

Report highlights growing child hunger in Australia

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Contrary to the image of Australia as an exceptional “lucky” country, poverty is intensifying. More than one in five respondents to a recent survey conducted by the Foodbank charity indicated that their children experienced food insecurity at least once in the past 12 months, up from 1 in 6 in 2016.

The charity’s “Rumbling Tummies—Child Hunger in Australia” report, released last month, underscores the impact of declining wages, cuts to welfare and the soaring cost of living, presided over by successive Labor and Liberal-National governments at the state and federal levels.

The report is based on an online survey earlier this year of 1,002 Australian parents with children under the age of 15. It defined “food insecurity” as “a situation that exists when people lack secure access to sufficient amounts of safe and nutritious food for normal growth and development and an active and healthy life.”

Among the respondents whose answers placed them in this bracket, 47 percent said their households ran out of food at least once a month and they were unable to purchase more. Around 4 percent said they struggled to feed their family every day. Almost 10 percent indicated that their family could spend a whole day without food at least once a week.

The respondents suffering food insecurity said the prime cause was the increasing cost of living. Around 38 percent cited exorbitant housing costs as a factor. In an indication of underlying poverty, 44 percent said they lacked enough money to purchase sufficient quantities of nutritious food for their families.

Australia has become one of the most expensive countries in which to live. As a result of a speculative property bubble, the median house price in Sydney exceeds \$1 million, while rents average approximately \$480 per week for an apartment. Housing costs have

also risen in other capital cities, regional centres and rural areas.

Hundreds of thousands of households suffer low wages and poor conditions in casual and insecure work, which now accounts for over 40 percent of all employment. They confront the prospect of not receiving work at any time, if an employer faces a downturn and seeks to cut costs.

Wages are stagnant or declining. Last year, wage growth was just 1.9 percent, the lowest level in over 60 years, and well below real increases in the cost of living. An earlier Foodbank report, released last October, found that employed workers accounted for 48 percent of those seeking food assistance.

The corporatisation or privatisation of electricity, gas and water services across the country has resulted in significant increases to bills. More than half of the parents facing food insecurity said they had missed bill payments in order to buy food.

According to an Australian Competition and Consumer Commission report released last September, national electricity expenses increased by 63 percent between 2007-08 and 2015-16.

Around 37 percent of those facing food insecurity reported to Foodbank that they lived on a low income, or some form of government welfare.

Poverty is a daily reality for those forced to subsist on meagre unemployment benefits. A single jobseeker on the Newstart unemployment allowance receives just \$268 a week. This is the result of decades of cuts and funding freezes by Labor and Liberal-National governments.

Food insecurity is particularly prevalent among the most disadvantaged layers of the population. The Foodbank report found that 44 percent of those affected were single parents, while some 33 percent were

younger parents.

In 2012, the Greens-backed Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard forced around 100,000 single parents off Parenting Payments, onto the poverty-level Newstart program. This move, which was part of a broader austerity offensive, cost the affected families \$118.70 a month.

Over 58 percent of respondents whose children faced food insecurity were of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent, one of the most oppressed sections of the working class.

The report highlighted the emotional impact of the mounting food crisis. Approximately three in four parents living in food insecure households said they felt embarrassed and ashamed because they struggled to provide food for their children, often relying on money from family and friends to ensure a meal was put on the table.

Steve, a respondent from Melbourne, told Foodbank: “Mum’s on a pension and I haven’t worked for probably three years now because of my depression and anxiety. I used to do concreting and forklift driving but I got to a stage where, because of the medication I’m taking, it played with my motion and because it’s such a dangerous job your vision has to be perfect.”

He added: “It’s the electricity, it’s the rent, it’s all the amenities and just the day-to-day living that makes it really, really hard.”

Foodbank CEO Brianna Casey said last month there had been a 10 percent increase in demand for food assistance over the past year. This followed an increase of 6 percent in 2016. Casey said the organisation’s front-line charity partners were forced to turn away more than 65,000 people in need of food assistance every month due to stocks being exhausted.

Foodbank has appealed for state and federal governments to invest in ensuring that everyone across the country has access to sufficient amounts of nutritious food. These pleas, however, will fall on deaf ears.

In the lead-up to a federal election, slated to be held this year or next, Labor, the Liberal-Nationals and all the parliamentary parties have declared their commitment to “balancing the budget” and “reducing the national debt,” code words for even deeper cuts to welfare and other areas of vital social spending in order to satisfy the financial markets and the profit demands

of the ever-more wealthy corporate elite.



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