

Australian report reveals widespread food insecurity

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Foodbank, one of Australia's largest providers to relief charities, released a report last month on the growth of food insecurity across the country amid the ongoing covid-19 pandemic.

The report was based on a survey of 1001 people who had experienced food insecurity in the past 12 months, conducted between June 25 and July 15. All of the respondents had answered in the affirmative to the question: "In the past 12 months, were there any times that you ran out of food and couldn't afford to buy any more?"

Currently, 43 percent of all food insecure people are going a whole day without eating at least once a week, compared to 30 percent in 2019. Last year, 15 percent of Australians experiencing food insecurity were seeking food relief at least once a week. In 2020, this has doubled to 31 percent. Some 28 percent of Australians experiencing food insecurity in 2020 had never done so before.

Charities have seen the demand for food relief increase by some 47 percent since March. This has largely been driven by emergency assistance requests from international students, visa holders and casual workers, more than two million of whom continue to be denied wage subsidies or welfare payments by the government.

The most acute economic and social impact of the pandemic is being felt by youth who are far more likely to be working in insecure casual employment. Approximately "65 percent of food insecure Gen Zs (aged 18-25) are going hungry at least once a week compared to 25 percent of food insecure Baby Boomers (56-74) and 25 percent of Builders (Age 75+)" the report stated.

It highlighted the significant impact the pandemic has had on Australia's labor market. According to official

figures, between March and July, the number of employed Australians decreased by 556,800 people and the unemployment rate increased from 5.2 percent to 7.5 percent.

These employment figures cover over the true extent of the social crisis. According to Roy Morgan, the levels of unemployment and underemployment across Australia reached 22.3 percent in September, down from a high of 27.4 percent in March (approximately 2.4 million people), in the midst of lockdowns. Anglicare's recent Job Snapshot report revealed there are eight Jobseekers for every entry-level position, but the charity stated that even this could be an underestimation.

A Good Shepherd study reported that "two in five Australians have experienced negative employment changes since April this year." This included reduced pay and hours, being temporarily stood down, taking leave to avoid loss of pay or being sacked, along with many other changes to employment.

The mass job cull by major companies, enforced by the trade unions, has left many casual workers on the precipice of a disaster. One of the most exploited sections of the working class, they have no guaranteed hours of work and are vulnerable to being underpaid or dismissed by their employers at a moment's notice.

Many of the industries hardest hit by COVID-19, such as hospitality, retail, tourism and accommodation, account for a large proportion of casual workers across Australia.

Jodie, whose story was featured in the Foodbank report, explained that she lost her job as a casual worker at a motor vehicle repair shop in New South Wales (NSW) when the pandemic began.

"It was very sudden," she said. "I'd never had to worry about food before this year. Even though I was a

casual, I was still working six times a week. So I went from earning \$1,100 a week down to a carers pension which I'm still a few weeks off being approved for." She reported that her partner also lost some 50 percent of his income when the coronavirus crisis struck.

Demonstrating the breadth of similar experiences, some 69 percent of charities have seen an increase in the number of newly unemployed people seeking food relief.

Cost of living has consistently been cited as the main reason many have reported experiencing food insecurity with unexpected expenses or large bills (41 percent) and rent and mortgage payments (35 percent) as the most common reasons.

Since the pandemic began, only 61 percent of those who have experienced food insecurity have accessed food relief. Those who have not sought assistance cite concerns that other people need help more than they do (33 percent), embarrassment (33 percent) and shame (30 percent).

The report states that those "who were already struggling before the coronavirus hit felt the effects more quickly and more seriously." Prior to the pandemic, those accessing food relief were overwhelmingly low income families, the unemployed, single-parent families, the homeless and people with mental illness. Since March, they have been forced to access food relief more frequently.

Many live payday to payday and therefore cannot adequately safeguard against sudden emergency situations. In March, when panic buying and stockpiling began, the most vulnerable confronted increased food scarcity, as many of the basic essentials (like pasta, toilet paper, rice, canned goods and long-life milk) disappeared from supermarket shelves.

The additional government assistance programs introduced in March alleviated some of the difficulties for those relying on welfare payments. According to a survey conducted by the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS), 80 percent of respondents said that they were eating better and more regularly due to the increased payments.

In September, the federal Liberal-National Coalition government began to roll back the additional subsidies. The JobSeeker welfare payment has now been reduced from an extra \$550 a fortnight to only \$250, with further reductions scheduled. JobKeeper wage subsidy

payments have also been brought down from \$750 a week to only \$500. Foodbank reported that charities have seen an additional 25 percent increase in food demand since these payments were first reduced.

The charity stated that "35 percent receiving assistance don't know how they will cope." Some 80 percent expect the cuts mean they will definitely have to skip meals and further reduce the amount of food that they purchase.

Maria, a founder of Survivors R Us, a charity that assists those who have suffered domestic violence, told Foodbank: "I have never seen the line as long as it was just to come and get some food... My ordering has gone up twofold to try and keep up with the demand... We probably had around 100-150 people a week before the pandemic and this has gone up to about 500 people a week... My only fear is when [government assistance] is rolled back... I think we'll actually increase again because [people] are not going to be coping."

Currently, Australia has far fewer COVID-19 cases than the Americas, Europe and India. However, the pandemic has exposed the real state of class relations, by accelerating and deepening the existing social, political and economic crisis. According to an earlier 2019 Foodbank report produced, prior to the pandemic, approximately 21 percent of all Australian's were food insecure, slightly above one in five people.

The widespread poverty is the result of a decades-long assault on social spending by governments, Coalition and Labor alike, and a protracted offensive against jobs, wages and conditions, enforced by the trade unions. Amid the deepest global crisis since the 1930s, these attacks against the working class have only escalated over the past year.



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