of date food, but works with organisations including Ozharvest and WIRES to get items it cannot sell to people and animals. "We've set ourselves a goal to divert 100 per cent of food waste from landfill by 2025," a spokesman, said.

Aldi also aims to send nothing to landfill by 2025, and works with charities such as Foodbank. "The only food that should be in our bins is food not fit for human consumption," it said.

Coles said it "discourages" people from trying to get items from bins for health and safety reasons. "Last financial year we donated more than 18,200 tonnes of unsold edible food to food rescue organisations SecondBite and hunger relief charity Foodbank," a Coles spokesman said.¹⁴

¹⁰ 'Bin living' scavenger says dumpster diving is 'a food resource' for a growing number of Australians

¹¹ Swain 2023

¹² Swain 2023

¹³ Swain2023

¹⁴ 'James eats most of his meals from food collected in bins. But is 'dumpster diving' legal? SBS

Online Dumpster Diver Manual

As new dumpster divers begin their diving an online manual has been published - *Diving into the Unknown: A Comprehensive Guide to Dumpster Diving for Food* by Jason Brown.¹⁵ The opening notes say:

Dumpster diving, once stigmatized as a desperate act of last resort, has evolved into a conscious choice for many individuals seeking to reduce their environmental footprint and access fresh, nutritious food. In this article, we'll delve into the world of dumpster diving for food, exploring the benefits, risks, and best practices for those looking to join the movement.

Topics include *Understanding the Benefits of Dumpster Diving for Food, The Risks and Challenges of Dumpster Diving for Food, Identifying Prime Dumpster Diving Locations and Best Practices for Dumpster Diving for Food.*

Youtube and other video sites

The web is awash with videos from dumpster divers. The videos show the preparation for diving, the dive itself and the haul for the night with commentary to explain and promote diving and the aftermath of the dive.

Dumpster diving 101: Frank eats out of bins

This is an article from Frank Deveson discussing Freeganism 'the practice of finding, reclaiming, consuming and distributing food that has been discarded. Often, restaurants, supermarkets and other shops throw away food and products they aren't able to sell for aesthetic purposes, or because of minor defaults'.¹⁶

He has a challenge for foodbanks.

I think supermarkets have an obligation to distribute the food products they have monopolised. Reducing items appropriately so that they don't end up in the bin or being 'rescued' by charities, who, while doing great things, may also be a part of a perpetual cycle of dependency, can empower us all to 'rescue' the food for ourselves.¹⁷

He is more positive of dumpster diving:

I do feel that things are changing though. I feel that dumpster diving is becoming a known and accepted thing to do, and I can almost assume that people will be into the idea. I also feel like this is because most people understand to some extent that the system is broken.

End words

This article has described dumpster diving as a practice of accessing food that has been rejected by a range of food services and re-purposing them as edible food for people in food insecurity .

¹⁵ Brown. Jason, *A Comprehensive Guide to Dumpster Diving for Food* EasyHealthyFood

¹⁶ *Dumpster diving 101: Frank eats out of bins* Greenpeace 15 July 2025

¹⁷ Green Peace July 2015