

Australia: Report reveals soaring levels of hunger, the result of rising living costs

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Last week the charity organisation Foodbank released their annual “Hunger Report,” which gives a snapshot of the level of food insecurity in Australia. It revealed that 33 percent of households, or an estimated 8.6 million people, ran out of money to pay for food or, in some cases, skipped meals for days. This is up from 28 percent the previous year—an increase of around 1.3 million people.

The report is based on an online survey of 4,024 people conducted by Foodbank between 11 and 28 July this year. Based on their responses they were categorised as highly food secure, marginally food secure, moderately food insecure or severely food insecure. The distribution of respondents was based on stratified quotas weighted by state, age, sex and location. The results give an indication of the food crisis in Australia.

Significantly the largest increase from the previous year were those categorised as severely insecure, which rose from 17 percent of households in 2021 to 21 percent in 2022. This means 400,000 more households have been thrust into severe food insecurity in a single year, or 1.04 million Australians.

To be classified as severely food insecure, households must have experienced any one of the following due to running out of money or not having access to food—went hungry and did not eat, went an entire day without food or lost weight as a result of not having food, this includes children.

Households with children are 1.5 times more vulnerable to severe food insecurity, with 32 percent, or one third of all households with children experiencing severely compromised levels of food access. According to the data, 52 percent of all Australian households with children under 18 experienced some form of food insecurity in the last 12 months.

These staggering numbers reveal a crisis bubbling under the surface, as families struggle to afford the rapidly

rising cost of living. Brianna Casey, the chief executive of Foodbank, told the *Guardian*, that it was the worst she had seen in six years in the job, “I’ve never seen anything like what we are seeing right now.

“It’s going to come as a surprise to many that we are seeing rates of food insecurity that are worse than at the height of the pandemic... People have come out of the pandemic in many instances in a more vulnerable position than they went in.”

The pandemic, however, is far from over. August was the deadliest month in Australia since the pandemic began, with over 2000 deaths due to the virus. The Albanese Labor government has removed all basic safety measures, deepening the policies of the Liberal party, which has set the stage for a massive surge of infection.

The policy of ‘letting the virus rip,’ coupled with the US-NATO instigated war in the Ukraine and massive profit gouging by major corporations, is fuelling an inflationary crisis which is pushing millions into poverty. The official inflation rate is 7.3 percent, the highest in 32 years, however the official figures hide the true extent of the pressure on families.

According to the latest available Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) figures fruit and vegetables had a 16.2 percent annual price increase in 12 months to the September quarter. At the same time, meat and seafood rose 7.3 percent, breads and cereals 10 percent and dairy related products 12.1 percent. Non-durable household products, such as those for home cleaning and healthcare rose by 11.9 percent and housing increased by 10.5 percent.

This is reflected in the report—the primary reason for households’ food crisis is “increased/high living expenses,” cited by 64 percent of respondents. Within that the top three reasons given were “increased food and grocery costs,” “increased energy costs” and “increased housing cost.”

The majority of those surveyed found they were more food insecure this year than last, on average 55 percent. One male respondent aged 55–65 years from regional Queensland said that the last time he couldn't afford food he went to get cheaper options from a food cooperative, "I had \$5 so that was enough to get through until pension day. Things are getting worse, I am scared."

Pointing to how widespread the food crisis has become, the report notes increasing "diversity" in the households that have experienced food insecurity from those "typically less vulnerable."

More than half, 54 percent, of households who had someone in paid work reported food insecurity and while 45 percent of households who were renting reported food insecurity, so did nearly a third, 30 percent, of those households with a mortgage.

Low-income families or those on the below-poverty welfare payments still account for the most impacted by the rising cost of living. As one woman over the age of 55 on the aged care pension wrote in the survey, "I only eat once a day because the cost of groceries have increased and the pension doesn't cover the real cost of living, so I try and cut down on everything, so I can survive on the government pension."

The report also notes the role of "natural disasters," such as droughts, bush fires, and flooding, which impacted nearly 20 percent of all households. The severe impact of these disasters is the result of residents being abandoned by the government. In Lismore, in northern New South Wales, thousands of victims of floods in February are still left homeless or forced to live in overcrowded camper vans.

The soaring levels of hunger in Australia are the results of the decades-long assault on the living conditions of workers, overseen by both Labor and Liberal parties alike. This process was only accelerated in the past two years, as the pandemic has been used to funnel billions into the pockets of the wealthy even as real wage levels are declining.



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