

# Australia: Escalating need for food handouts

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The past year saw a near 10 percent increase in the number of Australians seeking food from the country's largest provider of food assistance, according to a recent report. Foodbank provides food via charities to more than 473,000 people per month, but a further 65,000 people, including 30,000 children, are turned away each month despite their need.

The figures are symptomatic of worsening social hardship in the working class, a product of growing unemployment and underemployment, deep welfare cuts and cost-of-living increases.

Foodbank's annual report for 2013, "End Hunger in Australia," is at odds with the image, peddled by government and the media, of a prosperous society. The report is based on a survey of about 900 charities and welfare agencies that receive food collected and distributed by Foodbank.

Over 20 percent of Australian households are what the report categorises as "low economic resource households," that is, they earn a weekly income of \$496 or less, a sum about \$120 less than the minimum wage. Over the past ten years, the wealth of these families has fallen by 3.6 percent. At the same time, the average wealth of all households has grown by 22 percent, a figure skewed by the enormous accumulation of wealth at the very top of society amid massively growing social inequality.

A quarter of charities now report that demand for their services has increased 15 percent in the past year. About 10 percent of charities say demand has risen by a third.

According to the Foodbank report, more than three quarters of those accessing emergency food services had run out of food in the previous three weeks and had no money to buy more. More than a third said they regularly could not afford to eat for a whole day. Over 30 percent of recipients obtain Foodbank relief once per week, 10 percent more than once per week, and 20

percent use the service more than once per month.

The welfare agencies dispensing Foodbank services say they would need 65 percent more food just to meet current demand. The 65,000 people who are turned away each month must either go without, or buy food with their money supposed to go to other vital expenses, such as housing and medicines.

One charity worker reported: "Many of our customers queue outside our door for 90 minutes before we open. We have customers cry on our shoulders and hug us when they see what help they can receive via free food, veggies, fruit and a box of groceries for a few dollars."

Only a small minority of those receiving Foodbank services are homeless. Many are unemployed, disabled or depend on other welfare payments. The report cites research that the rate of financial stress experienced by households receiving government benefits as their main source of income is twice that experienced by other households. Some 7 percent of such households report going without meals, while 40 percent could not pay electricity or gas bills on time.

One Salvation Army worker told the *Sydney Morning Herald* that one third of the people receiving food via that charity were single parents that the previous Labor government forced onto the unemployment benefit, NewStart. That policy further impoverished single parents, with the 75,000 affected families having their already meagre incomes slashed by around \$100 per week.

The report has been met with silence by the governments that created this social disaster. The levels of mass poverty now being experienced are the product of the policies pursued by successive Labor and Liberal governments at the federal and state level. As a result of low wages, unemployment and welfare cuts, 20 percent of the Australian population lives below the poverty line, when measured as 60 percent of median income.

Foodbank is appealing to the state and federal governments for more funding. Its services reportedly save the government \$170 million each year, while the organisation receives a pittance from the federal government, about \$1 million annually. The figures point to a broader process: governments, in their drive to cut welfare expenditure, are deliberately driving the poor into the arms of private agencies.

In doing so, governments have created an army of unemployed and underemployed that can be exploited as cheap labour by business. More than 50 percent of those receiving Foodbank services have a job. This reflects the rise of casual and part-time work, as well as declining real wages experienced across the working class.

The most widely-recognised poverty line in Australia, that extrapolated from the 1974 Henderson Report, is currently \$918 per week for a family of two adults and two dependent children. Putting to one side the fact that it is difficult and often impossible to get by in any Australian capital city on that sum (the median cost of renting an apartment in Sydney is \$500 per week), the minimum *full-time* wage is now only \$622.20 per week, that is, \$300 below the poverty line for a two-child family.

Such figures point to the social crisis that is set to intensify as the economic slump worsens and the Liberal-National government of Tony Abbott takes up where Labor government left off, and pursues a ruthless austerity and economic restructuring agenda on behalf of big business and finance capital.



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