



Refugee Council of Australia

PARLIAMENT OF VICTORIA - LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

INQUIRY INTO FOOD SECURITY IN VICTORIA

As the national peak body for people from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds and the organisations and individuals who work with and support them, the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee of Victoria. The Refugee Council regularly consults with our members and refugee communities, and this submission is informed by their views.

1. Impact of food insecurity in Victoria on people seeking asylum and refugee communities

Food insecurity is a significant challenge for people seeking asylum and refugee communities across Australia. People seeking asylum face food insecurity at higher levels than other vulnerable groups due to their temporary visa status, challenges encountered during resettlement and restricted work rights.¹ Lengthy waits for resolution of asylum applications means many people are deprived of work rights, Federal Government support, financial aid and access to mainstream social services.

Approximately 4,000-6,000 people arrive in Australia on permanent refugee or humanitarian visas and settle in Victoria. Additionally, there are an estimated 11,000 - 20,000 people seeking asylum, including children, the elderly, and people with disabilities and chronic health issues who urgently need a basic safety net to shelter and feed their families.² A 2015 study conducted in Melbourne found more than 90% of asylum seekers experience food insecurity and more than half who had no income, with others reporting they experienced hunger, weight loss and emotional problems since arriving in Australia.³

Issues of food insecurity have been further compounded with significant cuts to federal funding of the Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS), which was designed to support people seeking asylum. The SRSS program provides a basic living allowance (typically 89% of the JobSeeker allowance, or approximately \$48 per day), very limited casework support and access to counselling services. Since 2017, funding for SRSS has been cut by 95%, leaving many people seeking protection in deep poverty and destitution.⁴ The narrow eligibility criteria means that very few people qualify for financial and other support. People seeking asylum are not eligible for any other form of social security payments, cannot access public housing and cannot apply for low-income healthcare cards.

Despite charities and frontline asylum services across Australia ramping up their services for people seeking refugee protection, they cannot meet the increasing demand for basic support. Overstretched agencies have seen an increase in people seeking emergency relief for food, clothing, blankets, and support to pay rent. Some of these charities have reported evidence of children of asylum-seeking families being treated for malnutrition and related developmental impairment because the families do not have any source of financial support to meet their basic needs and they are left hungry.⁵

¹ Fiona H. McKay and Matthew, [Food security among asylum seekers in Melbourne](#), Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health, 2015. 39(4): 344–349; Julie Maree Wood, Rebecca M. Leech and Claire Margerison, [The prevalence of food insecurity amongst refugees and asylum seekers during, and prior to, their early resettlement period in Australia: A cross-sectional analysis of the 'Building a New Life in Australia' data](#). Appetite. 2024, Vol 196.

² Department of Health Victoria, March 2024, [Refugee and Asylum Seeker Health and Well-Being](#). There are currently 4,260 people seeking asylum on a bridging Visa E, with thousands more living in various states of limbo in Victoria. Australian Refugee Council of Australia. [Statistics on People Seeking Asylum in Australia](#)

³ McKay and Dunn, [Food security among asylum seekers in Melbourne](#). Findings from a 2024 food security study indicated that food insecurity was highest in refugee camps overseas (71%), followed by bridging visas in Australia (30%), community detention in Australia (17%), immigration detention in Australia (11%), and during early resettlement in Australia (9%). See Wood et al. [The prevalence of food insecurity amongst refugees and asylum seekers](#).

⁴ SRSS has been cut from \$300 million to \$16 million. Refugee Council of Australia, [2024-25 Federal Budget](#).

⁵ Refugee Council of Australia. November 2023. [Children and the elderly among those facing a harsh winter after seeking asylum](#)

Case study: charities filling the gap

The Sanctuary Food Bank runs every week to provide food and hygiene products for their residents. As people seeking asylum, the residents at Sanctuary and Houses of Hope often have limited means to purchase food and hygiene products. As well as providing accommodation and case work support, Sanctuary, with a team of 15 volunteers, provides food packages, weekly cleaning, and personal hygiene products. Over the past year, Sanctuary Food Bank has provided food for almost 1,300 people. This year alone, Sanctuary has provided 5,500 bags of groceries, with each bag containing fruit, vegetables, pantry items and hygiene products.

2. Physical and mental health

There is a significant body of research which highlights the mental health impacts of the refugee experience. Many people seeking asylum in Victoria or elsewhere in Australia experience mental illness due to their uncertain migration status and asylum experience, including, in many cases, prolonged immigration detention and family separation. This is compounded by poor or interrupted access to health care, long periods of destitution and no safety net for people seeking protection (such as no access to Medicare, income support, work rights and casework).⁶

There is substantial evidence highlighting the negative impacts of food insecurity on physical and mental health. Food insecurity is associated with poor general health, poor nutrition, cardiovascular health, poor mental health, increased chances of being hospitalised, behavioural problems, poor developmental outcomes in children and an increased risk of chronic illnesses.⁷ Further impacts of food insecurity include increased stress levels, anxiety and depression, smoking, drinking alcohol, consuming low cost and energy-dense foods (high in fat and sugar), carbohydrate-based meals, fewer plant-based foods, and reducing overall food consumption, including skipping meals.⁸ According to Dietitians Australia, people suffering from food insecurity are significantly more likely to report experiencing mental illness, with 35% of people experiencing food insecurity also reporting mental illness, compared to 13% of food secure people.⁹

Marginalised communities on low incomes living in insecure housing have been identified as most at risk of food security. Asylum seeking families and individuals without adequate food security often suffer from eating less, eating poorer quality and variety of food, malnutrition, and compounded health issues.

Case study: ██████ does not want to send her children to school with empty lunch boxes

██████ is the sole carer for her three children. She arrived in Australia and sought refugee protection but has been waiting 8 years for a decision. She has limited working capacity because her youngest child has an intellectual disability that requires intensive care, and he is not eligible for NDIS support. A local charity helps her cover her rent and some bills, but ██████ struggles to get enough food for her children and herself. She doesn't want the children to go to school with empty lunch boxes, so she often keeps them home. This impacts their education and life in the school community, but she feels overwhelmed when they cry about having nothing. She has survived traumatic and challenging circumstances, and has kept her children safe on her own for a very long time. Her resilience and fortitude has been tested to the extreme when she is left with no government support. "The stress of waiting, of not knowing where we will get food, of knowing the harm that could come to my children if we are not given safety, it eats at me."

3. Poverty and hardship

Thousands of people seeking asylum are deprived of food as a direct consequence of government policy, restricted visa conditions and lack of access to mainstream social services. Studies show that low income

⁶ Department of Health Victoria. March 2024. [Refugee and Asylum Seeker Health and Well-Being](#)

⁷ McKay and Dunn, [Food security among asylum seekers in Melbourne](#).

⁸ House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture. November 2023. [Australian Food Story: Feeding the Nation and Beyond Inquiry into food security in Australia](#).

⁹ Dietitians Australia. [Nutrition and mental health in food security](#)

is the strongest and most consistent indicator of food insecurity.¹⁰ This was evident during COVID-19 lockdowns when people seeking asylum were excluded from JobKeeper and JobSeeker payments, with parents not being able to feed their children.¹¹ These challenges continue to exist with increasing cost of living expenses, groceries and rent.

According to Red Cross's Vulnerability Report, refugee communities and people seeking asylum overcome lack of food by borrowing money or getting food from friends, eating less, eating poorer quality foods and receiving food vouchers from charities.¹²

Case study: Damaged food eaten in haste

In 2022, an emergency relief provider in Victoria described the hunger and dire situation of people seeking asylum. Some of the food parcels the agency provided included bruised and damaged fruit and canned goods. In one drop-in service, the emergency relief worker noticed that people were taking the food parcels into the parking lots and eating the damaged food right there. The emergency relief worker stated: "People were genuinely starving, so they ate whatever didn't need cooking right there in front of us. They were desperate and so hungry."

Reports indicate that people from migrant and refugee backgrounds are at higher risk of food insecurity.¹³ There are structural, environmental and personal factors exacerbating food insecurity among the refugee population, including:

- Settlement challenges such as financial vulnerability, unemployment, poverty, restricted visa conditions (no work rights or Medicare), complex health issues, language and cultural barriers.¹⁴
- Limited or no access to government financial assistance for people seeking asylum.
- Financial hardship, large household utility bills, pressure to send money overseas to family members, and limited budgeting skills.¹⁵
- Food not being culturally or religiously appropriate, difficulty locating culturally appropriate food suppliers.¹⁶
- Newly arrived refugees may lack nutritional education and understanding of Australian foods as well as how food is sourced, prepared and consumed.¹⁷
- Lack of access to adequate, safe and fresh nutritious foods.¹⁸
- Difficulty to shop due to physical disabilities or an inability to carry heavy shopping.¹⁹
- No personal access to transportation. Relying on volunteers and community members for transportation to grocery stores.²⁰
- Feelings of discomfort and embarrassment in asking others for food or lining up at foodbanks waiting for food.²¹
- Large portion of refugees originate from countries experiencing severe food crises, adding to prolonged periods of deprivation and isolation.²²

¹⁰ Seiwright A, Callis Z and Flatau P. [Food Insecurity and Socioeconomic Disadvantage in Australia](#). International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health 2020; 17: 559.

¹¹ Asylum Seeker Resource Centre. April 2023. [Poverty through policy: The impact of excluding people seeking asylum from mainstream social support](#).

¹² Australian Red Cross. 2013. [Inaugural Vulnerability Report: Inside the Process of Seeking Asylum in Australia](#).

¹³ McKay and Dunn, [Food security among asylum seekers in Melbourne](#); Asylum Seeker Resource Centre. [Poverty through policy: The impact of excluding people seeking asylum from mainstream social support](#).

¹⁴ Lawlis, T., Islam, W., & Upton, P. (2018). Achieving the four dimensions of food security for resettled refugees in Australia: A systematic review; Department of Health Victoria. March 2024. [Refugee and Asylum Seeker Health and Well-Being](#).

¹⁵ Danielle Gallegos, Permilla Ellies, Janine Wright. [Still there's no food! Food insecurity in a refugee population in Perth, Western Australia](#). Journal of Dietitians Australia.

¹⁶ Ibid. McKay, F. H., Bugden, M., Dunn, M., & Bazerghi, C. (2018). [Experiences of food access for asylum seekers who have ceased using a food bank in Melbourne](#). Australia. British Food Journal, 120 (8), 1708–1721.

¹⁷ Lawlis et al., 2018; Moffat, T., Mohamed, C., & Newbold, K. (2017). Cultural dimensions of food insecurity among immigrants and refugees. Human Organization, 76(1), 15.

¹⁸ Zohra Goliaei et al. [Post-Resettlement Food Insecurity: Afghan Refugees and Challenges of the New Environment](#). International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health 2023, 20(10).

¹⁹ VicHealth. [Food For All: How local government is improving access to nutritious food](#)

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Australian Institute of Family Studies. 2020. [Understanding food insecurity in Australia](#).

²² According to the World Food Programme, 309 million people currently face an acute risk for food insecurity across 72 countries. See World Food Programme. June 2024. [WFP at a Glance](#)

4. Options available to lower the cost of food and improve access to affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate food

Improving food security requires the participation and cooperation of government and community stakeholders. Key stakeholders including policy makers, crisis services, public health workers, caseworkers, refugee supporters, charities and organisations need to work in collaboration with refugee communities and build on their cultural capital to improve access and knowledge of food quality, access and consumption in Australia.

There are concerns regarding the reliance on food charities, due to long-term feasibility and feelings of discomfort or shame when accessing foodbanks or services. Local food banks and food drives are important for short-term solutions and emergency situations. Research indicates that foodbanks are generally considered as a supplementary food source and are not "...effective when acting as the sole source of food supply."²³

Foodbanks were not popular among people seeking asylum in Melbourne as they were not religiously or culturally appropriate for them.²⁴ Longer term strategies need to be developed to ensure easy and affordable access to quality and culturally appropriate foods in socially acceptable environments, where people do not feel isolated or stigmatised. Stronger emphasis on longer-term food availability, access and stability is required in addition to maintaining short-term crisis support for people in emergency situations. Some key solutions are listed below to improve food availability, access and utilisation.

1. Improving food availability for refugees

- Encourage food manufacturers, growers, wholesalers and retailers to dispose of surplus food through food banks via economic/tax incentives, philanthropic and other means.²⁵
- Governments should provide subsidies for refugee organisations and food stores to enable fresh food to be sold at an affordable price.
- Continuing support for existing programs, including foodbanks, community meals programs, communal kitchens and food trucks with refugee and community organisations.

2. Improving access to food for refugees

- Improving equity and allowing people seeking asylum to have the same access to mainstream food services as other Victorians
- Support local charities and businesses to provide free and affordable quality food
- Providing community transport to assist local shops or markets that sell fresh food
- Electronic food vouchers delivered via mobile phone/email to avoid travelling costs and to save time
- Improving food accessibility through educational guidance and labelling culturally appropriate foods²⁶
- Guided orientation of markets and grocery stores upon arrival
- Utilisation of social media and mobile phone apps to locate culturally appropriate foods

3. Improving food utilisation for refugees

- Prioritising food literacy and educational programs focusing on healthy food preparation, budgeting and how to cook and share nutritious foods.
- Improving nutrition and food safety, storage and increasing diversity in diets in a healthy and culturally appropriate manner

²³ McKay and Dunn, [Food security among asylum seekers in Melbourne](#).

²⁴ McKay et al. [Experiences of food access for asylum seekers who have ceased using a food bank in Melbourne](#).

²⁵ See Kate Rosier. Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia. [Food insecurity in Australia](#); House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture. [Australian Food Story: Feeding the Nation and Beyond Inquiry into food security in Australia](#).

²⁶ For example, Afghan refugees in Australia have found it difficult to identify halal items in Australian supermarkets, which has limited their food procurement to small Afghan specialist shops. Foorough Kavian et al. [Migration, Stress and the Challenges of Accessing Food: An Exploratory Study of the Experience of Recent Afghan Women Refugees in Adelaide, Australia](#). International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health 2020 17(4).

- Nutritional education in languages other than English for communities that speak English as another language
- Ensure pre-packaged goods are properly labelled with 'best before' and 'use by' dates on food
- Education and training for staff dealing with food insecure clients.

5. Recommendations

1. Equitable access and utilisation of nutritious food should be a basic right for all Victorians, including refugee communities and people seeking asylum
2. The Victorian Government should ensure people seeking asylum have access to high quality and affordable food through free and subsidised food programs and mainstream services
3. The Victorian Government should provide targeted funding to refugee and asylum specialist agencies and services that have experience in delivering culturally appropriate food services
4. Investing in food manufacturers, growers, wholesalers and retailers to redistribute surplus foods to refugee organisations via economic incentives and philanthropic means
5. Increasing food access through community assistance with transport, financial aid and digital applications to help allocate culturally appropriate foods/markets
6. Increasing food safety and literacy through educational programs, cultural orientation and training of staff with food insecure clients