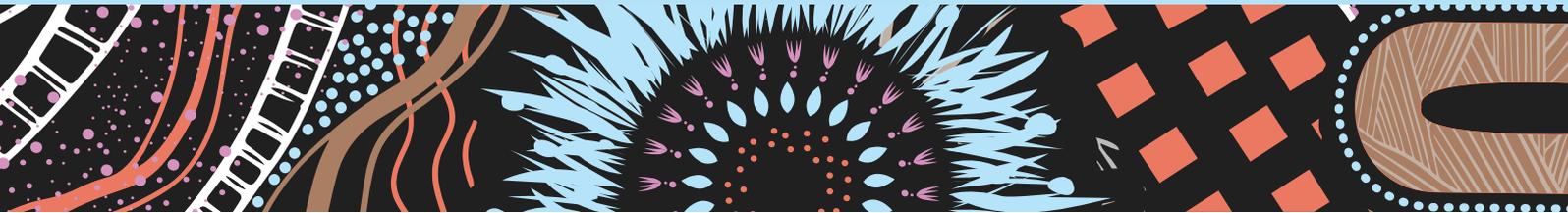# Food security and Indigenous mental health

Summary paper

This paper is a summary of the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare publication *Food security and Indigenous mental health*, published on the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare Indigenous Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Clearinghouse. It can be accessed online at <www.indigenousmhspc.gov.au>.

Some people may find the content of this report confronting or distressing. If you are affected in this way, please contact **13YARN (13 92 76)**, **Lifeline (13 11 14)** or **Beyond Blue (1300 22 4636)**.

Key findings

- Food insecurity disproportionately affects Indigenous Australians. In 2012–13, 1 in 5 Indigenous Australians had run out of food in the past year and could not afford to buy more, compared to 1 in 20 non-Indigenous Australians who faced these circumstances (ABS 2015).

- Food insecurity increases psychological distress and compromises wellbeing. A lack of quality and sufficient food causes stress, with food insecurity also linked with depression.

- Factors contributing to food insecurity include a lack of resources, such as transport; limited access to nutritious food at affordable prices; and lack of access to food due to geographical isolation.

- Most programs that focus on improving food security for Indigenous Australians are for people living in remote areas. However, food insecurity is affected by poverty and social disadvantage and by poor housing infrastructure in both urban and remote areas.

- With multiple causal factors and dimensions, coordination and collaboration across governments are needed to resolve food insecurity. Partnerships, community ownership and leadership are also essential elements of successful programs.

- Financial insecurity often drives food insecurity, so programs ensuring affordability are likely to have an impact. Programs also need to be continuous and sustainable; emergency relief programs do not offer sustainable or stable solutions.

What we know

Food security is a fundamental human right recognised in international law. Its importance to closing the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous Australians has been recognised in government policies (PM&C 2017a; DoH 2021).

In Australia, colonisation has led to a loss of traditional food sources. As a result of colonisation, Indigenous Australians were exposed to and became dependent on highly processed European foods which has left them with a higher predisposition to chronic illness.

The most widely accepted definition of food security is found in the Plan of Action of the 1996 Rome Declaration on World Food Security:

> Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life (FAO 1996).

The National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO) cites the following definition:

> The land and the sea is our food security. It is our right. Food security for us has two parts:
>
> – Food security is when the food from our ancestors is protected and always there for us and our children. It is also when we can easily access and afford the right non-traditional food for a collective healthy and active life.
>
> – When we are food secure we can provide, share and fulfil our responsibilities, we can choose good food, knowing how to make choices and how to prepare and use it (NACCHO 2016).

There are 4 dimensions of food security:

- Availability encompasses the consistent, physical availability of food and aspects of production and transport.

- Access refers to having access to a reliable and consistent quality of food, including the economic and other resources needed to acquire that food.

- Utilisation requires people to have the appropriate knowledge to use the food for good nutrition, including the basic sanitary conditions to choose and prepare food.

- Stability acknowledges that these conditions must be stable over time (FAO et al. 2020; Dietitians Australia 2016).

'Food insecurity' is used in this paper to refer to a lack of food security, where the availability and access to acceptable food is limited or uncertain (Radimer and Radimer 2002).

How does food insecurity affect mental health and wellbeing?

In 2012–13, 1 in 5 Indigenous Australians had run out of food in the past year and could not afford to buy more, compared to 1 in 20 non-Indigenous Australians who faced these circumstances (ABS 2015). Food insecurity was associated with high psychological distress (ABS 2015). Studies have also noted the links between food insecurity and depression (Weaver and Hadley 2009; Pryor et al. 2016).

It affects both the quality and quantity of diet and has a significant detrimental impact on nutrition (Jones 2017; Willows et al. 2011). Poor diet and malnutrition, which may result from food insecurity, is associated with chronic physical illness, which itself can lead to mental health issues.

Children in food-insecure households in Australia are also likely to have emotional or behavioural difficulties and are more likely to miss days of school and to miss out on school activities (Ramsey et al. 2011).

Some international studies among indigenous peoples have identified a link between food security and suicide or suicidal ideation (Pandey et al. 2019; Men et al. 2021; Hajizadeh et al. 2019; Shayo and Lawala 2019). Studies in Australia are lacking so the relationship is not known for Indigenous Australians.

Policy context

Food security has been identified as a priority area in closing the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous Australians (PM&C 2017b). The government states that actions to improve food security must enable self-determination in diet and nutrition-related decision-making (DoH 2021).

Many of the government efforts to improve food security relate solely to remote communities. Outback Stores established by the Australian Government in 2006 – which seeks to improve food affordability and availability, by providing fresh food and produce to remote locations at competitive prices (Outback Stores 2020) – is one example. Another example is the Community Stores Licensing Scheme under the *Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory Act 2012* (SFNT Act), which requires licensed stores to stock and promote nutritional food items (Bray et al. 2014) and includes funding to provide targeted assistance to community stores in selected communities.

Improved food security and food choices were expected outcomes of income management (also known as 'welfare quarantining') (AIHW 2010). It was first introduced as part of the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) in June 2007. However, several studies have found that income management itself can lead to stress and anxiety (Marston et al. 2020; Mendes et al. 2020; Roche et al. 2021).

Programs and initiatives

A sample of ten programs that aid food security were examined to identify best practice. Improving mental health was not a specified objective of most programs, nor were mental health outcomes specifically considered by evaluations, other than the Community Kitchens program.

Indigenous-specific programs

Overwhelmingly, the Indigenous-specific programs were directed at remote communities. Most programs, such as remote store programs, focused primarily on food accessibility and availability by ensuring a wide range of healthy food options that are affordable. Programs examined were as follows, with cited evaluations noted in parentheses:

- Remote store programs: Outback Stores (Ferguson et al. 2017), Mai Wiru Regional Stores (Lee et al. 2016) and Arnhem Land Progress Aboriginal (ALPA) Corporation (Brimblecombe et al. 2019).

- Healthy eating programs: Cape York Health Choice Rewards (Brown et al. 2019) and Good Food Systems: Good Food for All (Rogers et al. 2016; Brimblecombe et al. 2017).

- Garden programs: Edge of Nowhere (KPMG 2013) and Food Ladder (Schmidt et al. 2018).

Mainstream programs

A cross-section of evaluations of government-funded food support programs were reviewed to explore outcomes for food security, wellbeing and improved mental health, as follows:

- Community Kitchens brings small groups of people together to learn about planning and preparation of food and to eat the meal they have prepared together (Rosier 2011; Lee et al. 2010; AIFS 2014).

- School nutrition projects provide meal services to students in the Northern Territory. They were originally part of the Northern Territory Emergency Response, with their role expanded during COVID-19. The program was still active at the time of writing (Jaenke and Brimblecombe 2019).

- Food relief charities – Foodbank was examined as an example of charities that provide emergency food relief. Its services include the stable supply of staple foods to various locations and school breakfast programs (Foodbank 2014; MacDonald 2018).

What works

Environmental, geographical, economic, political, social and cultural factors all contribute to food insecurity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Many factors are associated with the ongoing impacts of colonisation. This multi-dimensional problem requires long-term commitment. Elements key to the success of food security programs include:

- Multi-sectoral and multi-dimensional approaches – Given the multiple causal factors of food insecurity, and the different dimensions (availability, accessibility, utilisation, stability) coordination of the different sectors that play a role in managing these aspects is necessary.

- Partnerships, community ownership and leadership – One of the key success factors for programs that address food security is the formation of partnerships and relationships with the community. Community ownership is also important, with local Indigenous Australians the decision makers about what they need and partnering with experts where needed. Indeed, community involvement and preferably control of program development and implementation has been described as the most important factor for the success of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander food and nutrition programs (Browne et el. 2018).

- Financial insecurity – With material hardship and inadequate financial resources a primary reason for food insecurity, programs that ensure affordability were more likely to have an impact. Solutions such as subsidy schemes, monetary incentive strategies and increasing incomes through increased social security payments were all flagged as viable solutions.

- Cultural safety and acceptability – Paternalistic or authoritarian programs lead to resistance and lowered self-esteem for participants (Skinner et al. 2016). Some programs flagged 'preserving dignity' as important and propose programs be presented as a 'service' – not a charity (Lee and Ride 2018). Indigenous culture and food preferences need to be acknowledged when developing programs. Effective programs empower Indigenous Australians, through increasing capacity and reconnecting people with cultural practices (Skinner et al. 2016).

- Continuous and sustainable – Emergency food relief is not a sustainable or stable solution and does not address the root causes of food insecurity. Tackling the systemic issues underpinning food insecurity requires long-term, consistent and sustainable investment.

Conclusions

Combatting food insecurity is not a current focus of Australia's mental health and suicide-prevention initiatives. Few programs relating to food security for Indigenous Australians assess their effect on mental health and suicidal behaviours as part of the evaluation. Understanding and addressing the complex underpinnings of food insecurity for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is required, with poverty and social disadvantage central to this challenge.

The overwhelming focus of food security research and interventions for Indigenous Australians was in remote Indigenous communities, with little known about the effects of food security interventions among urban Indigenous Australians. Solutions in non-remote areas often take on more of an emergency response. Continuous support and community ownership are important facets of successful food security interventions.

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