



Legislative Council
Legal and Social Issues Committee

Food security in Victoria

Inquiry

November 2024

Published by order, or
under the authority, of the
Parliament of Victoria
November 2024

ISBN 978 0 908262 04 5 (print version)

ISBN 978 0 908262 05 2 (PDF version)

This report is available on the Committee's website:
parliament.vic.gov.au/lpic-lc

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About the Committee

Functions

The Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee inquires into and reports on any proposal, matter or thing concerned with community services, education, gaming, health, and law and justice.

The Committee consists of members of the Legislative Council from the government, opposition, and other parties.

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Terms of reference

Inquiry into food security in Victoria

On 29 November 2023, the Legislative Council agreed to the following motion:

That this House requires the Legal and Social Issues Committee to inquire into, consider and report, by 14 November 2024, on the impacts and drivers of, and solutions for, food security in Victoria, including but not limited to —

- (1) the impact of food insecurity in Victoria, on —
 - (a) physical and mental health;
 - (b) poverty and hardship; and
- (2) options available to lower the cost of food and improve access to affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate food.

Chair's foreword

One of the worst impacts of the recent rise in the cost of living has been a parallel rise in food insecurity. In Victoria, we have seen an increase in both the number of people accessing food from food relief services and the amount of food these services have distributed across the community.

The Committee heard that there are many drivers of food insecurity. Of course, the rising price of food is the most obvious and we present data that shows this. This problem does not exist in isolation, though. Food prices have to be considered in the context of the inflation seen in other essential goods and services, including energy and housing. Unfortunately for many Victorians, the challenges caused by the rise in the cost of living have occurred at the same time as they have experienced critical financial stressors, such as unemployment, wage stagnation and inadequate income supports.

Food insecurity has a dramatic impact on individuals and families. Throughout this Inquiry, the Committee heard how physical and mental health suffers when people don't have access to adequate nutritious and culturally appropriate food. Some Victorians are also suffering from social isolation, withdrawing from social activities due to financial constraints and the undeserved stigma that can be associated with hardship.

That's why it is imperative for governments to act. The Committee acknowledges that power in this area largely lies in the hands of the Commonwealth. This includes how corporations and competition are regulated as well as the levels of income support provided by JobSeeker and the Age Pension. Accordingly, the Committee has recommended the Victorian Government advocate for an increase in Federal income support, to try and break the link between poverty and food insecurity.

However, the Victorian Government also has the power to act. For example, it can look at increasing support for food relief agencies and those schools providing help to their students who are turning up to school hungry.

The Committee also believes that the Government should establish a Victorian Food Security Strategy – including appointing a Minister for Food – to help Victoria's approach to food security transition from relief to resilience. The Committee acknowledges that this is a complex and ambitious aim but believes such an approach would best position Victoria to be able to meet our immediate and long-term food security needs.

I would like to thank the individuals and organisations who made a submission to this Inquiry and spoke with us at our public hearings. The evidence you provided was both enlightening and valuable in helping the Committee understand this issue and identify potential solutions.

Chair's foreword

I would also like to thank my fellow Committee Members for their hard work and cooperation throughout this Inquiry, the third we have finished this year. Finally, can I please thank the Committee Secretariat: Julie Barnes, Adeel Siddiqi, Caitlin Connally and Patrick O'Brien.

I commend this Report to the House.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Trung Luu', written in a cursive style.

Trung Luu MLC
Chair

Executive summary

The first half of the Committee's Final Report examines food security in Victoria and considers the drivers and impacts of food insecurity across the state. The second half of the Report focuses on solutions to the issues identified and makes recommendations to the Victorian Government that:

- highlight the importance of nutritious and culturally appropriate food
- outline short-term policy options for improving access to food
- make the case for a long-term Victorian Food Security Strategy.

Chapter 1: Food security in Victoria

Food security is said to exist when 'all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life'.¹ It exists along a continuum ranging from moderate food security to severe food insecurity, and encompasses six dimensions:

- availability
- access
- utilisation
- stability
- agency
- sustainability.

With these definitions in mind, Chapter 1 examines rates of food insecurity in Victoria, and how these are measured. It finds that at least 8% of Victorians experience severe food insecurity. Considering the inadequacy of current measurements – that is, the limitations of the Victorian Population Health Survey – this figure is likely to be much higher, particularly among vulnerable populations.

Noting the critical role food relief providers play in fulfilling the short-term needs of food-insecure Victorians, the Committee stresses the need for more accessible information to ensure food relief services reach those in need.

1 Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, *The State of Food Security in the World 2001*, 2001, p. 49.

Chapter 2: The drivers of food insecurity

Although the Terms of Reference required the Committee to look at the ‘drivers of ... food security in Victoria’, evidence received by the Committee focused on the drivers of food *insecurity*. Chapter 2 looks at two broad categories of these drivers:

- the rising cost of food
- broader cost-of-living pressures.

A significant number of Victorians who made submissions to the Inquiry expressed their distress at the rising cost of food (otherwise referred to as food inflation). Examining Australia-wide and Melbourne-specific data from the Consumer Price Index, the Committee confirms that Victoria has experienced significant food inflation over the last few years. Numerous factors have contributed to this rise, including growing production costs caused by disruptions in the supply chain such as extreme weather events and the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as a lack of competition in the supermarket sector.

The rising cost of food is only part of broader cost-of-living pressures. Inflation in essential goods and services is forcing Victorian households to choose between meeting the cost of food and other necessities like housing, healthcare and transport. However, falling inflation may see a concurrent decrease in food insecurity.

Victorians are also experiencing financial stress caused by unemployment, wage stagnation, and inadequate income support payments. The Committee found that this financial stress made it more difficult for Victorians to buy essential goods, such as food.

Lastly, acknowledging that the social and economic drivers of food insecurity are complex and interconnected, the Committee emphasises the need for a collaborative whole-of-government response to the issue.

Chapter 3: The impacts of food insecurity

Food insecurity has a profound impact on the physical and mental health of Victorians, exacerbating chronic health risks and conditions such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes, as well as stress, anxiety and depression. This is particularly the case for certain vulnerable cohorts, including young people and students, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

Regarding the mental health impacts of food insecurity, the Committee found that stigma and shame associated with accessing food relief can prevent some people from seeking assistance. The relationship between mental health and food insecurity is complex and often intersecting. Not only does food insecurity worsen mental health, mental health challenges can exacerbate food insecurity. This creates a harmful cycle that also intersects with people’s social and financial wellbeing.

As well as physical and mental health impacts, food insecurity in Victoria has various social implications, resulting from socioeconomic stressors and deepening poverty. Chapter 3 highlights the fact that food insecurity is both a symptom and driver of poverty and hardship, forcing individuals and families to make difficult choices between food and other basic necessities.

Improving access to food

As highlighted in Chapter 1, the globally accepted definition of food security encompasses six dimensions, one of which is access to an adequate supply of food. To address the Terms of Reference, Chapters 4, 5 and 6 focus on options available to the Victorian Government to improve Victorians' access to food. They do so in a way that takes account of other factors:

- improving access to nutritious food, including through healthy eating education, school meal programs, land-use planning that considers health and wellbeing, and better food labelling
- enhancing access to culturally appropriate food that meets the needs of Victoria's diverse communities
- the adoption of a comprehensive, whole-of-government strategy that addresses the underlying drivers of food insecurity
- other policy options that seek to enshrine the right to food, lower the cost of food, enhance social enterprise and manage food waste.

Chapter 4: The importance of nutritious and culturally appropriate food

Chapter 4 examines the importance of accessing nutritious and culturally appropriate food, considering what is needed to improve access.

Access to nutritious food

Chapter 4 outlines the mix of government and non-government programs designed to improve food literacy (the knowledge and skills required to grow, cook, and make informed decisions about food). It highlights the consequences of poor food literacy, including its burden on families and Victoria's healthcare system. It adds that improving food literacy is not a sufficient standalone solution to food insecurity; it must coincide with broader cost-of-living relief.

Governments seeking to improve food literacy should prioritise place-based initiatives and be accompanied by appropriate funding and infrastructure. Ways of improving food literacy include:

- implementing evidence-based, statewide public awareness campaigns
- expanding food education programs in schools

- working with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and culturally and linguistically diverse community groups
- establishing a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation framework for food literacy programs.

The Chapter emphasises the effectiveness of the Victorian Government’s School Breakfast Clubs Program. However, it notes rising demand for the program and recommends that the Government:

- make the program universally available to all schools who wish to opt in
- trial a comprehensive, universal school meal program which provides food throughout the day for students.

Finally, in relation to improving access to nutritious food, the Chapter examines a ‘Food is Medicine’ approach to mitigating food insecurity, which integrates food-based interventions into healthcare plans.

Access to culturally appropriate food

Chapter 4 contends that some culturally and linguistically diverse people face barriers accessing appropriate food. The reasons for this include a lack of capacity on the part of food relief providers and a lack of involvement of these communities in the design of food security interventions.

To improve access to nutritious and culturally appropriate food, the Committee stresses the importance of adopting a comprehensive approach that addresses the nutrition and cultural needs of diverse communities, including through partnerships with local organisations.

Chapter 5: Improving access to food: short-term solutions

Chapter 5 looks at improving access to food through short-term policy options including:

- enshrining the right to food
- lowering the cost of food
- involving social enterprise
- managing food waste via a national food tax donation incentive.

Noting Australia’s obligation under international law to secure the right to adequate food for all Australians, the Committee recommends that the Victorian Government amend the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities 2006 (Vic)* to enshrine this right for all Victorians.

To address food inflation, the Committee considers how the Victorian Government can lower the cost of food. It acknowledges that lowering the cost of food at the retail level is primarily the responsibility of the Commonwealth Government. However, the Victorian Government still has a role to play:

- advocate to the Commonwealth Government to introduce measures to address food costs and alleviate pressures on households facing food insecurity
- explore options to expand the provision of food vouchers to food insecure Victorians and provide additional support to food relief services.

The Committee outlines examples of social enterprises that are tackling food insecurity in Victoria, including organisations that gave evidence to the Inquiry.

Finally, the Committee heard that nearly 30% of food is wasted across the supply chain. It recommends that the Victorian Government advocate to the Commonwealth Government to support the implementation of a national food donation tax incentive.

Chapter 6: Improving access to food: a long-term food security strategy for Victoria

Whereas Chapter 5 looked at short-term policy options for improving access to food, Chapter 6 considers the adoption of a long-term comprehensive, whole-of-government strategy that addresses the underlying drivers of food insecurity.

Reducing food insecurity in Victoria requires a systematic approach that integrates multiple sectors, including health, agriculture, trade and education. One means of providing a sufficiently comprehensive approach that accounts for the complex, intersecting drivers of food insecurity is through a whole-of-government food security strategy. A number of stakeholders advocated for the development of such a strategy, which has the potential to diversify food choice and ensure the food relief sector can adequately support Victorians and manage sudden spikes in food insecurity.

In light of this, the Committee recommends that the Victorian Government:

- expand the Victorian Population Health Survey to more precisely monitor food insecurity across the food security continuum
- develop a Victorian Food Security Strategy focused on:
 - transitioning from food relief to resilience
 - supporting place-based responses
 - enhancing the food relief sector’s ability to deal with sudden shocks and crises
- to support the Strategy, appoint a Minister for Food and establish a Victorian Food Security Committee to support development of this Strategy.

The Committee understands that transitioning Victoria's response to food insecurity from one of food relief to resilience is an extremely difficult challenge requiring cooperation from the Commonwealth. The Committee also notes the necessity of food relief services in times of crisis and recommends that the Victorian government consider:

- publishing a real-time map of food relief services that helps identify service gaps and makes it easier for people to access support
- providing recurrent funding for the food relief sector.

The importance of supporting place-based responses is likewise underscored by the fact that communities across Victoria face unique challenges. Prioritising a place-based approach builds resilience, enhances capacity, improves nutritional outcomes, and can support the dignity of food relief recipients. As such, the Committee also recommends supporting the expansion of regional food hubs through recurrent funding.

Findings and recommendations

1 Food security in Victoria

FINDING 1: According to the most recent Victorian Population Health Survey data, at least 8% of Victorians experience severe food insecurity. However, using only the term 'severe' is too broad to adequately measure food insecurity. More comprehensive measures suggest that rates of food insecurity in Victoria, including moderate food insecurity, are likely to be much higher.

22

FINDING 2: There is a higher prevalence of food insecurity amongst populations that experience other forms of disadvantage, including low-income earners, Aboriginal people, and young Victorians.

22

2 The drivers of food insecurity

FINDING 3: Victoria has experienced significant food inflation over the last several years. Food prices continue to rise, and given ongoing cost of living pressures, the high cost of housing, and lack of real wage growth, food insecurity is likely to remain a challenge.

44

FINDING 4: There are several interconnected contributors to the rising cost of food in Victoria, including the price setting decisions of the major supermarkets, disruptions in national and global supply chains, and corresponding rises in the cost of production. These correlate with contributors to broader inflation.

44

FINDING 5: There is a widespread perception amongst Victorians that, as well as rising production costs, the rising cost of food is attributable to a lack of competition in the supermarket sector, which allows the major supermarkets to set unfairly high prices on essential food items.

44

FINDING 6: The rising cost and decreasing availability of essential goods and services such as housing, health and transport have increased the risk of food insecurity for Victorians.

52

FINDING 7: The recent decline in real wages in Australia has made it more difficult for some Victorians to buy essential goods and services, including food. **56**

FINDING 8: The social and economics drivers of food insecurity in Victoria are complex and interconnected, requiring a comprehensive whole-of-government approach. **60**

3 The impacts of food insecurity

FINDING 9: The strong correlation between food insecurity and poor health outcomes suggests that food insecurity is a significant contributor to issues such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, obesity, and other related diseases. **64**

FINDING 10: Food insecurity can cause people to make compromised eating choices, leading to an overreliance on unhealthy food options. This has far-reaching consequences for physical health, contributing to the growing burden of chronic diseases and increasing strain on the health system. **71**

FINDING 11: Food insecurity is closely linked with poor mental health, including chronic stress, anxiety, and depression. This is particularly the case for groups such as:

- a. young people
- b. low-income groups
- c. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- d. culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

78

FINDING 12: Mental health challenges can both cause and exacerbate food insecurity. **78**

FINDING 13: Stigma and shame associated with accessing food relief services can prevent people from seeking assistance. **79**

FINDING 14: Food insecurity contributes to social isolation, as individuals and families withdraw from social activities due to financial constraints and the stigma associated with being unable to provide food. **80**

FINDING 15: Poverty and hardship are both drivers and consequences of food insecurity. **83**

FINDING 16: In severe cases of food insecurity, individuals and families are forced to make difficult choices between basic necessities, such as food, housing, and healthcare. **84**

FINDING 17: Addressing food insecurity in Victoria requires both targeted interventions to support existing food relief services and measures to address structural socioeconomic issues. These approaches are complementary and should not be pursued in isolation. **84**

4 The importance of nutritious and culturally appropriate food

FINDING 18: Improving food literacy reduces food insecurity. It equips individuals with the knowledge and skills to make informed food choices, manage their resources effectively, and maintain a healthy diet. **90**

FINDING 19: A place-based approach to food literacy, emphasising local resources, cultural relevance, and community partnerships, can aid food security and foster sustainable, healthy eating habits across the community. **93**

FINDING 20: Improving food literacy is not a standalone solution. It must be partnered by addressing cost-of-living pressures and broader socioeconomic issues. **95**

FINDING 21: Public awareness campaigns that focus on food literacy, nutrition, and food security benefit public health more broadly. **97**

FINDING 22: Including food literacy in school curriculums can equip young people with practical skills related to food preparation, nutrition, and healthy eating practices. **101**

RECOMMENDATION 1: That the Victorian Government provide support to schools who wish to expand their food education programs, including encouraging them to take a place-based approach by working collaboratively with local communities to meet the specific needs and challenges of each region. **101**

FINDING 23: Culturally appropriate food literacy that aligns food education with cultural practices and needs helps improve food security in multicultural and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. **103**

RECOMMENDATION 2: That the Victorian Government support Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to deliver place-based food literacy programs. **103**

RECOMMENDATION 3: That the Victorian Government support First Nations communities with policies and resources to advance their goals and aspirations for food sovereignty. This should begin with implementing the recommendations outlined in the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation’s *FoodPATH* report. **103**

RECOMMENDATION 4: That the Victorian Government work with culturally and linguistically diverse community groups to deliver place-based food literacy programs. **103**

RECOMMENDATION 5: That the Victorian Government establish a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation framework for food literacy and security programs it implements, funds or otherwise supports. Evaluation should ensure that programs are effective, with strategies refined where needed, and appropriately supported. **103**

RECOMMENDATION 6: That the Victorian Government expand the Victorian School Breakfast Clubs program so that it is available to all Victorian schools who wish to opt in. **110**

RECOMMENDATION 7: That the Victorian Government trial and evaluate a school meal program that provides breakfast through to lunch, using partnerships with local food providers and community organisations. The trial should target schools with high rates of food insecurity and other forms of disadvantage. **110**

RECOMMENDATION 8: Following a review of the outcome of the trial, that the Victorian Government investigate the delivery of a school meal program to all schools in need. **110**

FINDING 24: While some consumers find the Health Star rating system helpful, others believe the system should be improved to provide more reliable information. **113**

FINDING 25: Access to culturally appropriate food is essential for meeting the needs of Victoria’s diverse communities, particularly those relying on food relief services. **116**

FINDING 26: ‘Food is Medicine’ initiatives are an emerging approach to healthcare which integrate food-based interventions into care plans. These initiatives aim to address both nutritional needs and health conditions by providing access to healthy, tailored food options through medical referrals. **118**

5 Improving access to food: short-term solutions

RECOMMENDATION 9: That the Victorian Government amend the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities 2006 (Vic)* to enshrine the right to adequate food. **122**

FINDING 27: State governments are limited in what they can do to lower the cost of food, as the primary responsibility rests with the Commonwealth. **125**

RECOMMENDATION 10: That the Victorian Government explore options to expand the provision of food vouchers to Victorians facing food insecurity. The Government should consider the appropriateness of a government program or providing grant support to relief services. **125**

FINDING 28: Social enterprises play an important role in addressing food insecurity in Victoria. **128**

RECOMMENDATION 11: That the Victorian Government continue to support social enterprises tackling food insecurity. **128**

FINDING 29: Food waste remains a significant issue in Australia, with estimates suggesting 30% of food is wasted across the entire supply chain, from farms to households. **130**

RECOMMENDATION 12: That the Victorian Government advocate to the Commonwealth Government to support the implementation of a national food donation tax incentive. **133**

RECOMMENDATION 13: That the Victorian Government explore potential penalties for food waste occurring along the supply chain to prevent the wastage of food that could otherwise be consumed.

134

6 Improving access to food: a long-term food security strategy for Victoria

RECOMMENDATION 14: That the Victorian Government expand the Victorian Population Health Survey to more precisely monitor food insecurity across the food security continuum, using validated tools such as the Household Food Security Survey Module.

140

RECOMMENDATION 15: That the Victorian Government develop a Victorian Food Security Strategy focused on:

- transitioning the food security response from relief to resilience
- supporting a place-based, community-led response to food security
- establishing a food relief sector which can be scaled to deal with sudden shocks and crises.

141

RECOMMENDATION 16: To support the development of a Victorian Food Security Strategy, that the Victorian Government appoint a Minister for Food and establish a Victorian Food Security Committee. The first action of the Minister and Committee would be to define resilience.

141

RECOMMENDATION 17: That the Victorian Government advocate to the Commonwealth Government for the development and implementation of a National Food Plan to ensure coordinated and sustainable food security efforts across all levels of government.

141

RECOMMENDATION 18: That the Victorian Government advocate to the Commonwealth Government to increase income support payments to alleviate poverty and food insecurity.

143

RECOMMENDATION 19: That the Victorian Government advocate to the Commonwealth Government for a national definition of multidimensional poverty, so that clear and tangible benchmarks may be set towards its elimination.

143

FINDING 30: Transitioning from a reliance on emergency food relief to a resilient, sustainable food system is essential to ensure all Victorians have consistent access to nutritious food, while reducing dependency on short-term food aid. **144**

FINDING 31: While food relief services are an indispensable safety net during times of crisis, they cannot be a long-term solution to food insecurity. **148**

FINDING 32: The food relief sector faces significant funding challenges, particularly due to the lack of recurrent funding. This hampers its ability to maintain continuity of services and effectively meet demand. **148**

RECOMMENDATION 20: That the Victorian Government conduct a comprehensive audit of food relief services across Victoria to identify service gaps. Following the initial audit, a Food Relief Services map should be made publicly available which provides real-time information to the public on available food relief resources. This map should be regularly updated to ensure it remains a reliable tool for both service providers and people in need. **148**

RECOMMENDATION 21: That the Victorian Government provide the food relief sector with recurrent funding to ensure it can address both current demand and future challenges. **148**

RECOMMENDATION 22: That the Victorian Government re-establish and resource the Victorian Food Relief Taskforce with an expanded membership to include First Nations people, persons with lived experience of food insecurity and frontline agencies. **148**

RECOMMENDATION 23: That the Victorian Government accept Sustain's proposal that local governments be empowered to lead the participatory development of community food systems and food security strategies via the provision of financial and supporting resources. As such, food security should be reinstated as a priority area within the next Victorian Health and Wellbeing Plan, embedding food security within strategic health planning for all local governments in Victoria. **150**

RECOMMENDATION 24: That the Victorian Government revise the Victorian planning provisions (*Planning and Environment Act 1987*) to include health and food security as an objective when local governments and other planning authorities are making planning decisions. **150**

FINDING 33: A food security strategy prioritising a place-based approach builds community resilience. Evidence suggests it achieves this through promoting local production and distribution, enhancing community capacity and food literacy, and preserving the dignity of food relief recipients.

154

RECOMMENDATION 25: That the Victorian Government expand regional food hubs, including providing recurrent funding, as part of the shift to food resilience.

154

What happens next?

There are several stages to a parliamentary inquiry.

The Committee conducts the Inquiry

This report on the *Inquiry into food security in Victoria* is the result of extensive research and consultation by the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee.

The Committee received written submissions, spoke with people at public hearings, conducted a site visit, reviewed research evidence and deliberated over a number of meetings. Experts, government representatives and individuals expressed their views directly to us as Members of Parliament.

A Parliamentary Committee is not part of the Government. The Committee is a group of members of different political parties (including independent members). Parliament has asked us to look closely at an issue and report back. This process helps Parliament do its work by encouraging public debate and involvement in issues.

You can learn more about the Committee's work at: <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/lpic-lc>.

The report is presented to Parliament

This report was presented to Parliament and can be found at: <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/get-involved/inquiries/foodsecurityinquiry/reports>.

A response from the Government

The Government has six months to respond in writing to any recommendations made in this report.

The response is public and put on the inquiry page of Parliament's website when it is received at: <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/get-involved/inquiries/foodsecurityinquiry/reports>.

In its response, the Government indicates whether it supports the Committee's recommendations. It can also outline actions it may take.

Chapter 1

Food security in Victoria

1.1 Scope and background

On 29 November 2023, the Legislative Council moved a motion to require the Legal and Social Issues Committee to conduct an inquiry into:

the impacts and drivers of, and solutions for, food security in Victoria, including but not limited to –

- (1) the impact of food insecurity in Victoria, on –
 - (a) physical and mental health;
 - (b) poverty and hardship; and
- (2) options available to lower the cost of food and improve access to affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate food.

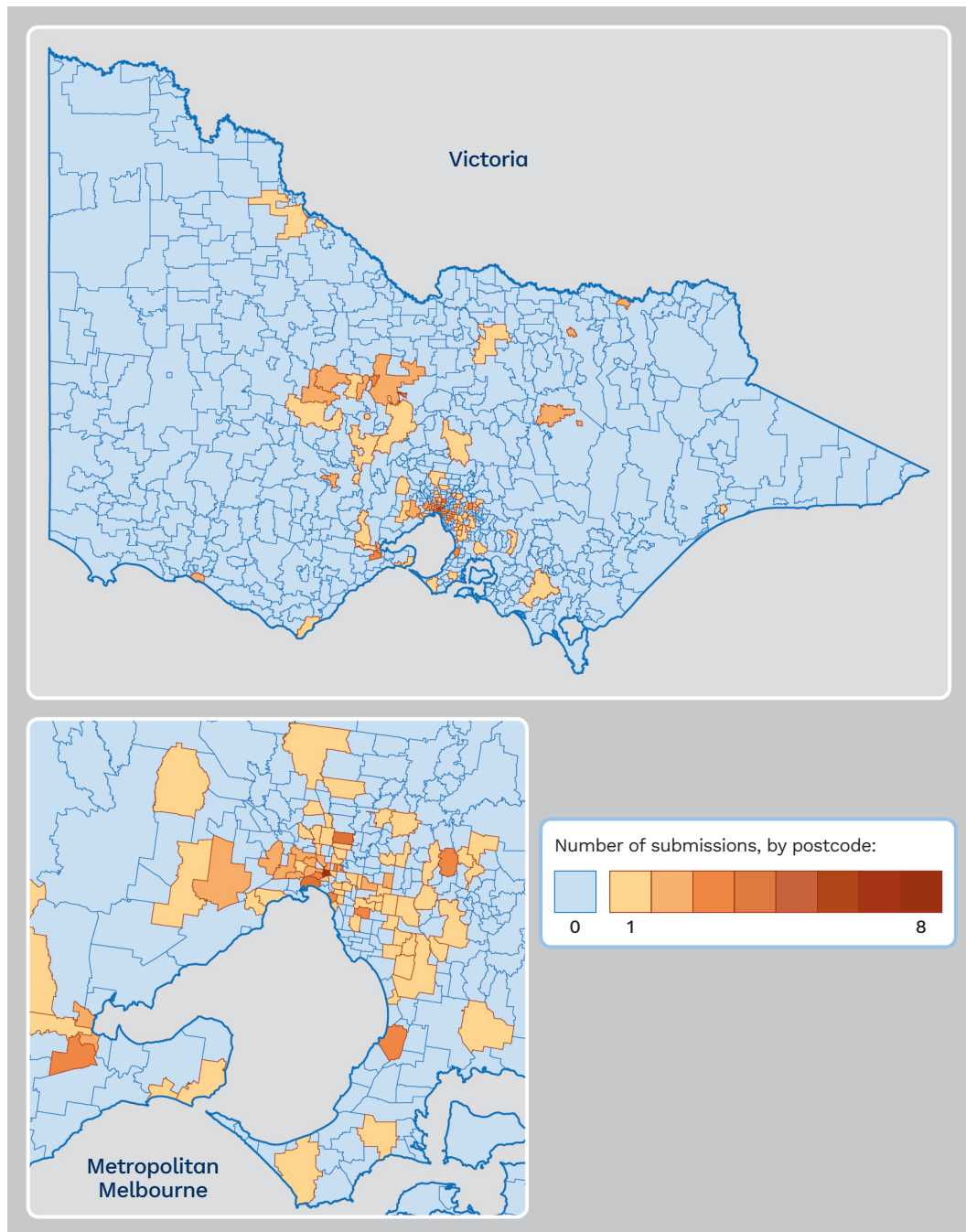
The Terms of Reference provided the Committee until 14 November 2024 to table a Final Report on these matters. The purpose of this Final Report is to paint a picture of food security in Victoria and recommend policy options to the Victorian Government to address any food insecurity. It is divided into six chapters.

1.1.1 The Inquiry process

Submissions

The Committee began accepting submissions to the Inquiry on 3 June 2024 and closed them on 26 July 2024. It granted numerous extensions to submitters and received the Inquiry's final submission on 9 August 2024. In all, the Committee received 177 submissions. Of these, over 90 were from organisations, including food relief providers, academic groups, and social enterprises. Over 70 were from individuals, many of whom described their personal experience with food insecurity.

Figure 1.1 Geographic spread of stakeholders who provided a submission



Note: The map only captures the geographic spread of submitters who provided location data with their submission.

Source: Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee.

Public hearings

The Committee held two days of public hearings for the Inquiry, on 20 and 21 August 2024. This consisted of 16 hearing sessions, with the Committee hearing from 25 organisations and individuals. Witnesses included the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, food relief providers and the major supermarkets, as well as Councils, student associations and academics.

Site visit

On 4 September 2024, the Committee visited Woolworths' Melbourne Fresh Distribution Centre (MFDC). The MFDC is a 38,000 sqm warehouse in Truganina used by Woolworths to process and distribute fresh fruit, vegetables, meat and chilled products to stores across Victoria. Staff from the MFDC gave Committee Members a tour of the centre—including its avocado- and banana-ripening rooms, intended to reduce food waste—and answered questions about Woolworths' role in Victoria's food supply chain.



Committee Members attended a site visit at Woolworths' Melbourne Fresh Distribution Centre in Truganina.

1.1.2 Other recent inquiries

This Inquiry follows or coincides with several other Parliamentary inquiries across Australia relating to food security, including:

- the Australian House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture's *Inquiry into food security in Australia*¹
- the Australian House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs' *Inquiry into food pricing and food security in remote Indigenous communities*²
- the Australian Senate Select Committee on Supermarket Prices' *Inquiry on the price setting practices and market power of major supermarkets*³

1 See Parliament of Australia, *Inquiry into food security in Australia*, <<https://www.aph.gov.au/foodsecurity>> accessed 6 September 2024.

2 See Parliament of Australia, *Inquiry into food pricing and food security in remote Indigenous communities*, <https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Former_Committees/Indigenous_Affairs/Foodpricing> accessed 6 September 2024.

3 See Parliament of Australia, *Senate Select Committee on Supermarket Prices*, <https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Supermarket_Prices/SupermarketPrices> accessed 6 September 2024.

- the Victorian Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's *Inquiry into securing the Victorian food supply*⁴
- the New South Wales Legislative Assembly Committee on Environment and Planning's *Inquiry into food production and supply in NSW*⁵
- the Western Australian Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People's *Inquiry into the most effective ways for Western Australia to address food insecurity for children and young people affected by poverty*.⁶

Inquiry into securing the Victorian food supply

Two weeks before the Committee received this Inquiry, the Legislative Assembly moved a motion to require its Environment and Planning Committee to conduct an inquiry into:

securing the Victorian food supply in the context of urban sprawl and the impact of population growth on the farming industry and arable land.⁷

Despite sharing similar names, the Environment and Planning Committee's *Inquiry into securing the Victorian food supply* and the Legal and Social Issues Committee's *Inquiry into food security in Victoria* differ in significant ways.

Both inquiries' terms of reference are aimed at ensuring appropriate access to food for Victorians. However, the Legislative Assembly's inquiry is specifically targeted at land use and planning concerns as they relate to agriculture and food production. By contrast, this Inquiry addresses the consequences of food insecurity and strategies to mitigate these effects, emphasising health and economic factors.

Over the course of their respective inquiries, the two Committees heard from similar witnesses. Likewise, numerous submitters made submissions to both inquiries.

Notwithstanding this, there was a greater emphasis in the Legislative Assembly inquiry on evidence from stakeholders involved in planning and agriculture. A greater deal of evidence to the Legislative Council inquiry came from charitable organisations, particularly food relief providers, and included numerous individuals with lived experience of food insecurity.

At the time of writing, the Environment and Planning Committee is drafting its Final Report and is set to table it by the end of 2024.

4 See Parliament of Victoria, *Inquiry into securing the Victorian food supply*, <<https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/foodsupply>> accessed 6 September 2024.

5 See Parliament of New South Wales, *Food production and supply in NSW*, <<https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/committees/inquiries/Pages/inquiry-details.aspx?pk=2841>> accessed 6 September 2024.

6 See Parliament of Western Australia, *Inquiry into the most effective ways for Western Australia to address food insecurity for children and young people affected by poverty*, <<https://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/Parliament/commit.nsf/PastEvidenceOnly/50BDAF5E858125C94825881D0015CB07>> accessed 6 September 2024.

7 Victoria, Legislative Assembly, 14 November 2023, *Parliamentary debates*, p. 4336.

1.2 Defining food security and insecurity

1.2.1 Food security

The term ‘food security’ originated at the 1973 World Food Conference, which described ‘world food security’ as the:

availability at all times of adequate world supplies of basic food-stuffs ... to sustain a steady expansion of food consumption ... and to offset fluctuations in production and prices.⁸

An updated version of this definition was developed by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). According to this updated definition:

Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.⁹

Many submitters to the Inquiry, including the Victorian Government, adopted this definition.

In its *Right to Food Guidelines*, the FAO describes food security as having four pillars or dimensions:

- **availability:** ‘availability of sufficient quantities of food of appropriate quality’
- **access:** access ‘by individuals to adequate resources ... for acquiring appropriate foods for a nutritious diet’
- **utilisation:** ‘utilisation of food through adequate diet, clean water, sanitation and health care to reach a state of nutritional well-being where all physiological needs are met’
- **stability:** ‘[t]o be food secure, a population, household or individual must have access to adequate food at all times’, regardless of extraneous circumstances such as economic shocks or climate crises.¹⁰

The FAO’s High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE) outlines a further two dimensions of food security:

- **agency:** ‘the capacity of individuals or groups to make their own decisions about what foods they eat, what foods they produce, how that food is produced, processed and distributed within food systems, and their ability to engage in processes that shape food system policies and governance’

⁸ World Food Conference, *Report of the World Food Conference: Rome, 5–16 November 1974*, E/CONF.65/20 1975, p. 14.

⁹ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, *The State of Food Security in the World 2001*, 2001, p. 49.

¹⁰ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, *Voluntary guidelines to support the progressive realization of the right to adequate food in the context of national food security*, 2005, p. 5; Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, *Policy Brief: Food Security*, 2006, p. 1.

- **sustainability:** ‘the long-term ability of food systems to provide food security and nutrition today in such a way that does not compromise the environmental, economic, and social bases that generate food security and nutrition for future generations’.¹¹

Submitters supported these dimensions to varying degrees, with some acknowledging the FAO’s four dimensions¹² and others expanding to include the two from the HLPE.¹³

In its submission, the City of Greater Geelong agreed that agency and sustainability ‘should ... be considered in the Victorian context’, and highlighted that ‘when individuals face economic constraints, their agency becomes limited’.¹⁴ It noted that ‘[t]hese constraints arise from factors like income, prices of goods, and time availability’, and emphasised the inclusion of agency as ‘critical’ in the context of high food prices.¹⁵

Submissions also stressed the interconnectedness of these dimensions. For example, the University of Melbourne’s Foodprint Melbourne research project stated that ‘it is important that interactions between the multiple dimensions of food security are recognised and considered in developing policy solutions’.¹⁶ Likewise, Central Goldfields Food Network—in an Issues and Opportunities Paper attached to Central Goldfield Shire Council’s submission—described the dimensions as ‘complex and interconnected’ and emphasised the need for ‘structural changes to ensure “dignified food security”’.¹⁷

Stakeholders such as the Give Where You Live Foundation recommended that the Victorian Government adopt the ‘global’ or ‘internationally recognised’ definition of food security outlined above.¹⁸ Moreover, the latter recommended that the Government use this definition ‘as the basis of a consistent framework guiding action across the state’.¹⁹

A small handful of stakeholders—City of Greater Geelong, Dietitians Australia, the George Institute for Global Health—also noted the connection between food security and water security. The George Institute in particular recommended that the Committee ‘[i]ntegrate water security as a component of food security throughout the Inquiry’, noting the negative impact of water insecurity on food security.²⁰

11 High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition, *Food security and nutrition: Building a global narrative towards 2030*, Committee on World Food Security, 2020, pp. 7–9.

12 See, for example, Hobsons Bay City Council, *Submission 67*; Salvation Army Australia, *Submission 103*.

13 See, for example, City of Greater Bendigo, *Submission 72*; the Community Grocer, *Submission 73*; Give Where You Live Foundation, *Submission 95*.

14 City of Greater Geelong, *Submission 83*, p. 5.

15 Ibid.

16 Foodprint Melbourne, The University of Melbourne, *Submission 157*, p. 5.

17 Central Goldfields Shire Council, *Submission 156.1*, p. 17.

18 Give Where You Live Foundation, *Submission 95*, p. 5; City of Greater Geelong, *Submission 83*, p. 3.

19 City of Greater Geelong, *Submission 83*, p. 3.

20 The George Institute for Global Health, *Submission 117*, p. 3.

1.2.2 Food insecurity

Unlike food security, there is no one globally accepted definition of food insecurity. However, it is typically defined by the absence of the above defined dimensions of food security.

Deakin University's Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition (IPAN) and Institute for Health Transformation (IHT) described food insecurity as occurring 'when all or some of these dimensions break down'.²¹

The FAO explains that:

A person is food insecure when they lack regular access to enough safe and nutritious food for normal growth and development and an active and healthy life.²²

Another common definition of food insecurity, cited in several submissions including by the Victorian Government, was developed in an article published in the *Journal of Nutrition*:

Food insecurity exists whenever the availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or the ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways is limited or uncertain.²³

Referencing this definition, Monash Business School's Professor Ralph Kober, Associate Professor Paul Thambar, and Dr Zhiyun Gong argued in their submission that:

food insecurity occurs if someone is unable for whatever reason to access culturally appropriate, nutritionally adequate, and safe foods in a socially acceptable manner that maintains their human dignity.²⁴

As evidenced by the original conception of food security as *world* food security, food insecurity occurs on different scales. IPAN and IHT acknowledged this, stating that '[f]ood insecurity can impact a person, a household or even a whole community'.²⁵ Monash University's Department of Nutrition, Dietetics and Food likewise contended that 'food security exists at multiple scales', but stressed that its submission 'focus[ed] on food insecurity at the household and community level'.²⁶ This is true of most of the submissions to the Inquiry, although many also targeted Victoria and Australia's food systems as a whole.²⁷

²¹ Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition and Institute for Health Transformation, *Submission 136*, p. 4.

²² Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, *Hunger and food insecurity*, <<https://www.fao.org/hunger/en>> accessed 8 August 2024.

²³ Sue Ann Anderson, 'Core indicators of nutritional state for difficult-to-sample populations', *The Journal of Nutrition*, 120 (Supplement 11), 1990, pp. 1575–1576.

²⁴ Professor Ralph Kober et al., *Submission 126*, p. 1.

²⁵ Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition and Institute for Health Transformation, *Submission 136*, p. 4.

²⁶ Monash University, *Submission 108*, p. 1.

²⁷ See, for example, Regional Food Security Alliance, *Submission 58*; Sustain: The Australian Food Network, *Submission 76*; Common Ground Project, *Submission 147*.

1.2.3 The continuum of food security

Like many others, the Victorian Government's submission contended that 'food security sits on a continuum'.²⁸ The Government explained that this continuum ranges:

from 'food secure' to 'severe food insecurity' – for example, occasional food shortages (infrequent and short-lived) to chronic persistent conditions where individuals need long-term food relief services due to vulnerability and poverty.²⁹

It noted the Australian Bureau of Statistics' three-tier classification of food insecurity as 'marginal', 'moderate', or 'severe'. This classification—adopted from Statistics Canada— was also used by several stakeholders.³⁰

Foodbank Victoria explained that:

Marginal food insecurity might present as uncertainty regarding ability to obtain food, with moderate food insecurity leading to individual and households compromising on food quality and variety, reducing food quantity and skipping meals, and severe food insecurity will mean individuals and households are not able to access food for a day or more or, in extreme cases, several days.³¹

Contending that 'the greatest commonality for all people experiencing food insecurity is what people must forego as a result', the Salvation Army provided the following examples:

For people experiencing minor financial hardship, shifting from name-brand to store-brand is a manageable economy. For people in more significant hardship, swapping fresh vegetables for frozen is common. The people The Salvation Army serves are forgoing one necessity for another.³²

Similarly, the City of Greater Bendigo stated:

[P]eople experiencing severe food insecurity have run out of food and cannot afford to buy more, while people experiencing moderate food security may be missing meals, and/or substituting healthier food options for those that are more affordable, convenient and filling (such as processed, packaged foods).³³

Table 1.1 below, provided by the Yarra Ranges Council, shows a matrix for understanding food insecurity in more detail (using the term 'mild' in place of 'marginal').³⁴

²⁸ Victorian Government, *Submission 167*, p. 7.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Foodbank Victoria, *Submission 137*, p. 2.

³² The Salvation Army, *Submission 103*, p. 1.

³³ City of Greater Bendigo, *Submission 72*, p. 4.

³⁴ Yarra Ranges Council, *Submission 86*, p. 47.

Table 1.1 Food security continuum

High food security	Mild food insecurity	Moderate food insecurity (food insecure without hunger)	Severe food insecurity (food insecure with hunger)
Lived experience of households			
No problems or anxiety about accessing nutritious, affordable, culturally appropriate food.	Have problems at times, or are anxious, about accessing adequate food. Quality/quantity of food consumed is not substantially interrupted.	Have reduced the quality/variety of the food they are eating, but not the amount they are consuming.	One or more members of household routinely alter eating patterns, including reducing food intake. Likelihood of one or persons experiencing hunger is greater.
Household coping strategies			
Do not rely on coping strategies.	Overeat in preparation for scarcity, shop discounts/bulk buy, purchase fewer fresh fruit/vegetables (fear of potential waste), increase consumption of energy dense foods, buy foods past use-by dates, use spoiled foods (e.g. cutting mould off cheese), skip social activities involving food.	Coping strategies as per mild food insecurity strategies. Households may also resort to using emergency food relief.	Skip meals, reduce meal sizes, forego family meals to enable children to eat but adults to skip meals, forego items (medication, clothing, transport, delay paying bills), increase intake of cheaper carbohydrates, routinely use emergency food relief.
Potential health implications for members of households			
Optimal health and reduced risks for diet-related conditions.	Worry and anxiety about where future meals will come from. Negative effects on adult and child mental health, child behaviour and development.	Diet may be altered to include energy dense, nutrient poor foods that can contribute to overweight, obesity and chronic conditions. Diet may also lack in diversity resulting in reduced consumption of essential vitamins and minerals contributing to micronutrient deficiencies.	Includes aspects of mild and moderate food insecurity but is worsened by reductions in the size or frequency of meals. Can affect the health and wellbeing of pregnant women, in-utero foetal growth and outcomes, children’s wellbeing, growth, and development. Greater risks for asthma, as well as mental illness in adolescence and early adulthood.

Source: Yarra Ranges Council, *Submission 86*, p. 20.

1.3 Measuring food insecurity

1.3.1 Rates of food insecurity in Victoria

Various stakeholders provided evidence canvassing the rates of, and experiences with, food insecurity in Victoria. The majority of this evidence referred to data attained through the Victorian Population Health Survey (VPHS).

Victorian Population Health Survey

The VPHS is an annual survey conducted by the Victorian Agency for Health Information.³⁵ Since 2006, the survey has measured rates of food insecurity via responses to a single question: ‘In the last 12 months, were there any times that you ran out of food, and couldn’t afford to buy more?’³⁶

The 2022 report referred to this question as a measure of ‘severe food insecurity’,³⁷ and an earlier report on the 2014 VPHS data referred to it as a measure of ‘food insecurity *with* hunger’.³⁸

Using this metric, the most recent data from 2022 suggested that 8.1% of Victorians experienced severe food insecurity in 2021–2022. This is compared to 5.8% in 2020, 6.5% in 2019, and 6.8% in 2018. At the time of writing, the Agency for Health Information had yet to publish 2023 data and was in the process of collecting 2024 data.

In 2014, the Victorian Agency for Health Information temporarily expanded the VPHS to also measure ‘food insecurity *without* hunger’, using six further questions that asked respondents whether they:

- worried about food insecurity with hunger
- relied on unhealthy, low-cost food
- did not always have healthy food, and why.³⁹

Using this expanded measure of food insecurity—including severe food insecurity (food insecurity *with* hunger) and moderate food insecurity (food insecurity *without* hunger)—the Agency found that 41% of Victorians in 2014 were food insecure.⁴⁰

Issues with the VPHS’ measure of food insecurity are considered at Section 1.3.3.

This Chapter considers data from the VPHS in more detail. It should be noted that the data only focuses on respondents who indicated that they had experienced food insecurity, therefore totals may exceed the population rates of food insecurity.

³⁵ Department of Health, *Victorian Population Health Survey*, <<https://www.health.vic.gov.au/population-health-systems/victorian-population-health-survey>> accessed 6 September 2024.

³⁶ See Department of Human Services, *Victorian Population Health Survey 2006: Selected findings*, Melbourne, 2007, p. 38.

³⁷ Victorian Agency for Health Information, *Victorian Population Health Survey*, <<https://vahi.vic.gov.au/reports/victorian-population-health-survey>> accessed 6 September 2024.

³⁸ Victorian Agency for Health Information, *Challenges to healthy eating – food insecurity in Victoria: Findings from the Victorian Population Health Survey 2014*, Victorian Government, Melbourne, 2018, p. 1.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

Hunger Report

Another commonly referenced source for rates of food insecurity in Victoria was Foodbank Australia's annual *Hunger Report*.

Foodbank Victoria contended that the Hunger Report data was 'some of the most cited and robust data on food insecurity across Australia'.⁴¹ Unlike the VPHS, since 2022 the Hunger Report uses an 18-question food security measurement tool.

According to the 2023 Hunger Report, 35% of Victorian households experienced moderate to severe food insecurity in 2022–23, compared to 33% in the previous year.⁴² Broken down further, 13% of Victorian households experienced moderate food insecurity, and 21% experienced severe food insecurity.⁴³ This is marginally lower than the national average, with 3.7 million Australian households (36%) experiencing moderate to severe food insecurity in 2022–23, compared to 33% in the previous year.⁴⁴

The Victorian data in the Hunger Report matches survey data collected by Sustain: The Australian Food Network from local government areas since early 2023:

data from these surveys (conducted in the City of Banyule, Golden Plains Shire Council, the City of Casey, seven LGAs in the Goulburn Valley region and four LGAs in the Loddon Mallee region) consistently show an incidence of food insecurity of between 25%–40%.⁴⁵

The most recent Hunger Report, published on 15 October 2024, found that 32% of households in metropolitan Victoria⁴⁶ and 37% of households in regional Victoria experienced moderate or severe food insecurity.⁴⁷ The report explained that '[i]n 2024, the proportion of Australian households experiencing food insecurity ... decreased'.⁴⁸ For Victoria, there was a 4% decrease in food insecurity in metropolitan households, but a 4% increase in regional households. Given that 65% of respondents to the survey were from major cities, the data suggests less Victorian households are experiencing food insecurity this year compared to last. However, the issue remains a significant one, particularly for vulnerable populations such as regional Victorians, and households with less than \$30,000 in income.⁴⁹

⁴¹ Foodbank Victoria, *Submission 137*, p. 3.

⁴² Ipsos, *Foodbank Hunger Report 2023: National Key Findings Report*, Foodbank, 2023, p. 36.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁴⁵ Sustain: The Australian Food Network, *Submission 76*, p. 22.

⁴⁶ Ipsos, *Hunger Report 2024*, Foodbank, 2024, p. 68.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁴⁹ Foodbank, *Foodbank Hunger Report 2024*, <<https://reports.foodbank.org.au/foodbank-hunger-report-2024>> accessed 16 October 2024.

Taking the Pulse of the Nation

Another relevant survey is the Melbourne Institute's *Taking the Pulse of the Nation*.⁵⁰ In 2022, the survey asked respondents across Australia whether in the previous three months they had missed a meal due to a lack of money and/or eaten less than they thought they should due to a lack of money.⁵¹ Defining food insecurity as when a person had done either or both of these things, it found that 20.6% of Victorians were food insecure.⁵² This was even higher for Victorians aged 18–44 at 26.7%.⁵³

Food relief data

Some stakeholders also assessed food insecurity based on the quantity of food relief distributed by food relief providers.⁵⁴

The 2019 Hunger Report noted that:

- Foodbank Victoria agencies distributed 1.2 million meals per month
- there was a 25% increase in the proportion of people seeking food relief from Foodbank Victoria agencies
- Foodbank Victoria agencies required 32% more food to meet total demand.⁵⁵

Foodbank Victoria also publishes Victoria-specific data in its annual report. In 2022–23, Foodbank Victoria distributed 13.3 million kilograms of food and groceries, equivalent to 23.9 million meals.⁵⁶ This represented a slight increase from 2021–22, during which Foodbank Victoria distributed 12.1 million kilograms of food and groceries, equivalent to 22 million meals.⁵⁷

Another food relief service, OzHarvest, highlighted that in 2024 its agencies were feeding 981 Victorians per month on average, representing a 31% increase in demand over the preceding six months.⁵⁸

In its 2022–23 Annual Report, Foodbank Victoria noted that '[a]lmost without exception, our 521 charity partners reported large and sustained increases in people reaching out to them for help this year'.⁵⁹ Likewise, OzHarvest stated that 28% of

⁵⁰ See Melbourne Institute, *Taking the Pulse of the Nation*, <<https://melbourneinstitute.unimelb.edu.au/data/tpn>> accessed 9 September 2024.

⁵¹ Melbourne Institute, *High rates of food insecurity, but few Australians getting help*, <<https://melbourneinstitute.unimelb.edu.au/data/taking-the-pulse-of-the-nation-2022/food-insecurity>> accessed 9 September 2024.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ See, for example, City of Melbourne, *Submission 78*, p. 2; Maroondah City Council, *Submission 871*, which attaches a report by Swinburne University postgraduate student Joshua Williams; City of Greater Bendigo, *Submission 72*, p. 5.

⁵⁵ Foodbank, *Foodbank Hunger Report 2019*, Foodbank, 2019, pp. 22–23.

⁵⁶ Foodbank Victoria, *2022–23 Annual Report*, Foodbank, 2023, p. 6. This is equivalent to 2 million meals per month, a slight increase from the 2019 rate.

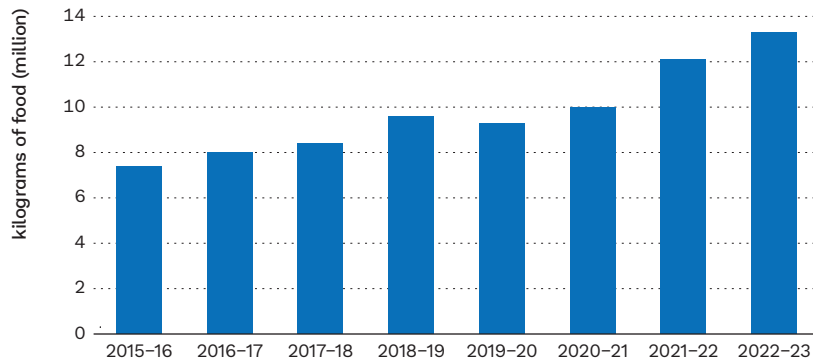
⁵⁷ Foodbank Victoria, *2021–22 Annual Report*, Foodbank, 2022, p. 6.

⁵⁸ OzHarvest, *Submission 143*, p. 5.

⁵⁹ Foodbank Victoria, *2022–23 Annual Report*, p. 8.

people accessing food through its agencies were doing so for the first time, and that 74% of its agencies required more food to meet this increased demand.⁶⁰

Figure 1.2 Kilograms of food distributed by Foodbank Victoria, 2015–2023



Source: Foodbank Victoria annual reports 2016–2023. See Foodbank, *Research & Reports*, <<https://www.foodbank.org.au/research-reports/?state=vic>> accessed 6 September 2024.

It is important to note that the amount of food distributed by food relief agencies alone cannot reliably be used to gauge the rate of food insecurity amongst Victorians. Nor can it be used to assess overall demand for services. There are other factors potentially influencing these metrics, such as an increase in overall funding and capacity. However, combined with VPHS data the measures appear to correlate with a rise in food insecurity in Victoria.

1.3.2 Vulnerable populations

Stakeholders to the Inquiry highlighted that while food insecurity affects Victorians broadly, certain groups are more vulnerable than others. The Victorian Government's submission explained that food insecurity has a marked impact on 'those Victorians who already face disadvantage and vulnerability in the community'.⁶¹ Evidence to the Committee pointed to the following groups as being at greater risk of food insecurity:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- culturally and linguistically diverse communities, including migrants, refugees and asylum seekers
- older people
- people with disability
- children and young people, including students
- unemployed and underemployed people
- people with high levels of mental stress

⁶⁰ OzHarvest, *Submission 143*, p. 35

⁶¹ Victorian Government, *Submission 167*, p. 11.

- low-income earners
- people experiencing homelessness
- single-parent households
- renters
- people living in rural areas.⁶²

This Section outlines rates of food insecurity within certain vulnerable populations. The drivers and impacts of food insecurity amongst these groups is considered in greater detail Chapters 2 and 3.

Aboriginal people

In its submission, the Victorian Government referred to the fact that, according to the Victorian Population Health Survey:

in 2020, Aboriginal Victorians were almost three times more likely (15.1 per cent) than non-Aboriginal Victorians (5.7 per cent) to have run out of food and unable to afford to buy more.⁶³

In a broader Australian context, OzHarvest's submission stated that 24% of Aboriginal Australians are at risk of food insecurity.⁶⁴ Similarly, the City of Greater Bendigo cited a study indicating that 'First Nations people in Australia have significantly higher levels of food insecurity than the general population', with estimates ranging from 22% to 32%.⁶⁵

Young people

The Victorian Government's submission noted that, according to the VPHS:

in 2022, the proportion of people aged 18–24 years (12 per cent) who reported running out of food and unable to afford to buy more was 50 per cent higher than all Victorian adults (8 per cent).⁶⁶

⁶² See Hobsons Bay City Council, *Submission 67*; Sustain: The Australian Food Network, *Submission 76*; Maroondah City Council, *Submission 87*; Warrnambool City Council, *Submission 141*; Greater Dandenong City Council, *Submission 113*; Ballarat Community Health and Ballarat Food Access Network, *Submission 114*; OzHarvest, *Submission 143*; Whittlesea Community Connections, *Submission 146*; Mitchell Shire Council, *Submission 168*; Brimbank City Council, *Submission 173*.

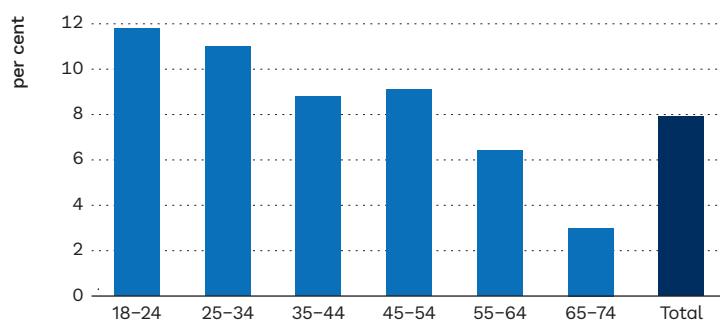
⁶³ Victorian Government, *Submission 167*, p. 12.

⁶⁴ OzHarvest, *Submission 143*, p. 7.

⁶⁵ City of Greater Bendigo, *Submission 72*, p. 5.

⁶⁶ Victorian Government, *Submission 167*, p. 12.

Figure 1.3 Age groups of people who experienced severe food insecurity in 2022



Source: Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee. Data taken from Victorian Agency for Health Information, *Victorian Population Health Survey 2022*, <<https://vahi.vic.gov.au/visualisation/10051/dccd7c0f-f28c-4585-a05d-f18170422cb6>> accessed 23 September 2024.

OzHarvest’s submission suggested 15% of young people are at risk of food insecurity.⁶⁷

Other stakeholders reported dramatically higher rates. In its submission, the City of Greater Bendigo noted that while ‘[a]dditional food insecurity data for children and young people is limited’:

youth-led research found that 76% of young people surveyed across central Victoria (16–24 years of age) had experienced some form of food insecurity in the last 2 years.⁶⁸

Likewise, the City of Melbourne explained that for metropolitan Melbourne:

Age is a contributing factor to food insecurity, with younger residents being more exposed than older residents. 61% of 18–24-year-old residents experienced food insecurity compared to 7% of 65+ year old residents. This younger age bracket is likely to be representative of students living in the City of Melbourne (City of Melbourne Social Indicator Survey, 2024).⁶⁹

Regarding tertiary students, the Just Food Collective noted that:

While there is no current published data on Victorian student food insecurity levels, the most recent research is from University of Tasmania who shows “the prevalence of food insecurity among students has increased from two in five (42%) in 2022, to more than one in two (53%) students in 2024.” The food insecurity statistic released by the Victorian Population Health Survey 2022 shows 8.1% of the general population is food insecure, suggesting tertiary students are 6.5 times more likely to be suffering.⁷⁰

In research involving its own students, the William Angliss Institute in Victoria found that 44% of survey respondents were food insecure.⁷¹ The University of Melbourne’s

⁶⁷ OzHarvest, *Submission 143*, p. 7.

⁶⁸ City of Greater Bendigo, *Submission 72*, p. 5.

⁶⁹ City of Melbourne, *Submission 78*, p. 2.

⁷⁰ Just Food Collective, *Submission 89*, p. 2.

⁷¹ Ibid.

Student Union and Graduate Student Association shared similar insights, particularly in relation to international students.⁷²

In a broader Australian context, the collaborative submission from the G21 region cited a study indicating that:

Two-thirds (67%) of Australian teachers report having students come to school hungry or without having eaten breakfast and estimate that these students lose more than two hours a day in learning.⁷³

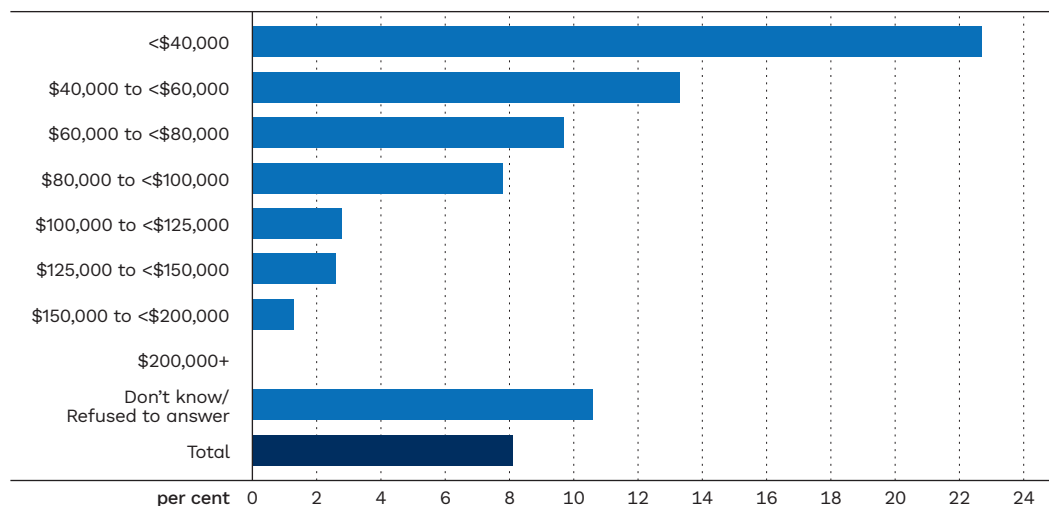
Low-income earners

In its submission, the Victorian Government identified that ‘people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage’ are at higher risk of marginal food insecurity, stating that:

in 2020, of the people who reported worrying about running out of money to buy food, 45 per cent were unemployed, 29 per cent did not hold a university qualification, and 35 per cent of adults with a total annual household income between \$40,000 to \$60,000 were significantly more likely to have worried about running out of money to buy food compared with all adults; this increased to 50.5 per cent of adults who reported an annual household income of less than \$20,000.⁷⁴

Figures 1.4 and 1.5 show rates of severe food insecurity under the 2022 VPHS by income and employment status.

Figure 1.4 Household income of people who experienced severe food insecurity in 2022



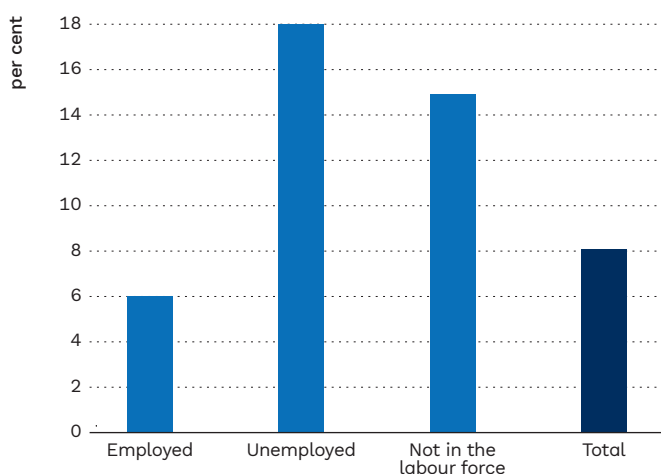
Source: Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee. Data taken from Victorian Agency for Health Information, *Victorian Population Health Survey 2022*, <<https://vahi.vic.gov.au/visualisation/10051/dccd7c0f-f28c-4585-a05d-f18170422cb6>> accessed 23 September 2024.

⁷² See University of Melbourne Student Union, *Submission 162* and University of Melbourne Graduate Student Association, *Submission 96*.

⁷³ Give Where You Live Foundation, *Submission 95*, p. 9.

⁷⁴ Victorian Government, *Submission 167*, p. 12.

Figure 1.5 Employment status of people who experienced severe food insecurity in 2022



Source: Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee. Data taken from Victorian Agency for Health Information, *Victorian Population Health Survey 2022*, <<https://vahi.vic.gov.au/visualisation/10051/dccd7c0f-f28c-4585-a05d-f18170422cb6>> accessed 23 September 2024.

OzHarvest’s submission suggested that 20% of low-income earners are at risk of food insecurity, 20% of rental households, and 23% of unemployed people.⁷⁵ It also identified single-parent households as particularly vulnerable to food insecurity, with 23% being at risk.⁷⁶

Culturally and linguistically diverse communities

The Committee was told throughout the Inquiry that people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, particularly migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, were more at risk of food insecurity.⁷⁷

The Victorian Government’s submission indicated that ‘in 2020, 41 per cent of those who were born overseas and spoke a language other than English worried about running out of food’.⁷⁸

In the 2022 VPHS, people born in Australia (8.7%) were more likely to experience severe food insecurity than people born overseas (7.5%).⁷⁹

However, people who were born in Australia and spoke another language at home were more likely to experience severe food insecurity than people born in Australia

⁷⁵ OzHarvest, *Submission 143*, p. 7.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

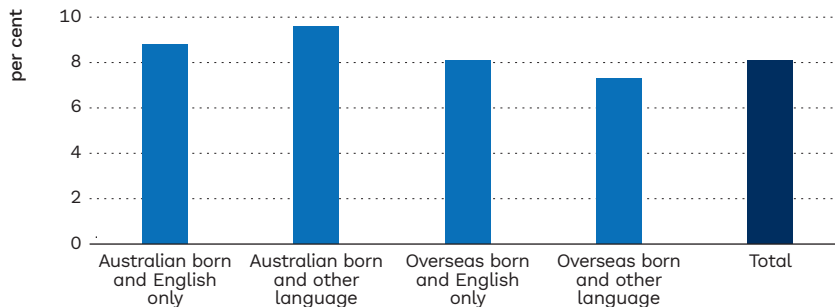
⁷⁷ See: Islamic Council of Victoria, *Submission 115*; Refugee Council of Australia, *Submission 131*.

⁷⁸ Victorian Government, *Submission 167*, p. 12.

⁷⁹ Victorian Agency for Health Information, *Victorian Population Health Survey 2022*, <<https://vahi.vic.gov.au/visualisation/10051/dccd7c0f-f28c-4585-a05d-f18170422cb6>> accessed 23 September 2024.

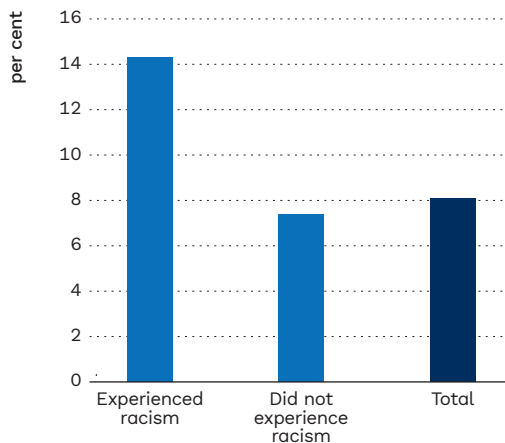
and who only spoke English at home.⁸⁰ Moreover, people who experienced racism were more likely to experience severe food insecurity.⁸¹ This is shown in Figures 1.6 and 1.7.

Figure 1.6 Birthplace and language of people who experienced severe food insecurity in 2022



Source: Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee. Data taken from Victorian Agency for Health Information, *Victorian Population Health Survey 2022*, <<https://vahi.vic.gov.au/visualisation/10051/dccd7c0f-f28c-4585-a05d-f18170422cb6>> accessed 23 September 2024.

Figure 1.7 Experience of racism of people who experienced severe food insecurity in 2022



Source: Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee. Data taken from Victorian Agency for Health Information, *Victorian Population Health Survey 2022*, <<https://vahi.vic.gov.au/visualisation/10051/dccd7c0f-f28c-4585-a05d-f18170422cb6>> accessed 23 September 2024.

1.3.3 Issues with data capture

A number of stakeholders raised concerns about Victoria's approach to capturing data on the rates of food insecurity. Given that the VPHS is 'the only source of population health surveillance data that is obtained first-hand from the Victorian population',⁸² it offers the most direct means of measuring food insecurity in the state. However, many

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Victorian Agency for Health Information, *Victorian Population Health Survey*, <<https://vahi.vic.gov.au/reports/victorian-population-health-survey#:text=The%20Victorian%20Population%20Health%20Survey,years%20of%20age%20or%20older>> accessed 9 September 2024.

witnesses and submitters to the Inquiry criticised the VPHS' measurement of rates of food insecurity as inadequate and called for the Victorian Government to adopt a more robust measurement framework.

Foodbank Victoria argued that the question used by the VPHS to measure food insecurity 'only assesses the impact of food affordability on food insecurity and fails to provide insight on the impact of food access, availability and utilisation', calling it 'a blunt tool that underestimates the total number of households experiencing food insecurity and the nuances associated with it'.⁸³ A joint submission from academics at Monash University argued that it does not 'account for marginal and moderate food insecurity, nor the severity of food insecurity'.⁸⁴

Calling the VPHS' estimate of severe food insecurity 'conservative', the Community Grocer stated that '[c]ommunity reports suggest this number could be even higher – as many as 1 in 3 households'.⁸⁵

In its submission, the National Heart Foundation of Australia noted that:

The 2014 VPHS did undertake a more rigorous assessment by posing up to six questions. The survey found that 41% of adults in Victoria were experiencing some level of food insecurity. These results show that current screening tools used to measure food insecurity in Australia are likely significantly underestimating the problem. No further assessment of this detail has been undertaken by the state since the 2014 VPHS.⁸⁶

At a public hearing, Dr Kelly Donati, Co-Founder and Acting Chair of Sustain, criticised the VPHS data for looking 'at quite large health regions, which do not enable local governments in particular to make decisions and allocate resources to local need'.⁸⁷ Because of this gap, Dr Donati explained that Sustain is:

regularly approached by local government to do research into what is happening at the local level in terms of food insecurity. Really, they should be investing those resources into actually addressing the issues that they can at a local level, and it should be the State Government that is doing that data collection on a systemic basis.⁸⁸

Several Council stakeholders agreed on the importance of providing local governments more localised food insecurity data.⁸⁹

In calling for a better food insecurity monitoring and surveillance system in Victoria, Dr Sue Kleve from Monash University similarly highlighted the importance of timely

⁸³ Foodbank Victoria, *Submission 137*, p. 3.

⁸⁴ Monash University, *Submission 108*, p. 5.

⁸⁵ The Community Grocer, *Submission 73*, p. 2.

⁸⁶ National Heart Foundation of Australia, *Submission 135*, p. 4.

⁸⁷ Dr Kelly Donati, Co-Founder and Acting Chair, Sustain: The Australian Food Network, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 34.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ See, for example, Brimbank City Council, *Submission 173*, p. 5 and Golden Plains Shire Council, *Submission 84*, p. 5.

1 data for community-based organisations, to enable them to appropriately cater to the needs of their communities.⁹⁰

Alternative measurement tools

Many stakeholders called on the Victorian Government to adopt the Household Food Security Survey Module (HFSSM),⁹¹ an 18-question food security measurement tool developed by the United States Department of Agriculture.⁹²

Administered at a household level, the HFSSM asks respondents about the food they ate, and their ability to afford the food they needed, in the last 12 months. The questions ask whether respondents ever experienced the following:

- running out or worrying they would run out of food
- skipping meals or cut meal sizes
- hunger.

The HFSSM can be used to measure food security for households, as well as adults and children. In line with the conception of food security as a continuum, scores of zero indicate high food security, scores of 1–2 marginal food security, scores of 3–7 low food security, and scores of 8–18 very low food security.⁹³

In a public hearing, Dr Sue Kleve explained that the HFSSM is ‘considered the gold standard in measurement’.⁹⁴

On behalf of Dietitians Australia, Julia Schindlmayr referred to is as ‘a validated, standardised scale which can assess the presence and severity of food insecurity at the household level in adults and children’ and recommended its adoption by the Victorian Government.⁹⁵

Despite recommending that the Government adopt the HFSSM, Foodbank Victoria made the point that:

Some changes may need to be made to account for the Australian population context – for example, tailoring questions to better represent the experiences of diverse populations including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations and the

⁹⁰ Dr Sue Kleve, Department of Nutrition, Dietetics and Food, Monash University, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 35.

⁹¹ See, for example, City of Greater Bendigo, *Submission 72*, p. 6; Sustain: The Australian Food Network, *Submission 76*, p. 6; Monash University, *Submission 108*, p. 7; Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition and Institute for Health Transformation, Deakin University, *Submission 136*, p. 3; Foodbank Victoria, *Submission 137*, p. 3; OzHarvest, *Submission 143*, p. 2; Healthy Food Systems Australia, *Submission 150*, p. 2; Foodprint Melbourne, The University of Melbourne, *Submission 157*, p. 3.

⁹² United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, *U.S. Household Food Security Survey Module: Three-Stage Design, With Screeners*, September 2012, <<https://www.ers.usda.gov/media/8271/hh2012.pdf>> accessed 23 September 2024.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 10–11.

⁹⁴ Dr Sue Kleve, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 40.

⁹⁵ Julia Schindlmayr, Acting Manager, Advocacy and Policy, Dietitians Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 59.

disproportionate barriers faced as well as the culturally significant coping mechanisms and household dynamics. [reference omitted]⁹⁶

Speaking to the Committee, Foodbank Victoria’s Madelaine Griffith stated that a more robust measure would enable the Government to understand the true burden of food insecurity, and that:

This data combined with other data from the sector, including Foodbank’s Feed it Forward survey and other large-scale datasets, can help build a nuanced, whole-of-state evidence base to plan actions from.⁹⁷

Committee comment

As highlighted in Section 1.2, the definitions of food security and insecurity outlined in the Victorian Government’s submission align with commonly accepted definitions of these concepts. In its submission, the Government also agrees with other stakeholders that food security occurs along a continuum from high to low food security, and moderate to severe food insecurity. Notwithstanding this, the way the Government captures and measures food security data through the VPHS is inadequate and does not allow for a comprehensive understanding of food insecurity in Victoria.

Before the Victorian Government can provide adequate solutions to food insecurity, it must understand the true scope of the issue. In order to do so, it must ensure a regular and comprehensive monitoring and surveillance mechanism that accurately captures the true extent of food insecurity along the entire continuum of food security. This is addressed further in Section 6.2.

Notwithstanding issues with data capture, the Committee believes the VPHS’ measurement of severe food insecurity provides a useful starting point for understanding rates of food insecurity in Victoria.

It notes that most other sources of food security data—such as the Melbourne Institute’s *Taking the Pulse of the Nation* survey, Foodbank’s Hunger Report, and food relief services—do not provide adequate Victoria-specific data. However, it acknowledges that these sources were frequently referenced by stakeholders, and that their data suggests rates of food security in Victoria—including both moderate and severe food insecurity—are far higher than what is captured in the VPHS.

In light of this data, the Committee understands that certain groups—such as low-income earners, Aboriginal people, and young Victorians—are more vulnerable to food insecurity than the rest of the population. Hence, it examines the underlying drivers and subsequent impacts of this food insecurity in Chapters 2 and 3, respectively.

⁹⁶ Foodbank Victoria, *Submission 137*, p. 3.

⁹⁷ Madelaine Griffith, Manager, Research and Design, Foodbank Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

FINDING 1: According to the most recent Victorian Population Health Survey data, at least 8% of Victorians experience severe food insecurity. However, using only the term ‘severe’ is too broad to adequately measure food insecurity. More comprehensive measures suggest that rates of food insecurity in Victoria, including moderate food insecurity, are likely to be much higher.

FINDING 2: There is a higher prevalence of food insecurity amongst populations that experience other forms of disadvantage, including low-income earners, Aboriginal people, and young Victorians.

1.4 Mapping food relief

Mapping food relief services could provide an important tool for the provision and access of food support across Victoria. Stakeholders highlighted the importance of accurate, up-to-date information for both service providers and individuals seeking assistance. The Committee was told that many people in need do not know where to access food services or have limited understanding to the diverse services available to them.

Madelaine Griffith from Foodbank Victoria told the Committee one of the more significant reasons people do not access food relief is because they do not know where to access it.⁹⁸

Name Withheld

“I am struggling to pay for my groceries ... I don’t even know where to go for food services to help.”

Source: Name Withheld, *Submission 109*.

To improve public awareness, mapping food services was suggested. Some stakeholders indicated they have developed publicly accessible maps of various food services in their area, ranging from food relief providers to community garden locations.⁹⁹ Other stakeholders have conducted mapping as part of a needs assessment or other work. Box 1.1 below outlines the City of Melbourne’s *Community Food Guide* map, providing an example of a public food service map.

⁹⁸ Madelaine Griffith, Manager, Research and Design, Foodbank Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5.

⁹⁹ For example: City of Melbourne, Foodbank Victoria and The Community Plate.

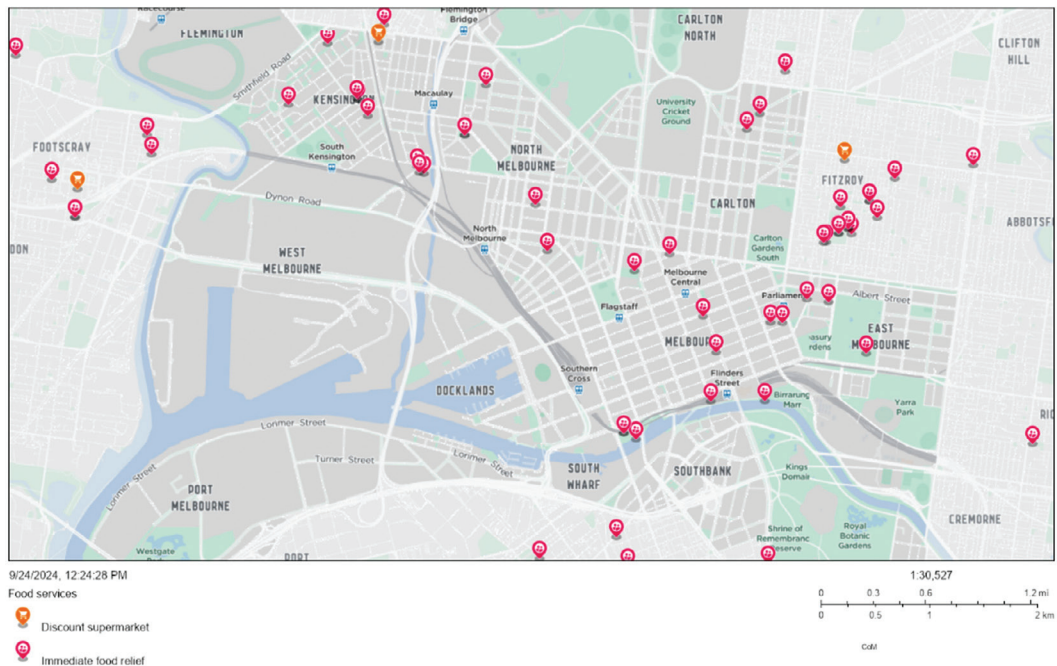
Box 1.1 City of Melbourne's *Community Food Guide* Map

The City of Melbourne's *Community Food Guide* is a comprehensive and live map of community food services. The map is updated via community submissions.

The map is divided into several food service categories which can be used to filter information:

- Free/low cost meals
- Food parcel
- Food voucher
- Food bank/pantry
- Fresh produce
- Longlife food
- Community garden
- Food education.

Figure: Community Food Guide map



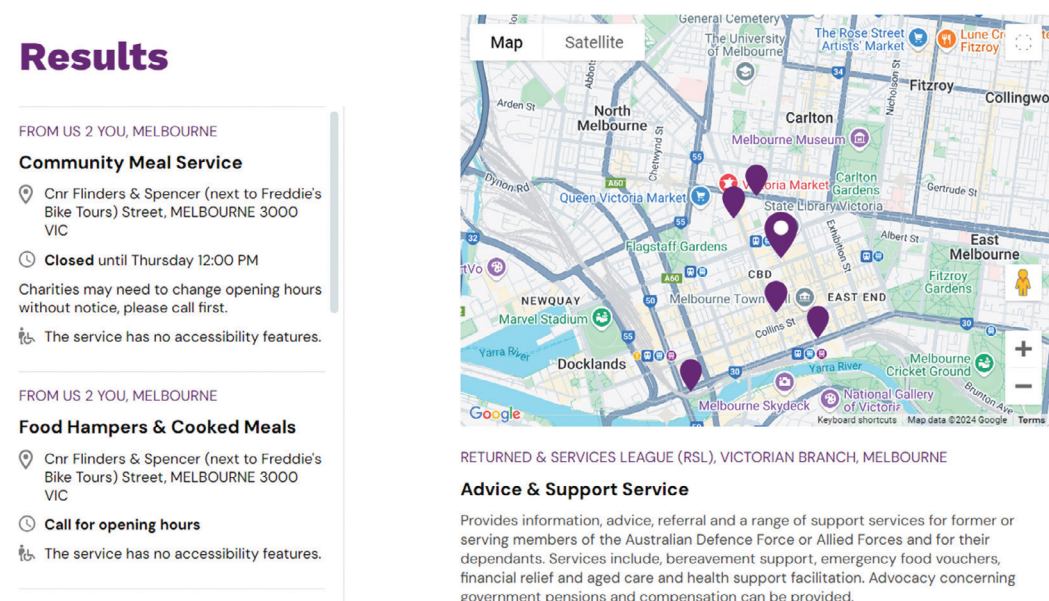
Source: City of Melbourne, *Submission 78*, p. 4; Sustain: The Australian Food Network, *Submission 76*, Attachment B, p. 10; City of Melbourne, *Community Food Guide: food map*, 2024, <<https://www.melbourne.vic.gov.au/community-food-guide>> accessed 24 September 2024.

Box 1.2 Foodbank's 'Find Food' support service

The Find Food service run by Foodbank is an online directory of food programs and outlets available to the public. It works by inputting a postcode to see results of local services in the area.

According to Foodbank Victoria's submission, there has been a steady increase in visits to Find Food across the 2023/24 financial year.

Figure: Example result from the Find Food service



Note: Results based on inputting postcode '3000'.

Source: Foodbank Victoria, *Submission 137*, p. 9.

It was contended that a food relief map could serve a two-fold purpose:

- **Identify service gaps:** Mapping local food systems helps governments and councils identify key vulnerabilities, inefficiencies, and gaps in food relief services. This enables targeted interventions and policy adjustments to address areas where food access is limited or underserved.
- **Provide public information:** By creating accessible maps or information-sharing platforms, the public can easily locate local food producers, food relief services, and community resources. This empowers residents with real-time information.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ See, for example: Golden Plains Shire Council, *Submission 84*; Sustain: The Australian Food Network, *Submission 76*; Nillumbik Shire Council, *Submission 129*; Central Goldfields Shire Council, *Submission 156*.

The Golden Plains Shire Council provided a copy of its *Local Food Needs Assessment* report. It contended a food systems map would facilitate easier access to fresh produce and provide residents with real-time information about available food resources.¹⁰¹ This aligns with broader efforts across Victoria to enhance food security and community resilience by strengthening the links between food producers and consumers.

Other jurisdictions have developed accessible food relief service maps to assist people in need. In 2020, the Tasmania Government developed a ‘point-in-time geospatial map of emergency food relief services’ across the State.¹⁰² At the time, the map was intended to for internal use to ‘inform Government decision-making’. In its 2021 *Food relief to food resilience: Tasmanian Food Security Strategy 2021–2024* report, the Tasmanian Government outlined the key findings of its mapping project which indicated several challenges in the Tasmania’s food relief system:

- The food system was ‘complex’ with a ‘range of different organisations providing varied services, that in most cases do not operate in a collaborative way’.
- There was a heavy reliance on purchasing food from local supermarkets or private donations.
- Schools provided a broad range of food relief, beyond just breakfast programs, often acting as community food hubs.
- There was uneven distribution of services with some areas showing the existence of food ‘deserts’ or clusters of services.
- It was difficult in measuring fluctuating demand for food relief.
- Food relief definitions were unclear.¹⁰³

The Tasmanian Government’s *Food Relief to Food Resilience Action 2023–2025* outlines two action items related to mapping food relief (see Figure 1.8 below).

¹⁰¹ Golden Plains Shire Council, *Submission 84*, Attachment A, p. 20.

¹⁰² Department of Communities Tasmania, *Food relief to food resilience: Tasmanian Food Security Strategy 2021–2024*, Tasmanian Government, 2021, p. 9.

¹⁰³ Department of Communities Tasmania, *Food relief to food resilience: Tasmanian Food Security Strategy 2021–2024*, Tasmanian Government, 2021, p. 13.

Figure 1.8 Food relief mapping action items, Tasmanian Government

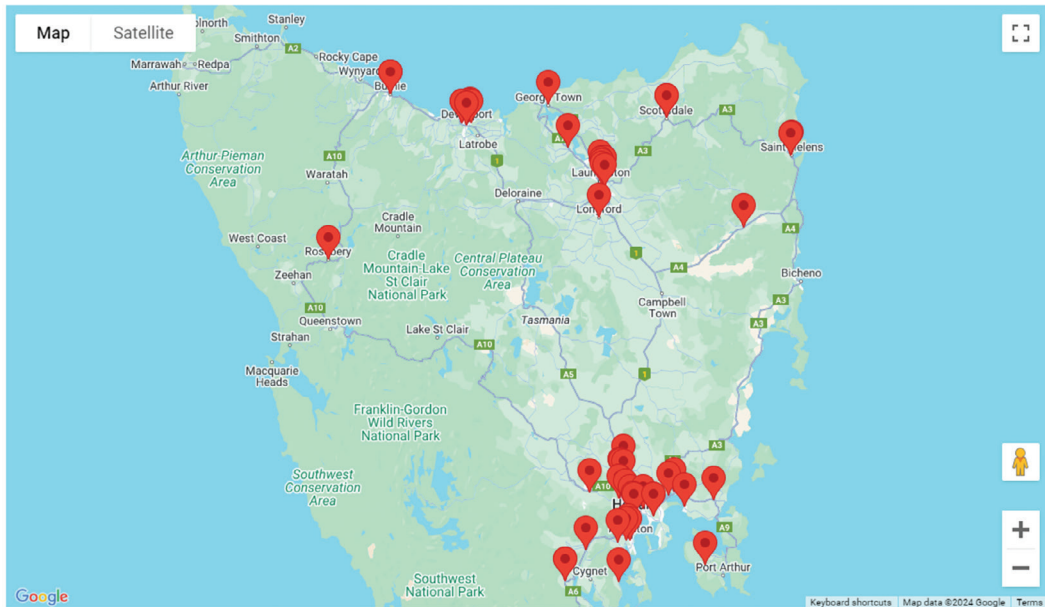
Sustainable relief

Action	Lead	Integrated Support	Place-based	Data and Information
<p>Food Relief and Resilience Geospatial Map including local government profiles</p> <p>Develop the Food Relief Geospatial Map on the List to include local government profiles and details of food resilience projects across Tasmania. The local government profiles will include a snapshot of food relief providers in all local government areas. The map will be used to consolidate existing knowledge of availability and location of food relief and will be built to include food resilience projects across the State, including community gardens and other projects. Consideration will be given to how the map might capture data on community need and demand, and forecast changes in food resilience.</p>	Department of Premier and Cabinet	✓	✓	✓
<p>FindHelpTAS partnership</p> <p>Partner with the Tasmanian Council of Social Services and food sector organisations to improve food relief information available through the FindHelpTAS platform. This will involve using available information and improving accessibility of 'food relief/resilience' services to connect Tasmanians in need with support services.</p>	Department of Premier and Cabinet	✓		✓

Source: Tasmanian Government, *Food Relief to Food Resilience Action Plan 2023-2025*, 2023, p. 9.

In relation to the 'FindHelpTAS partnership', there already exists an interactive food relief and resilience map. The map shows services across Tasmania which offer food relief support, including resilience activities such as community gardens and cooking classes. Figure 1.9 below shows the FindHelpTAS food relief map.

Figure 1.9 Food relief and resilience map, Tasmania



Source: FindHelpTAS, *Food relief and resilience*, <https://www.findhelptas.org.au/programs-map/?p_cat=food> accessed 24 September 2024.

In its submission, the Victorian Government indicated that in 2022 KPMG conducted mapping and a gap analysis of the Victorian food relief sector.¹⁰⁴ However, neither this analysis, nor any mapping, is publicly available.

The Committee further considers and makes a recommendation with regard to mapping food relief in Chapter 6.

¹⁰⁴ Victorian Government, *Submission 167*, p. 16.

Chapter 2

The drivers of food insecurity

2.1 Introduction

Although the Terms of Reference required the Committee to look at the ‘drivers of ... food security in Victoria’, much of the evidence provided to the Committee focused on the drivers of food insecurity in particular. Noting that, to achieve food security, there is a pressing need to address the underlying drivers of food insecurity, this Chapter also focuses on the latter. In particular, it draws attention to two broad categories of drivers, namely the rising cost of food and broader cost-of-living pressures. These two categories encompass several standalone drivers, including:

- food inflation and the inflation of other essential goods and services
- economic and environmental factors, including extreme weather events and the COVID-19 pandemic
- level of competition in the supermarket sector
- financial stressors such as unemployment, wage stagnation and inadequate income supports.¹

The Chapter further highlights the interconnection between the drivers of food insecurity and urges the Victorian Government to avoid taking a siloed approach to addressing them.

2.2 The rising cost of food

The cost of food has absolutely caused severe insecurity in our household. It’s a weekly reminder of poverty and difficulty. We scrape by, searching for sales, wasting petrol on searching for better deals from supermarket to supermarket and feel at the mercy of what might be on special not what may meet our individual nutritional needs. Grocery prices are affecting more than just disposable income. It makes me question whether I can afford to make that doctor’s appointment or put the heater on in winter. Our health is suffering and it needs to be dealt with. I believe the cost of food in Australia is affecting all facets of society. Pushing people into homelessness, poor health and forcing people to compromise moral values by stealing to make ends meet. We are not seeing reasonable mark ups - we are seeing corporate greed being more important than the well being of real people. Please, help.

Janelle Evans, *Submission 4*.

¹ See, for example, Hobsons Bay City Council, *Submission 67*, p. 2; Knox City Council, *Submission 79*, p. 3; Yuen Yan Li, *Submission 161*, pp. 9-12.

According to a large number of stakeholders, a major driver of food insecurity is the rising cost of food in Victoria, also referred to as food or grocery inflation. Box 2.1 summarises some of the evidence received from individuals about their experience with rising food costs.

Box 2.1 Individuals' experiences of rising food costs

As a single mum of two, I am alarmed at the continual rise in prices at the supermarket. Whilst I can cut back on some things in life, feeding my family is not an option, it's a must. The costs of keeping food on the table is affecting our budget more than any other single factor and it's one we can't avoid.

Gemma Carr, *Submission 11*.

The cost of food has increased at such a rate our weekly bill has more than doubled but we are no longer eating a large variety of foods, unless we can get our hands on goods close to or past their use by dates.

Belinda Knott, *Submission 12*.

My family, which is reliant on one income, can't get their weekly shop to within budget, not because of their "poor financial management", but because the government and its politicians only care for profit, not the people they serve. I am currently living alone, barely getting enough money to pay rent, pay for groceries ... I am pleading for some form of lowering the price of food, as I am and so many others are struggling. Please regulate pricing in supermarkets.

Name withheld, *Submission 14*.

The cost of groceries in this country is astronomical. I now shop almost exclusively at Aldi, and only go to Coles or Woolworths for things I can't get at Aldi. I am frequently amazed that the three or four things I'm forced to buy at Coles or Woolworths, totals nearly the cost of my entire weekly grocery shop at Aldi. It will only be a matter of time that Aldi prices will also increase, and then Australians won't have a low cost option.

Name withheld, *Submission 24*.

I've noticed that the cost of fresh food and vegetables has been steadily increasing over the years. It's not just the occasional price hike; it's a consistent and persistent trend. I remember when I could buy a bunch of fresh carrots for \$1.50, but now it's closer to \$3.00. The same goes for other essential items like milk, bread, and eggs.

Name withheld, *Submission 52*.

(Continued)

Box 2.1: Continued

The cost of food has significantly increased and only seems to be getting worse. Each shop I buy less food and it gets more expensive. I have had to switch from supermarkets to other options to be able to afford a greater variety of fresh fruits and vegetables, as supermarket costs for fruits and vegetables were limiting my options. I am fortunate enough to be able to continue to afford the basics, though I am becoming increasingly limited in the items I can afford.

Name withheld, *Submission 65*.

2.2.1 Food inflation

One way to measure food inflation in Australia and Victoria is via the Consumer Price Index (CPI). The CPI ‘measures quarterly changes in the price of a ‘basket’ of goods and services which account for a high proportion of expenditure by the CPI population group (i.e. metropolitan households)’.² The basket of goods contains goods and services from 11 categories of household expenditure, including food and non-alcoholic beverages.³ As analysed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), CPI offers a measurement of household inflation—a general increase in the price of goods and services over time—and provides statistics about price change for the various categories of household expenditure, such as food.⁴

According to the Reserve Bank of Australia (RBA), ‘low and stable inflation is a prerequisite for a strong economy and sustained full employment and growth in real wages’.⁵ Thus, with agreement from the Australian Government, the RBA strives to keep ‘consumer price inflation between 2 and 3 per cent’.⁶

Australia

In line with total inflation, CPI measures show a steady increase in the price of food in Australia over time.

The ABS’ most recent figures indicate that CPI for food and non-alcoholic beverages in Australia rose by 3.3% from June 2023 to June 2024.⁷ This is lower than the change in total CPI (referred to as ‘all groups CPI’) for the same period (3.8%), and represents

2 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Consumer Price Index, Australia methodology*, 2024, <[https://www.abs.gov.au/methodologies/consumer-price-index-australia-methodology/dec-quarter-2023#:~:text=The%20Consumer%20Price%20Index%20\(CPI.group%20\(i.e.%20metropolitan%20households\).>](https://www.abs.gov.au/methodologies/consumer-price-index-australia-methodology/dec-quarter-2023#:~:text=The%20Consumer%20Price%20Index%20(CPI.group%20(i.e.%20metropolitan%20households).>) accessed 30 September 2024.

3 Ibid.

4 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Consumer Price Index, Australia*, 2024, <<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/economy/price-indices-and-inflation/consumer-price-index-australia/latest-release>> accessed 11 September 2024.

5 Reserve Bank of Australia, *Inflation*, 2024, <<https://www.rba.gov.au/inflation-overview.html>> accessed 17 September 2024.

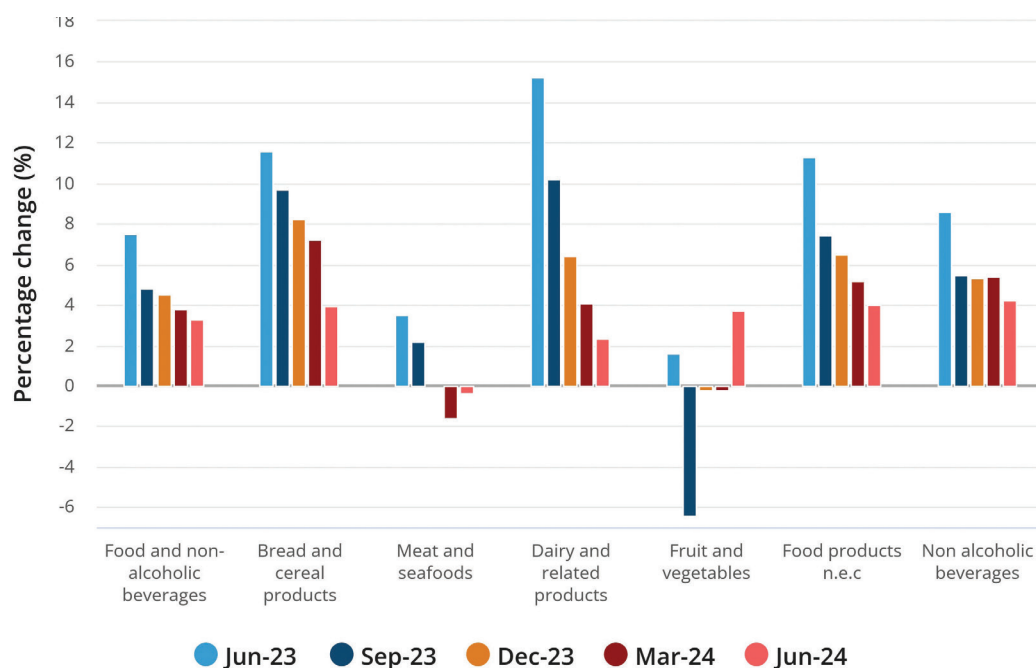
6 Reserve Bank of Australia, *Statement on the Conduct of Monetary Policy*, 2023, <<https://www.rba.gov.au/monetary-policy/framework/stmt-conduct-mp-8-2023-12-08.html>> accessed 17 September 2024.

7 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Consumer Price Index, Australia*.

‘[a]nnual food inflation eas[ing] for the sixth quarter in a row’.⁸ However, as with total inflation, it is higher than the RBA’s total inflation goal of 2–3%.

Figure 2.1 shows the gradual easing of food inflation over the past year with decreasing CPI changes for all categories of food and non-alcoholic beverages. However, neither meat and seafoods nor fruit and vegetables experienced the same level of inflation as the other sub-categories.

Figure 2.1 CPI changes for food and non-alcoholic beverages between 2023 and 2024



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Consumer Price Index, Australia, 2024*, <<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/economy/price-indexes-and-inflation/consumer-price-index-australia/latest-release>> accessed 17 September 2024.

Despite this easing, food and non-alcoholic beverages—along with housing, clothing and footwear, and alcohol and tobacco—represented one of ‘[t]he most significant price rises this quarter’.⁹ Moreover, it exists within the context of very high inflation since 2020, with the CPI for food and non-alcoholic beverages peaking at 9.2% in December 2022 and all groups CPI peaking at 7.8% in the same quarter.¹⁰

Hobsons Bay City Council noted in its submission that the most recent figures:

follow even higher food inflation in the 2022–23 financial year, where the costs of some items such as dairy (15.2%) and bread and cereals (11.2%) increased substantially.¹¹

⁸ Ibid.

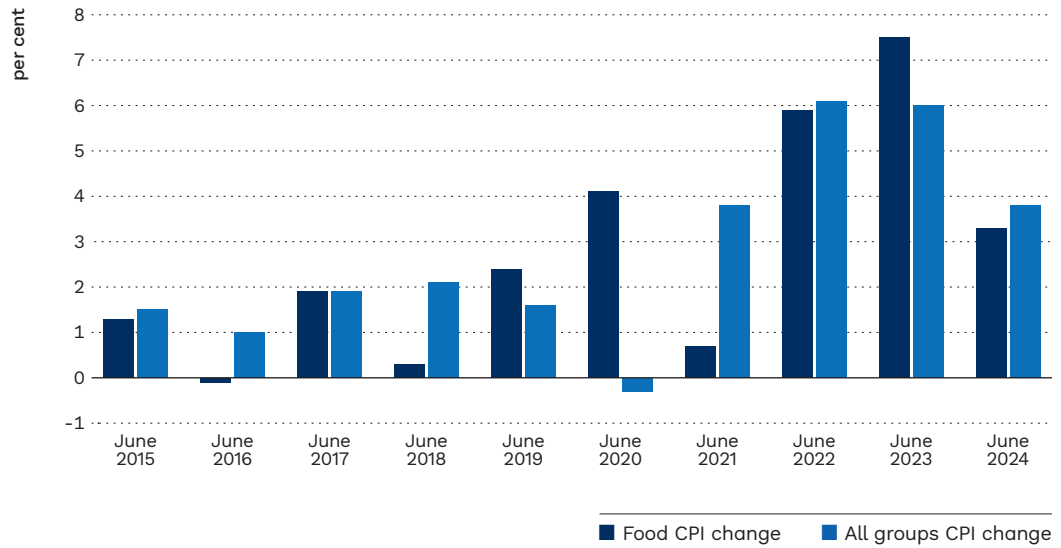
⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ See Reserve Bank of Australia, *Inflation*, <<https://www.rba.gov.au/inflation-overview.html>> accessed 17 September 2024.

¹¹ Hobsons Bay City Council, *Submission 67*, p. 4.

Figure 2.2 demonstrates the significance of food and total food inflation from June 2015 to June 2024. In particular, it shows that while food inflation has eased in 2024, this has followed a period of very high food inflation, particularly in 2022 and 2023.

Figure 2.2 Annual food and all groups CPI changes between June 2015 and 2024 in Australia

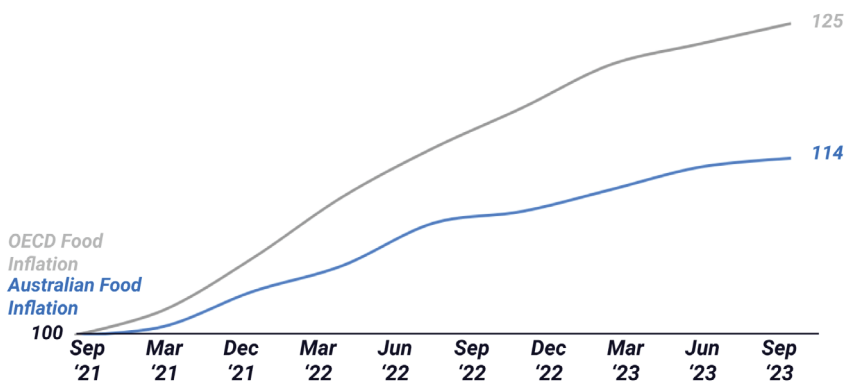


Source: Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee. Data retrieved from Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Consumer Price Index, Australia*, 2024, <<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/economy/price-indexes-and-inflation/consumer-price-index-australia/latest-release>> accessed 17 September 2024.

Contributors to total inflation—and the impact of total inflation on food security—are considered in Section 2.2.3.

In its submission to the Senate Select Committee on Supermarket Prices, Woolworths provided a graph comparing Australia’s food inflation between September 2021 and September 2023 to the average food inflation in OECD countries (see Figure 2.3).

Figure 2.3 Comparison of OCED food inflation and Australian food inflation



Source: Woolworths Group, *Submission 69, Attachment A*, p. 6.

Woolworths' suggested this data showed that '[w]hile it is of limited comfort to Australian households, food inflation is not unique to Australia', and that '[g]rocery inflation has been lower than the rest of the world and is declining'.¹² For example, it noted:

Over the last four years, prices for food and non-alcoholic beverages increased in Australia by 18.8%, which is lower compared to New Zealand, the UK, Canada and the US, as well as the EU, where prices increased between 23–31%.¹³

Furthermore, it explained that 'economy-wide inflation (ABS CPI) has increased 4 percentage points faster than food inflation (ABS Food and Non-Alcoholic Beverages) since the last ACCC Inquiry (September 2008-September 2023)', and that 'food inflation in Australia - and at Woolworths - has moderated with deflation in F24, led by deflation in fruit and vegetables and red meat'.¹⁴ This deflation is evidenced in Figure 2.1 above.

The Committee notes that the inflation Australia experienced over the past several years may have been a large contributor to a 'spike' in food insecurity. Therefore, as inflation declines there may be a concurrent decrease in the number of people experiencing food insecurity.

Victoria

The recent situation in Australia, marked by high overall inflation alongside rising food costs, is similarly evident in metropolitan Victoria.

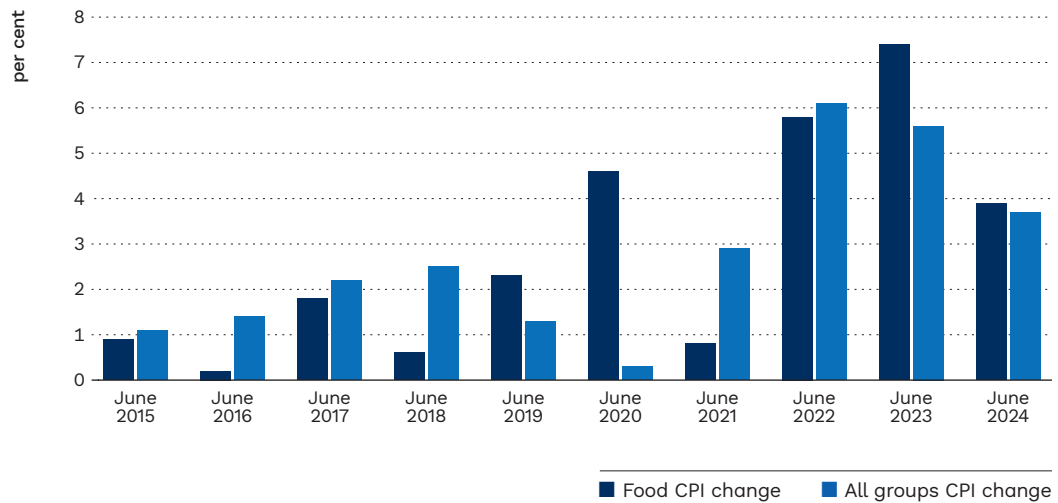
Figure 2.4 compares CPI changes for food and non-alcoholic beverages (food inflation) and all groups CPI (total inflation) between June 2015 and June 2024 in Melbourne. It demonstrates that food inflation has followed a similar trend to total inflation over the last decade, and in some quarters outpaced it. It also indicates that while food inflation in Victoria has eased in 2024, this follows a period of very high food inflation in 2022 and 2023.

¹² Woolworths Group, *Submission 69*, Attachment A, p. 6.

¹³ Woolworths Group, *Submission 69*, p. 4.

¹⁴ Woolworths Group, *Submission 69*, Attachment A, p. 4; Woolworths Group, *Submission 69*, p. 4.

Figure 2.4 Annual food and all groups CPI changes between June 2015 and 2024 in Melbourne



Source: Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee. Data retrieved from Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Consumer Price Index, Australia, 2024*, <<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/economy/price-indexes-and-inflation/consumer-price-index-australia/latest-release>> accessed 17 September 2024.

The rising cost of nutritious food

A key element of food access is access to appropriate food for a nutritious diet. Even where lower-cost food options are available, it is important that these options support a nutritious diet, and do not require households to make choices that compromise their dietary needs. As noted in Figure 2.2, the price of meat and seafood and fruit vegetables have been relatively stable.

The Regional Food Security Alliance made this point in its submission, stating:

A recent review by VicHealth found that as the cost of living and in particular the cost of fresh food rises, food insecurity will increase and people experiencing hardship may shift more towards cheaper, lower-quality food options, which can lead to obesity and poor nutrition. This contributes to a vicious cycle of reduced physical and mental health, more poverty, and increasing food insecurity. [reference omitted]¹⁵

Likewise, Briony Blake for Dietitians Australia told the Committee:

I think that with the rising cost of dietitian-approved foods, if you will, or foods that we recommend to our clients, if the foods that we see as healthy and health serving are rising in price beyond what is reasonable with inflation, it creates a massive cause for concern and can leave us getting ever more creative and resourceful in the way that we provide nutrition advice to those seeking our care.¹⁶

¹⁵ Regional Food Security Alliance, *Submission 58*, p. 8.

¹⁶ Briony Blake, Dietitian, Dietitians Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 60.

Some stakeholders highlighted the issue of food deserts, ‘areas where it is difficult to access food’, and food swamps, areas ‘where most of the food options and food sold is un nourishing’. The Salvation Army noted this in its submission:

It is important to recognise that people experiencing financial hardship face not only a shortage of income, but also often a shortage of time. To the people working or living in food swamps or deserts, needing something quickly due to time poverty, the only available options may be either non-nutritious food, or food which is less competitively priced. The failure of local government planning forces many to pay a premium, or eat unhealthy food.¹⁷

Chapter 3 considers the physical health risks associated with compromised food choices in greater detail. Chapter 4 examines how the Victorian Government can amend its planning laws and regulations to ensure better access to healthy food options.

The remainder of this Section examines the contributors to food inflation in Victoria.

2.2.2 Contributors to food inflation

As with total inflation, the Committee was informed that there are multiple contributors to food inflation.

According to the Woolworths Group, ‘drivers of food inflation in Victoria are informed by national and global factors’.¹⁸ This was echoed by Coles, which noted ‘the impact of inflationary global and local events over [the 2022 and 2023 financial years], including a pandemic, the conflict in Ukraine, natural disasters and other supply chain disruptions’.¹⁹

Other stakeholders raised inflation issues in areas intersecting with the provision of food, such as energy and transport, noting their impact on the supply chain. Many stakeholders, particularly individual submitters, also emphasised the influence of Australia’s ‘supermarket duopoly’, their price setting practices and resultant level of competition in the supermarket sector as a contributor to food inflation.

Each of these contributors is discussed below.

Rising production costs

Several stakeholders noted the impact of rising production costs on food inflation. In its submission, the Victorian Farmers Federation (VFF) pointed out that:

The Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) found that rising input prices were one of the factors that contributed to global food price rises in 2021

¹⁷ The Salvation Army Australia, *Submission 103*, p. 6.

¹⁸ Woolworths Group, *Submission 69*, p. 4.

¹⁹ Coles Group, *Submission 160*, p. i.

and 2022 and the RBA has stated that agricultural inputs costs are also evident in higher grocery prices in Australia. [references omitted]²⁰

It stated that '[t]he Australian agriculture industry as a whole had suffered a 115% increase in input costs from 2002 to 2022', and contended that:

As food prices increase, the amount of money making its way back to farmers doesn't always correlate. In fact, in many cases farmers see an increase at their end in the form of the cost of inputs. These inputs include land, equipment, fertiliser, chemical, seed, buildings and facilities, maintenance, labour, fuel, energy, feed, taxes, insurance and more. Whilst these expenses continue to rise, farmers continually strive to increase their yields and efficiency so they can remain competitive and profitable in the long term.

In turn, the costs that are added to production of food are eventually passed through the supply chain to the consumer.²¹

Coles concurred that 'the increasing cost of doing business ... has largely been driven by higher input prices faced by many of [its] suppliers, combined with the escalating cost of fuel, labour, freight, and energy'.²²

Likewise, Paul Harker, Chief Commercial Officer of the Woolworths Group, told the Committee that '[t]he key driver of grocery inflation is the higher prices we are paying to our suppliers, who are facing higher costs to grow, make, move and package products'.²³ In its submission, Woolworths Group spoke about long life products, explaining:

Consistently, a key driver of grocery inflation in long life categories has been the higher prices we are paying to suppliers. In the 14 months from November 2021 to January 2023, we received more than 1,800 cost increase requests from our long-life suppliers with an average per month ~4.5x our pre-COVID volumes. During this period the average value of those requests was higher than headline CPI for that period of time. Suppliers have been citing higher input costs from increasing commodities and supply chain costs in making those requests.²⁴

Disruptions in the supply chain

Linked to rising production costs, stakeholders also raised disruptions in supply chains, which according to Monash University 'can constrain food access and further drive up food prices'.²⁵

Coles Group noted that '[d]omestically, the disruption to national supply chains caused by natural disasters and labour shortages have resulted in increased costs to Coles

²⁰ Victorian Farmers Federation, *Submission 166*, p. 3.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

²² Coles Group, *Submission 160*, p. 9.

²³ Paul Harker, Chief Commercial Officer, Woolworths Group, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 August 2024, p. 39.

²⁴ Woolworths Group, *Submission 69*, p. 4.

²⁵ Monash University, *Submission 108*, p. 3.

and its suppliers'.²⁶ Moreover, it explained that '[g]lobal supply chain pressures have also significantly impacted Coles and its suppliers', highlighting 'the supply chain stress resulting from COVID restrictions'.²⁷

The Woolworths Group asserted that its 'supply chain handled 164 days of disruption in F23 as a result of floods, rail derailments, cyclones, and fires'.²⁸

Deakin University stated that:

Currently, Victorian food systems are experiencing once in a generation acute and chronic shocks and stressors. These include supply chain problems stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian war on Ukraine, and the cost of living crisis. Australia is also impacted by climate-related and natural disasters such as floods and fires, many impacting the nation's most productive food-growing regions.²⁹

Other stakeholders also highlighted the impact of natural disasters on the supply chain.³⁰ The Salvation Army stated that:

As climate change continues to impact on Australia's seasons, and increased the occurrence of natural disasters, it too has an impact on food security. Weather events causing damage to crops, severing supply chains and decreasing food availability, will prove to have a significant influence on communities throughout Victoria.³¹

It further highlighted that:

Even where communities themselves are not directly impacted by natural disasters, the impacts on the supply chain can be significant. A confluence of pressures from COVID-19, drought, bushfires and other natural disasters have led to shortages of staple fresh produce. Disasters such as floods and Bird-flu cases in east coast states have put pressure on supply chains, forcing highly publicised price spikes in some foods.³²

The Committee heard from the VFF that supply chain disruptions have had an impact on transport costs, increasing the cost of agricultural production.³³

Various stakeholders advocated for increasing reliance on local food production to avoid issues with global supply chains.³⁴ The Committee addresses this issue in Chapters 4 to 6.

²⁶ Coles Group, *Submission 160*, p. 7.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

²⁸ Woolworths Group, *Submission 69*, Attachment A, p. 16.

²⁹ Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition (IPAN) and Institute for Health Transformation, Deakin University, *Submission 136*, p. 5.

³⁰ See, for example, Healthy Loddon Campaspe, *Submission 104*, pp. 8–9; Darebin Information, Volunteer & Resource Service (DIVRS), *Submission 134*, p. 5.

³¹ The Salvation Army Australia, *Submission 103*, p. 7.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Victorian Farmers Federation (VFF), *Submission 166*, p. 2.

³⁴ See, for example, Maribyrnong City Council, *Submission 85*, p. 5; Maroondah City Council, *Submission 87*, p. 11; City of Ballarat, *Submission 99*, p. 5; Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance, *Submission 139*; Common Ground Project, *Submission 147*, p. 16; Dunolly and District Neighbourhood Centre, *Submission 77*, p. 2.

Level of competition in the supermarket sector

The current economic system prioritises profit over people’s health, wellbeing, and livelihoods. Australia’s highly concentrated supermarket sector allows for consumer price gouging and unfair deals with producers, exacerbating food insecurity.

Yarra Ranges Council, *Submission 86*, p. 15.

The Committee received considerable evidence—particularly from individuals—alleging that Australia’s supermarket sector constitutes a ‘duopoly’ formed by Woolworths and Coles. It heard from stakeholders about the major supermarkets’ alleged control of the sector—which has allowed them to unfairly increase the price of food, commonly referred to as ‘price gouging’—and the impact this has had on food inflation in Australia.

Some of this evidence is captured in Box 2.2 below.

Box 2.2 Individuals’ perceptions of the major supermarkets

Woolworths and Coles make massive profits every year and that is only possible if they are underpaying producers and overcharging consumers - those of us at either end of the process are struggling to live which makes their profits just sickening. I don’t want to live on the streets but once I pay rent and utilities, my money goes to supermarket profits and a tiny amount is left over for me to actually have food.

Name withheld, *Submission 31*.

I like so many Victorians are struggling with the grotesque price gouging from Coles and Woolworths. It’s been an uphill battle and how these two supermarkets were allowed to consolidate many of their competitors into one big duopoly is appalling ... Coles and Woolworths ideally need to be broken up[.] As long as their monopoly is this big any attempts to curb it through fines and a regulator will be futile, they’ll just pay it and continue or gaslight their way out of accountability. It’s key hole surgery when the sector needs knee reconstruction.

Name withheld, *Submission 37*.

Woolworths and Coles have been accused of unfairly inflating prices, exploiting their dominant market positions to maximize profits at the expense of consumers. ... The duopoly created by these two supermarkets stifles competition, making it difficult for smaller businesses to compete and for consumers to find alternative options. ... The inflated prices disproportionately affect low-income families and individuals, exacerbating financial stress and reducing the quality of life for many Australians.

Saul Minshall, *Submission 44*.

(Continued)

Box 2.2 Continued

I am making my submission on the basis that the price gouging is having a very real impact on rural families. At the establishment where I work, I have noticed a young colleague now coming to work hungry more often than not. He comes from a large, single income family. This is just one example. The Labor government should force the duopoly to break up and not allow it to occur again (like in the USA that doesn't allow it to exist).

Andrew Hezel, *Submission 51*.

A supermarket duopoly has had the same effect that all market duopolies or monopolies always have: price gouging, rate hiking, extortionate practices, in a word: greed. Runaway, unchecked, naked greed. Allowing the supermarket duopoly continually extort greater and greater profit margins only drives up prices and costs-of-living everywhere, as every other business tries to compensate for increased costs of essentials, triggering a domino effect. In a mixed economy, it's on the government to reign in corporations. To break out the collar and leash when necessary. By making groceries essential, the Essential Services Commission would have the power to regulate supermarkets.

Joshua Jennings, *Submission 62*.

Organisations shared similar views in their submissions and in public hearings.³⁵ For example, Sustain: The Australian Food Network said that regarding the food system:

Australia has one of the most concentrated supermarket sectors in the developed world. This effective situation of duopoly market power has enabled Coles and Woolworths to charge excessive prices (what some term "price gouging") and dictate unconscionable business terms with producers. These practices and the lack of effective competition in the Australian supermarket sector have been recognised as contributing factors to the rise in food poverty and food insecurity. This has been documented in submissions to the various inquiries that have taken place investigating supermarket prices and their impacts on both consumers and suppliers in the past year as well as by the published reports of those inquiries that have concluded.³⁶

A key inquiry referred to in Sustain's evidence above is the Senate Select Committee on Supermarket Prices (also noted in Chapter 1). The Select Committee examined 'the price setting practices and market power of major supermarkets', with particular reference to a number of matters including 'rising supermarket profits and the large

³⁵ See, for example, Zakaria Wahid, General Manager, Islamic Council of Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 56; Rachna Madaan Bowman, Financial Counsellor, South East Community Links, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 22; Geelong Food Relief Centre (GFRC), *Submission 158*, p. 6; Metcash Trading Limited, *Submission 172*, p. 2; Jerry Ham, Group Manager, Homelessness and Community Support, Uniting (Victoria and Tasmania), public hearing, Melbourne, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 51.

³⁶ Sustain: The Australian Food Network, *Submission 76*, p. 21.

increase in price of essential items'.³⁷ In its Final Report, the Committee concluded that Australia has a 'supermarket duopoly':

Australia is in the midst of a cost of living crisis, and yet the supermarkets—and especially the Coles and Woolworths duopoly—are making record profits.

Consumers are bearing the brunt of increases in food and grocery prices, and domestic small agricultural suppliers and businesses are being squeezed to constantly provide more for less, risking their livelihoods and those of the people around them. They risk even more if they dare to speak out and question the way this duopoly deals with its suppliers.³⁸

The Select Committee defined 'price gouging' as a practice where there are 'sudden increases in prices that people think are too high and without justification'.³⁹ Using this definition, it explained:

The question of whether price gouging exists in the supermarket sector was at the heart of this inquiry ... The answer seems to be resounding yes, with it occurring in many and varied ways. While many of those ways appear minor on the surface—a dollar here, a fraction of a percentage there—they add up incrementally. Taken as a whole, those individual activities create a picture of an industry driven by profits at the expense of consumers, who have a right to affordable and nutritious food.⁴⁰

Several stakeholders, such as Sustain,⁴¹ OzHarvest⁴² and many councils,⁴³ recommended that the Victorian Government support the recommendations made by the Select Committee regarding price gouging. The Select Committee's recommendations included amending the *Competition and Consumer Act 2010* (Cth) to create divestiture powers specific to the supermarket sector, where a supermarket has misused their market power or engaged in unconscionable conduct, and to prohibit price gouging.⁴⁴ A summary of the Select Committee's Inquiry can be found in Box 5.2.

Other stakeholders also recommended that the Victorian Government support the passage of the Supermarket Industry Bill 2024, introduced in the Legislative Council as a Private Members' Bill on 29 August 2024.⁴⁵ The Bill seeks to:

- provide for the Essential Services Commission to carry out functions relating to the supermarket industry

37 Parliament of Australia, *Senate Select Committee on Supermarket Prices Terms of Reference*, <https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Supermarket_Prices/SupermarketPrices/Terms_of_Reference> accessed 30 September 2024.

38 Parliament of Victoria, Senate Select Committee on Supermarket Prices, *Supermarket Prices: Final Report*, May 2024, p. 123.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 98.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 126.

41 Sustain: The Australian Food Network, *Submission 76*, p. 8.

42 OzHarvest, *Submission 143*, pp. 2–3.

43 See, for example, Knox City Council, *Submission 79*, p. 4; Yarra Ranges Council, *Submission 86*, p. 15; Warrnambool City Council, *Submission 141*, p. 8.

44 Parliament of Victoria, Senate Select Committee on Supermarket Prices, *Supermarket Prices: Final Report*, May 2024, p. vii.

45 See Sustain: The Australian Food Network, *Submission 76*, p. 8; Knox City Council, *Submission 79*, p. 2; Maribyrnong City Council, *Submission 85*, p. 2; Yarra Ranges Council, *Submission 86*, p. 16; Wyndham Park Community Centre (WPCC), *Submission 154*, p. 3.

- create an independent panel to advise on essential grocery items
- amend the *Essential Services Commission Act 2001* (Vic).⁴⁶

In his submission, Ian Warway explained that:

If, as the Greens suggest, groceries were made essential the Essential Services Commission (ESC) would have the power to regulate supermarkets. It would allow them to set maximum profit margins on certain grocery items, and make the price of groceries fair.⁴⁷

At the time of writing, the Bill had not been read for a second time and therefore not tabled in the Parliament.

The Committee is also aware of the Reducing Supermarket Dominance Bill 2024 introduced into the House of Representatives by Bob Katter on 25 March 2024.⁴⁸

At the national level, the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) has examined the pricing practices of the major supermarkets. On 1 February 2024, the Australian Government directed the ACCC to inquire into ‘the markets for the supply of groceries’, considering issues such as:

- the approach of suppliers, wholesalers and retailers to setting prices
- factors affecting the price of inputs along the supply chain
- non-price aspects of competition, including the impact of discounts offered by retailers.⁴⁹

In August 2024, the ACCC released its interim report, in which it found that:

Australia’s supermarket industry at the retail level is an oligopoly. That is, most supply in the market is from a small number of market participants.⁵⁰

Regarding concerns raised by consumers, it further stated:

There is an inherent tension between the claims of suppliers that they are receiving unsustainably low prices for their products and claims of consumers that they are paying excessively high prices for their groceries. In exploring these claims, we are taking into account cost increases in the economy broadly and, to the extent possible, distinguishing outcomes for grocery prices that are not explained by those cost increases.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Victoria, Legislative Council, 29 August 2024, *Parliamentary debates*, p. 3145.

⁴⁷ Ian Warway, *Submission 41*.

⁴⁸ Parliament of Australia, *Reducing Supermarket Dominance Bill 2024*, <https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Bills_Legislation/Bills_Search_Results/Result?bld=r7167> accessed 3 October 2024.

⁴⁹ Australian Competition & Consumer Commission, *Supermarkets inquiry 2024–25*, <<https://www.accc.gov.au/inquiries-and-consultations/supermarkets-inquiry-2024-25>> accessed 1 October 2024.

⁵⁰ Australian Competition & Consumer Commission, *Supermarkets inquiry: Interim report*, August 2024, p. 9.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

On 23 September 2024, the ACCC also announced it had commenced proceedings against Woolworths and Coles in the Federal Court for breaching the Australian Consumer Law by making misleading claims about discounts.⁵² In particular, it alleged that ‘Woolworths made false or misleading representations to consumers about the prices of 266 products during the period between September 2021 and May 2023’, and that ‘Coles made false or misleading representations to consumers about the prices of 245 products during the period between February 2022 and May 2023’.⁵³

As noted, the Committee received evidence from both major supermarkets. For its part, Woolworths stated that:

Victoria has a highly competitive grocery sector - with independent stores comprising 46% of all supermarkets in Victoria, and IGA having the highest number of stores in the State of any supermarket. In addition, Victoria has the highest representation of Aldi and Coles stores in the country and in the past 12 months, 87% of Woolworths’ Victorian customers also shopped at another supermarket. Customers have the ability to shop across multiple retailers - and take up this opportunity - to get the best possible value.⁵⁴

Its Chief Commercial Officer Paul Harker told the Committee:

Grocery retail more broadly is a high-volume, low-margin sector, and Australia has one of the most efficient and productive grocery sectors in the OECD. We make a reasonable profit – around 3 cents in the dollar – and much of that goes back to Australian households in the form of superannuation and dividends. We also make considerable investments back into our business so it is more resilient, innovative and efficient.⁵⁵

Likewise, Coles’ Head of Public Affairs Adam Fitzgibbons explained that the recent inflationary peak ‘coincided with a reduction in [Coles’] profit margin’:

Our profit margin of 2.57 per cent was actually a decline on the previous year, which speaks to the fact that we absorbed some of those inflationary pressures rather than passing them on. And we certainly did not increase our profits through that period at all.⁵⁶

Committee comment

The Committee acknowledges there are numerous contributors to food inflation in Victoria and Australia, most notably the rising cost of food production. Rising production costs—for example, in energy and transport—coincide with and are exacerbated by disruptions to national and global food supply chains. They are also

52 Australian Competition & Consumer Commission, *ACCC takes Woolworths and Coles to court over alleged misleading ‘Prices Dropped’ and ‘Down Down’ claims*, 2024, <<https://www.accc.gov.au/media-release/accc-takes-woolworths-and-coles-to-court-over-alleged-misleading-prices-dropped-and-down-down-claims#:~:text=Alleged%20conduct%20by%20Coles,February%202022%20and%20May%202023.>> accessed 1 October 2024.

53 Ibid.

54 Woolworths Group, *Submission 69*, p. 1.

55 Paul Harker, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 40.

56 Adam Fitzgibbons, Head, Public Affairs, Coles Group, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 49.

spurred on by inflationary shocks and stressors such as the occurrence of extreme weather events, pandemics, and overseas conflicts.

The Committee further acknowledges that there is a widespread perception amongst stakeholders that there is insufficient competition within Australia's supermarket sector. It was asserted that the lack of competition enables Woolworths and Coles to unfairly increase prices on essential food items, which in turn exacerbates rates of food insecurity within Victoria.

Both Woolworths and Coles gave evidence to the Committee acknowledging the struggles faced by many Victorians to secure sufficient quantities of nutritious food, particularly in light of broader cost-of-living pressures. Both outlined their respective commitment to ensuring the prices of food items within their stores are as low as possible.

In their evidence, the major supermarkets stressed the impact of supplier-side issues in relation to food inflation, as laid out above. The Committee believes that the issue has been well-prosecuted by numerous other inquiries, most significantly by the Select Committee on Supermarket Prices, and encourages the Victorian Government to consider the findings and recommendations made in these inquiries.

Specific recommendations to address the rising cost of food are considered in Section 5.3.

FINDING 3: Victoria has experienced significant food inflation over the last several years. Food prices continue to rise, and given ongoing cost of living pressures, the high cost of housing, and lack of real wage growth, food insecurity is likely to remain a challenge.

FINDING 4: There are several interconnected contributors to the rising cost of food in Victoria, including the price setting decisions of the major supermarkets, disruptions in national and global supply chains, and corresponding rises in the cost of production. These correlate with contributors to broader inflation.

FINDING 5: There is a widespread perception amongst Victorians that, as well as rising production costs, the rising cost of food is attributable to a lack of competition in the supermarket sector, which allows the major supermarkets to set unfairly high prices on essential food items.

2.3 Cost-of-living pressures

Not having an income that covers the basics of life forces people to make impossible choices, and that does impact on their security, their health and also their wellbeing. It can be the choice between skipping a meal and experiencing homelessness. It can be the choice between your child’s medication and paying the rent. It can be the choice between warmth and having the lights on, and food is often the first thing that a person cuts back on to meet their or their family’s basic needs.

Jerry Ham, Group Manager, Homelessness and Community Support, Uniting Victoria and Tasmania, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 44.

Stakeholders in this Inquiry contextualised the rising cost of food and the increasing prevalence of food insecurity in Victorian within a broader ‘cost-of-living crisis’. The Victorian Government highlighted:

Victorians are experiencing rising costs in food, fuel, utilities, insurance, and housing expenses. Although inflation has decreased from over seven or eight percent in late 2022 and early 2023 to current rates of less than four percent, cost of living remains a significant issue. High rates of inflation and reduced access to affordable food has impacted the ability of many Victorians to achieve a level of food security.⁵⁷

The major supermarkets also acknowledged the issue, with the Woolworths Group explaining ‘[w]e understand the pressures that Victorian customers face, with increasing costs for housing (rent and mortgage payments), electricity, utilities, petrol and groceries placing pressure on household budgets’.⁵⁸

The evidence suggested that broader cost-of-living pressures have a significant impact on rates of food insecurity. The Committee was told that, when people face financial hardship, food is one of the first things they cut out in order to afford other essentials, such as housing.⁵⁹ OzHarvest’s Christine Crowley highlighted this fact in her evidence to the Committee, stating:

It is just more, again, the cost of living. It is one of the key factors. Housing, financial – all of that comes into it, but we mention that more from the food perspective because that is what we deal with every day. We have been told that food is usually the first thing to go if people have a choice between rent or other costs. Food is not the easiest but the hardest and quickest decision to make.⁶⁰

Box 2.3 collates some of the experiences individual stakeholders have had with the rising cost of living.

⁵⁷ Victorian Government, *Submission 167*, p. 9.

⁵⁸ Woolworths Group, *Submission 69*, p. 1.

⁵⁹ See, for example, City of Greater Bendigo, *Submission 72*, p. 2; Islamic Council of Victoria, *Submission 115*, p. 2; Sustain: The Australian Food Network, *Submission 76*, p. 23.

⁶⁰ Christine Crowley, Manager, Melbourne City, OzHarvest, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 6.

Box 2.3 Individuals' experiences with the rising cost of living

Over the past 24 to 36 months, I have noticed a sharp rise in the cost of essential items, from groceries to utilities. This has left me with limited options to cut costs, causing immense stress as I struggle to cover bills and other essential expenses. The situation is becoming unsustainable, not just for me, but for many others in our community who are facing similar challenges. Despite my best efforts to manage my finances prudently, the continuous increase in food prices is making it nearly impossible to balance my budget. The pressure to meet basic living costs is overwhelming, and it is clear that without intervention, many individuals and families will continue to face severe financial hardship.

Jonathan Powell, *Submission 5*.

I don't know how much of a difference my submission would make I don't feel like it will. But something to relieve the cost of living needs to happen. NOW not later, not next year, not in 2 years. NOW because I don't see a light at the end of the tunnel I just see darkness and more hard times ahead.

Name withheld, *Submission 29*.

We see how difficult it is to bring up a family for our sons. Add to the expensive essentials list each week the cost of education for the kids, recreation for them, and travel to and from work/school and you see more problems for families in general.

Wendy Radford, *Submission 34*.

With rent so high plus grocery, utilities, I fear we will be left behind and homeless. It appears that the government really don't care about the people, especially the working class and those on benefits that don't cover the cost of living. The government is meant to be for the people, not to line pockets of the wealthy. In conclusion, I truly hope for price caps on life essentials such as grocery, rent and utilities.

Name withheld, *Submission 35*.

Cost of living is putting a strain on everyone. Our landlord is increasing our rent and in the midst of this food security is in crisis. I work full time and earn a decent income. I can no longer justify the price of staples like olive oil. A large olive oil was \$60 in my local supermarket. I cannot imagine being a student or pensioner in this climate.

Name withheld, *Submission 128*.

2.3.1 Inflation in housing, health and transport

The CPI is one means of measuring changes to the ‘cost of living’. The ‘cost of living’ refers to the expenses incurred by households to purchase goods and services necessary to maintaining a certain standard of living.⁶¹ As explained in Section 2.2.2, CPI provides a measure of household inflation, but also provides statistics about price changes for various categories of household expenditure. This Section examines the relationship between food security and the cost of:

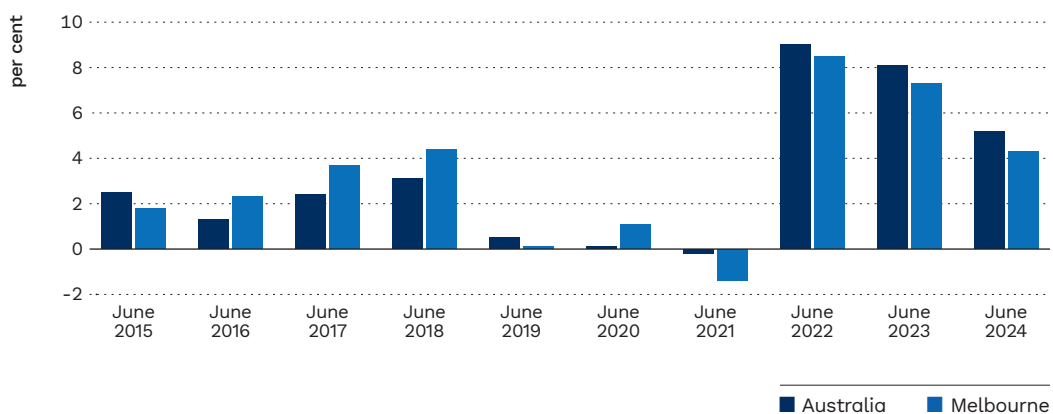
- housing
- health
- transport.

Housing

One of the major sources of inflation in Victoria since 2021 has been housing. In the June 2024 quarter, the CPI for housing in Australia (encompassing rents, new dwelling purchases and utilities, among other things) rose 1.1% compared to the previous quarter.⁶² Along with food and non-alcoholic beverages, this represented one of ‘[t]he most significant price rises this quarter’, and was 0.1% higher than the rise in all groups CPI for the same quarter (1.0%).⁶³ Since the previous June quarter, the CPI for housing in Australia rose 5.2% and in Melbourne 4.3%.⁶⁴

Figure 2.5 shows annual housing CPI changes for Melbourne and across all capital cities, as measured in corresponding June quarters over the last decade.

Figure 2.5 Annual housing CPI changes between corresponding June quarters in 2015–2024



Source: Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee. Data retrieved from Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Consumer Price Index, Australia*, 2024, <<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/economy/price-indexes-and-inflation/consumer-price-index-australia/latest-release>> accessed 17 September 2024.

⁶¹ David Jacobs, Dilhan Perera and Thomas Williams, ‘Inflation and the Cost of Living’, *Bulletin*, March Quarter 2014, Reserve Bank of Australia, p. 33.

⁶² Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Consumer Price Index, Australia*.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

In this Committee's Final Report for its *Inquiry into the rental and housing affordability crisis in Victoria*, it found that the cost of renting in Victoria is causing significant financial and social stress for many renters.⁶⁵ It explained that '[a]s housing stress increases, the capacity to pay for food, clothes, healthcare and other essentials decreases',⁶⁶ and that due to rental stress:

many renters are forced to make difficult decisions, including delaying purchasing their own home, or even more drastic choices between paying rent and paying for food, medical bills, utilities such as electricity and water, or education.⁶⁷

Many stakeholders to this Inquiry also emphasised the link between rental stress and people's ability to afford adequate food. For example, Jerry Ham, Group Manager of Homelessness and Community Support at Uniting Victoria and Tasmania, said:

I think we cannot underestimate the housing affordability aspect. I think it is probably a quite well-known and publicly known formula that it is ideal if someone spends, say, about a third of their income on their housing so that then two-thirds is available for other costs. But in many cases we are finding that either people do not have housing at all available to them or those costs have risen to maybe two-thirds of their income or even more. So it means that the disposable amount of money that they then have for consumables and other purchases is just really, really minimal.⁶⁸

The interaction between rental stress and food insecurity was likewise reflected in individuals' evidence to this Inquiry, as captured in Box 2.4. The Committee received similar evidence in relation to mortgage stress⁶⁹ and the price of household utilities.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ Parliament of Victoria, Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee, *Inquiry into the rental and housing affordability crisis in Victoria*, 28 November 2023, p. 134.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 131–132.

⁶⁸ Jerry Ham, Group Manager, Homelessness and Community Support, Uniting (Victoria and Tasmania), public hearing, Melbourne, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 45.

⁶⁹ See, for example, South East Community Links (SECL), *Submission 100*, p. 5; Bendigo Foodshare Inc, *Submission 116*, p. 11.

⁷⁰ See, for example, Yarra Ranges Emergency Relief Network (YRERN), *Submission 120*, p. 11; Financial Counselling Victoria (FCVic), *Submission 124*, p. 2.

Box 2.4 Individuals' experience of food insecurity due to rental stress

I haven't done a full grocery shop in months due to my financial circumstances. I work casually as a bartender, have done for 10 years and I've never struggled this much to put food on the table for myself. The business I work for continues to stress about the costs of staffing - but I still can't afford a full grocery shop. Make this make sense. I skip 2/3 meals a day because I just can't afford it on top of my bills and rent.

Name withheld, *Submission 8*.

My rent is cheap in comparison to others but still more than half my income. I have 5 children - 4 at home and work 4 casual jobs. It's embarrassing the last year I have never felt so much of a failure when it comes to providing for my children. We can no longer afford other necessities often like new school shoes because we are scraping so hard just to have everyone fed and a roof over our heads.

Name withheld, *Submission 9*.

I work two jobs, one of which is full time (38+ hours a week). I can barely afford basic necessities and rent is skyrocketing through the roof. I have resorted to simple, low cost & prep meals (eg. 2 minute noodles) over fresh, nutritious produce because it is overall cheaper and doesn't spoil as quickly.

Name withheld, *Submission 15*.

Since moving out of home in 2020 it quickly became apparent my award rate job and rental commitments were utterly incongruent. I would either have to fall behind on rent or make some kind of dietary concession.

Tarn Johnson, *Submission 17*.

We are in a regional area where housing prices have gone up significantly after Covid. In 2019 the annual rental affordability index deemed Apollo Bay to have "acceptable" rental affordability. Now, it is classed as "severely unaffordable", meaning low-income families would be spending up to 60 per cent of their income on rent. Apollo Bay is getting FoodBank deliveries consistently now, with about 850 kilos of food being handed out weekly.

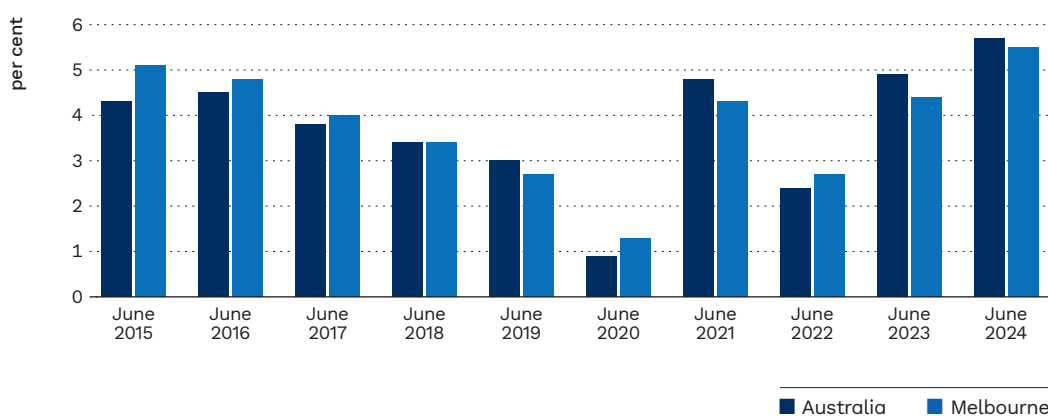
Karlijn Sas, *Submission 71*.

Health

As well as housing, stakeholders emphasised the impact of the rising cost of healthcare on food security.⁷¹ In the June 2024 quarter, the CPI for health in Australia (encompassing medicine and medical and hospital services, among other things) rose 1.5% since the previous quarter.⁷² According to the ABS' analysis, this followed 'the annual increase in private health insurance premiums on 1 April 2024'.⁷³ Since the previous June quarter, the CPI for health in Australia rose 5.7%. As with the housing CPI, this was lower for Melbourne at 5.5%.⁷⁴

Figure 2.6 shows annual health CPI changes for Melbourne and across all capital cities, as measured in corresponding June quarters over the last decade.

Figure 2.6 Annual health CPI changes between corresponding June quarters in 2015–2024



Source: Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee. Data retrieved from Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Consumer Price Index, Australia*, 2024, <<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/economy/price-indexes-and-inflation/consumer-price-index-australia/latest-release>> accessed 17 September 2024.

The Committee also received evidence about the reciprocal nature of poor health and food insecurity. In its submission, Sustain highlighted:

As the burden of disease increases, people are more exposed to these risk factors, which leads to further infirmity. For example, people experiencing food insecurity are more likely to develop cardiovascular disease (Weaver and Fasel 2018). This may impact their ability to grow food, work, and / or their healthcare costs may worsen their levels of economic disadvantage. Consequently, with decreased mobility, or less financial income, their experience of food insecurity is likely to worsen, continuing a spiral of ever more illness and food insecurity.⁷⁵

⁷¹ See, for example, Aisling Wheeler, *Submission 19*; Name withheld, *Submission 20*.

⁷² Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Consumer Price Index, Australia*.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Sustain: The Australian Food Network, *Submission 76*, p. 17.

This was reiterated by a number of other organisations such as Yarra Ranges Council, who explained that:

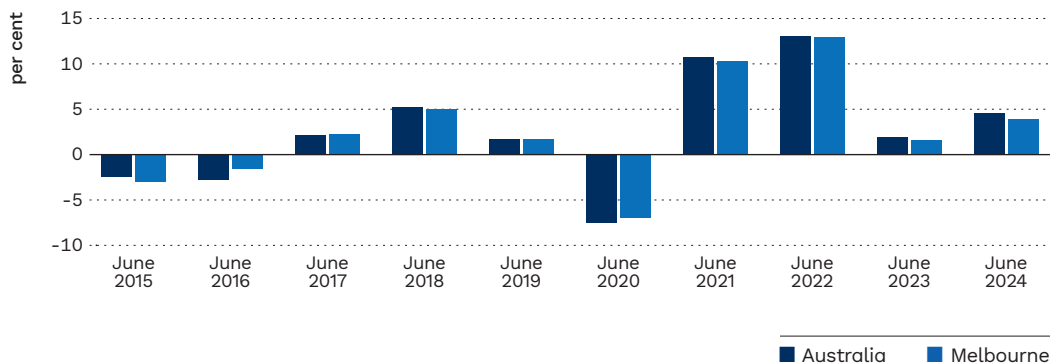
Households experiencing food insecurity often consume inadequate nutrients and maintain poorer diets, sometimes foregoing essential healthcare and medications due to financial constraints. Consequently, adults affected by food insecurity face higher risk of developing chronic conditions such as diabetes, heart disease, obesity, hypertension, arthritis, and poor mental health. Managing existing chronic health issues also becomes more challenging under these circumstances.⁷⁶

Transport

The Committee was also informed how transport costs can affect access to food.⁷⁷ In the June 2024 quarter, the CPI for transport in Australia (encompassing the cost of motor vehicles, fuel and transport fares, among other things) rose 0.9% compared to the previous quarter.⁷⁸ According to the ABS, the main contributor to this rise was the cost of fuel (1.7%).⁷⁹ Since the previous June quarter, CPI for transport in Australia rose 4.6%. As with housing and health CPI, this is lower for Melbourne at 3.9%.⁸⁰

Figure 2.7 shows annual transport CPI changes for Melbourne and across all capital cities, as measured in corresponding June quarters over the last decade.

Figure 2.7 Annual transport CPI changes between corresponding June quarters in 2015–2024



Source: Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee. Data retrieved from Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Consumer Price Index, Australia*, 2024, <<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/economy/price-indexes-and-inflation/consumer-price-index-australia/latest-release>> accessed 17 September 2024.

⁷⁶ Yarra Ranges Council, *Submission 86*, p. 6.

⁷⁷ See, for example, University of Melbourne Graduate Student Association, *Submission 96*, pp. 8–9; University of Melbourne Student Union, *Submission 162*, p. 12; Bendigo Foodshare Inc, *Submission 116*, p. 4.

⁷⁸ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Consumer Price Index, Australia*.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

A joint submission from G21 organisations noted that:

People are facing a lot of financial strain, which is obviously affecting their ability to get food, let alone get the right kind of healthy, nutritious food. But it's also extending to being able to have the ability to put petrol in the car to go and get the food or pay for public transport to get the food.⁸¹

FINDING 6: The rising cost and decreasing availability of essential goods and services such as housing, health and transport have increased the risk of food insecurity for Victorians.

2.3.2 Financial stressors: income limitations

The combination of rising living costs, inadequate wages and high unemployment rates amplifies financial strain on households, making it difficult for residents to consistently access affordable and nutritious food options.

Maribyrnong City Council, *Submission 85*, p. 4.

As highlighted in Chapter 1, low-income earners experience greater rates of food insecurity. This includes unemployed and underemployed people, highlighting the effect of issues such as income stagnation and the level of social security payments on the ability to purchase food.

In its submission, Knox City Council made the point that '[i]n a country like Australia, which meets 89% of its food needs domestically, food insecurity is not caused by a lack of food'.⁸² Rather:

Food insecurity is the outcome of our systems failing to ensure that people live in circumstances in which they can provide adequate food for themselves. System failures include: low/stagnant wages, unemployment, underemployment [and] low Centrelink payments ...⁸³

Unemployment

Stakeholders frequently cited unemployment and underemployment as key drivers of food insecurity in Victoria. In August 2024, the unemployment rate in Australia was 4.1%, and underemployment 6.4%.⁸⁴ The situation in Victoria was even worse, with unemployment at 4.5%, and underemployment at 6.6%.⁸⁵ As shown in Figure 2.8, rates have increased over a two-year period but lowered across the past decade.

⁸¹ Give Where You Live, *Submission 95*, p. 8.

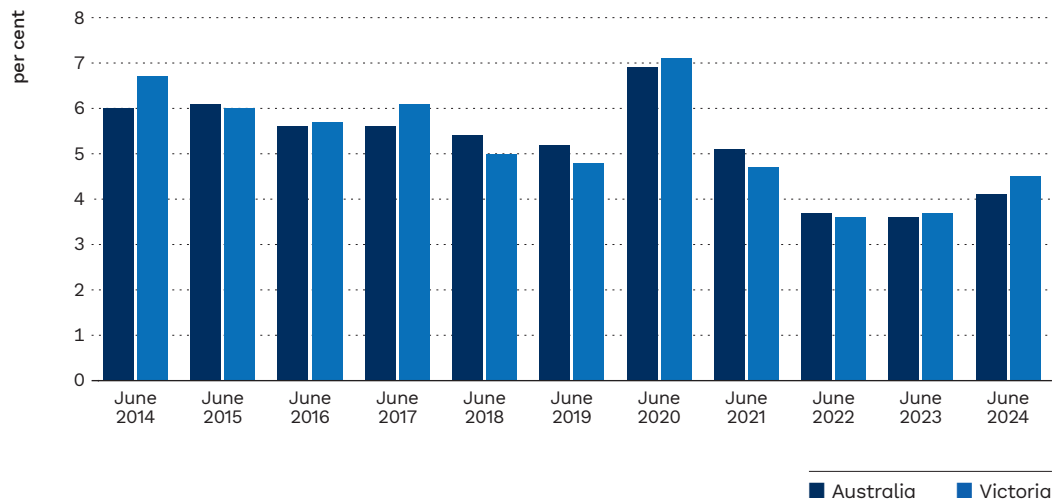
⁸² Knox City Council, *Submission 79*, p. 15.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Labour Force, Australia, 2024*, <<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/labour-force-australia/aug-2024>> accessed 30 September 2024.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

Figure 2.8 Unemployment rate in Australia and Victoria between June 2014–2024



Source: Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee. Data retrieved from Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Labour Force, Australia*, 2024, <<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/labour-force-australia/aug-2024>> accessed 30 September 2024.

Although unemployment has eased since its decade peak in June 2020, stakeholders informed the Committee that unemployment and underemployment are two of the main reasons people seek food relief.⁸⁶ The link between unemployment and underemployment and food insecurity was also highlighted by several other stakeholders.⁸⁷

Wage stagnation

Stakeholders proposed wage stagnation as a key driver of food insecurity in Victoria.⁸⁸

According to the ABS' most recent Wage Price Index (WPI) data, which measures changes in the price of wages and salaries, annual wages have risen 4.1% in Australia since the corresponding June 2023 quarter and 3.3% in Victoria.⁸⁹

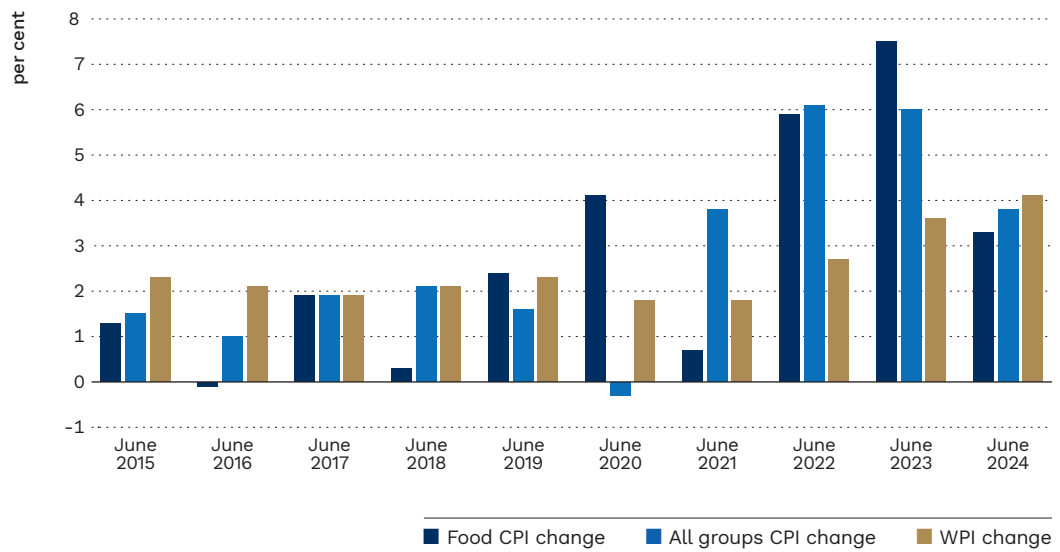
⁸⁶ See, for example, Madelaine Griffith, Manager, Research and Design, Foodbank Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8; The George Institute for Global Health, *Submission 117*, p. 6; Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition (IPAN) and Institute for Health Transformation, Deakin University, *Submission 136*, p. 6; Foodbank Victoria, *Submission 137*, p. 5.

⁸⁷ See, for example, The George Institute for Global Health, *Submission 117*, p. 6; Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition (IPAN) and Institute for Health Transformation, Deakin University, *Submission 136*, p. 6; Foodbank Victoria, *Submission 137*, p. 5.

⁸⁸ See, for example, Knox City Council, *Submission 79*, p. 3; Maribyrnong City Council, *Submission 85*, p. 4; Therese Watson, Advocacy Officer, Strategic Growth and Advocacy, Greater Dandenong City Council, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 6.

⁸⁹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Wage Price Index, Australia*, 2024, <<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/economy/price-indexes-and-inflation/wage-price-index-australia/latest-release>> accessed 30 September 2024.

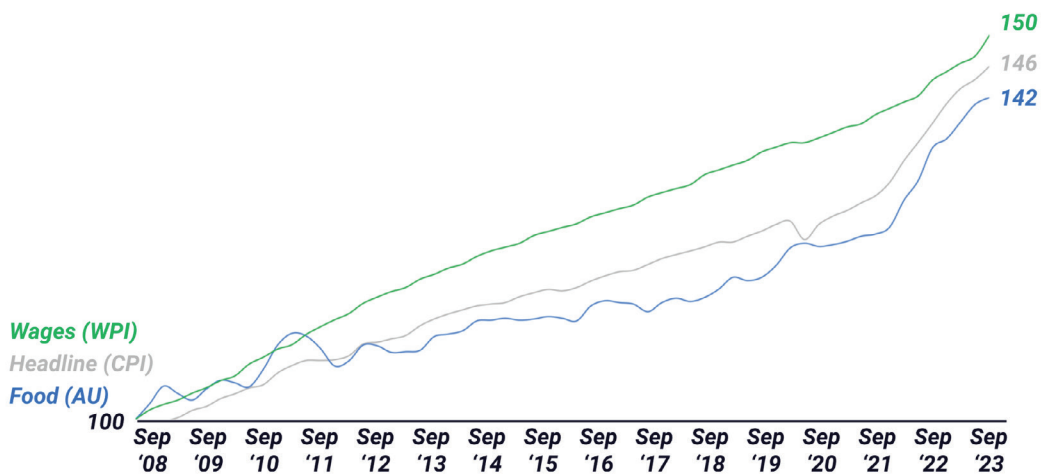
Figure 2.9 Annual CPI vs WPI changes between June 2015 and 2024 in Australia



Source: Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee. Data retrieved from Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Consumer Price Index, Australia, 2024*, <<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/economy/price-indexes-and-inflation/consumer-price-index-australia/latest-release>> accessed 17 September 2024 and Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Wage Price Index, Australia, 2024*, <<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/economy/price-indexes-and-inflation/wage-price-index-australia/latest-release>> accessed 30 September 2024.

Referring to Figure 2.10 below, the Woolworths Group noted that ‘[w]ages ... have increased 8 percentage points faster than food inflation over the equivalent period’, referring to September quarters between 2008 and 2023.⁹⁰

Figure 2.10 Comparison of WPI, all groups CPI and food CPI between 2009 and 2023 in Australia

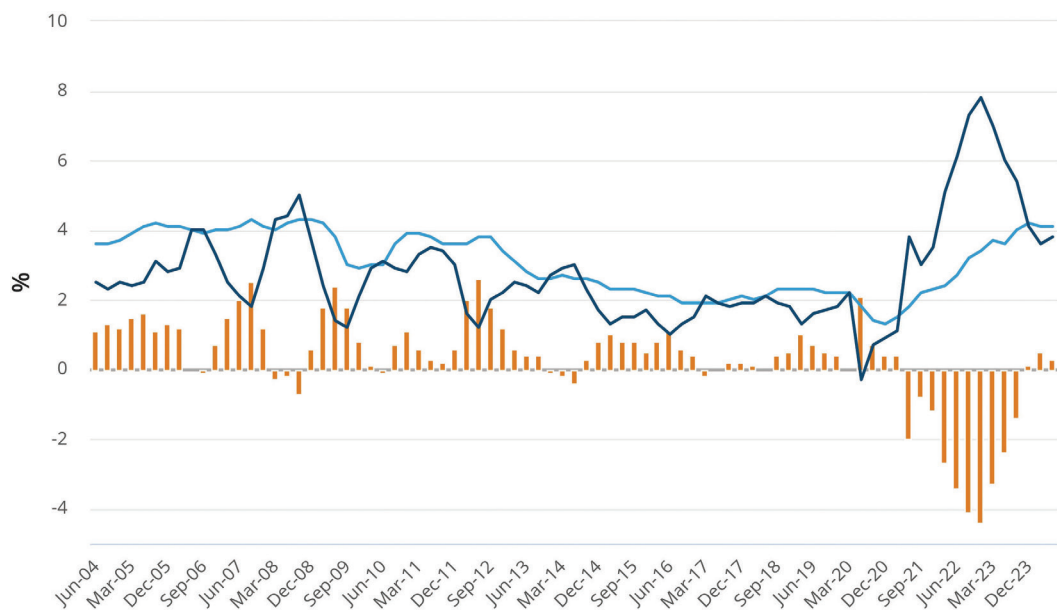


Source: Woolworths Group, *Submission 69*, Attachment A, p. 4.

⁹⁰ Woolworths Group, *Submission 69*, Attachment A, p. 4.

Although WPI has increased over time, this is not the case for real wages (i.e., wages adjusted for inflation). The ABS calculates real wage growth by subtracting changes in the CPI from changes in the WPI. Between June 2023 and 2024, real wages grew 0.3%.⁹¹ However, this followed a lengthier period (June 2021—September 2023) in which the CPI rose significantly faster than the WPI, resulting in a decrease in real wages.⁹² The lowest point in this period was between December 2021 and 2022, when real wages fell 4.4%.⁹³ Figure 2.11 shows the rate of annual real wage growth over the last two decades.

Figure 2.11 Real wage growth between June 2004 and June 2024 in Australia



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Wages*, <<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/measuring-what-matters/measuring-what-matters-themes-and-indicators/prosperous/wages#:text=Real%20wages%20are%20calculated%20by.previous%20year%2C%20seasonally%20adjusted>> accessed 15 October 2024.

Recent analysis highlights the drop in the value of wages since March 2020 by reference to the average annual full-time wage.⁹⁴ Whereas the average annual full-time wage in March 2020 was \$90,000, the value of this wage in June 2024 was approximately \$87,000.⁹⁵ Economist Greg Jericho explained that, ‘had a person earning [\$90,000 in March 2020] received pay rises in line with the wage price index, their wage would now be worth \$4,300 less in real terms’.⁹⁶ He elaborated that,

⁹¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Wages*, <<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/measuring-what-matters/measuring-what-matters-themes-and-indicators/prosperous/wages#:text=Real%20wages%20are%20calculated%20by.previous%20year%2C%20seasonally%20adjusted>> accessed 15 October 2024.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

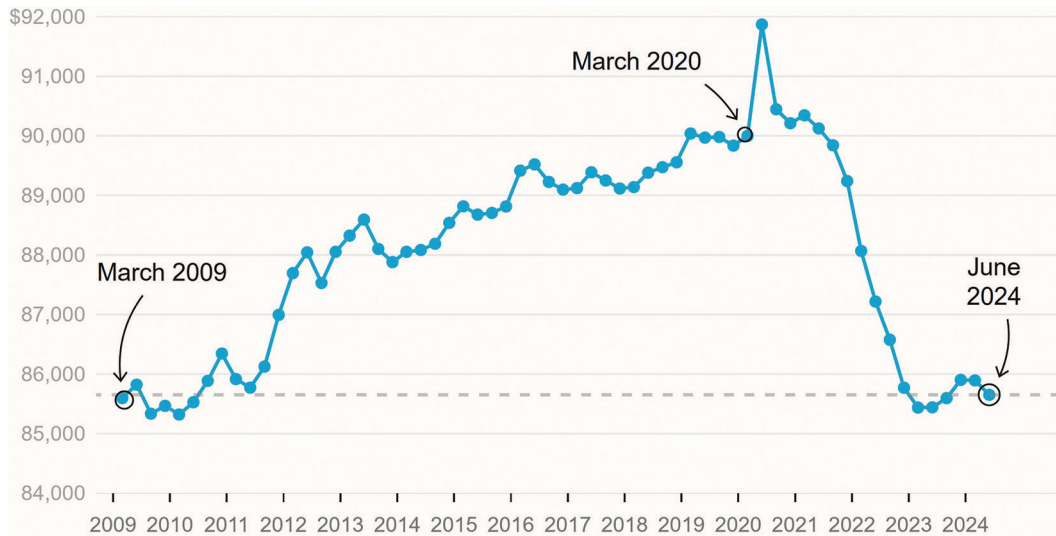
⁹⁴ Greg Jericho, ‘On the climate crisis, housing and more, politicians avoid clarity because it demands action’, *The Guardian*, 10 October 2024, <<https://www.theguardian.com/business/grogonomics/2024/oct/10/on-the-climate-crisis-housing-and-more-politicians-avoid-clarity-because-it-demands-action>> accessed 15 October 2024.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

'in effect, they can now buy as much with their wage as they did back in 2009'.⁹⁷ This is reflected in Figure 2.12.

Figure 2.12 Real value of the average annual wage in March 2020



Source: Greg Jericho, 'On the climate crisis, housing and more, politicians avoid clarity because it demands action', *The Guardian*, 10 October 2024, <<https://www.theguardian.com/business/grogonomics/2024/oct/10/on-the-climate-crisis-housing-and-more-politicians-avoid-clarity-because-it-demands-action>> accessed 15 October 2024.

As highlighted throughout this Chapter, it is not just the price of food that puts a strain on Victorians' ability to afford food—it is also the price of other goods and services, including housing, healthcare and transport, and limitations to people's incomes. Even if wage growth has outpaced food inflation in recent years, the failure of wages to keep pace with the rising cost of other essentials threatens some Victorians' ability to secure adequate food.

Box 2.5 below outlines individuals' experiences of wage stagnation impeding their ability to pay for essentials.

FINDING 7: The recent decline in real wages in Australia has made it more difficult for some Victorians to buy essential goods and services, including food.

97 Ibid.

Box 2.5 Individuals' experiences of wage stagnation in the context of food insecurity

It is clear that many Australians are having difficulty paying for normal living costs. Wage increases have not kept pace with inflation.

Dr Richard Whitfield, *Submission 46*.

I'm experiencing problems in affording things I used to buy two years ago. My wage hasn't increased but prices of food have gone up multifold. I have given up buying certain items only because I can't afford it.

Name withheld, *Submission 57*.

As a teacher, my pay has not matched inflation. The 6% over the course of our agreement has not matched ... increase in grocery costs not to mention the current mortgage repayment rate and other financial stresses at this time.

Name withheld, *Submission 63*.

Social security payments

The Committee was told that inadequate social security payments have exacerbated the financial pressures faced by low-income earners, worsening food insecurity amongst this cohort.⁹⁸ According to a submission from G21 organisations, '[r]esearch undertaken by ACOSS found that 73% of people receiving income support are eating less or skipping meals due to the rising costs of living'.⁹⁹

Similarly, despite acknowledging 'that income support payments are outside the scope of this Inquiry and the powers of the Victorian Government', the Salvation Army emphasised that 'the single biggest measure to relieve food insecurity would be to ensure income support is sufficient'.¹⁰⁰

In the context of the JobSeeker payment, concerns were raised about the payment being adjusted to the average CPI. It was suggested as CPI growth is uneven, it does not reflect the inflation of all essential items, with some, such as food, at times increasing at a higher rate. As a result, when adjustments are based on the average CPI, the purchasing power of recipients may decline. Additionally, the lag in indexation means that payments are often out of step with the real cost of living.

Box 2.6 outlines some of experiences of individuals receiving some sort of social security payments.

⁹⁸ See, for example, Monash University, *Submission 108*, p. 4; Darebin Information, Volunteer & Resource Service (DIVRS), *Submission 134*, p. 4; Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance, *Submission 139*, p. 9.

⁹⁹ Give Where You Live Foundation, *Submission 95*, p. 10.

¹⁰⁰ The Salvation Army Australia, *Submission 103*, p. 3.

Box 2.6 Individuals receiving social security payments' experiences with food insecurity

I'm on the disability support pension and work a part time job and i still have to go to 3 different stores to get my moneys worth of groceries. I used to get my groceries delivered by Coles (I am half blind so I can't drive) but now it's too expensive to do that. I can't afford much. After bills, I don't have a lot of money left. Rent takes half of my income.

Name withheld, *Submission 18*.

I am on a disability pension. Two years ago, I could just afford the family grocery shopping. I can't anymore, I estimate that I am now \$200 a fortnight short of my needs. This means every fortnight I am extremely stressed because I simply do not have enough to feed my pets and family.

Jill Mcgranaghan, *Submission 33*.

As a young and heavily disabled person, i have to rely on the Disability Support Pension to cover myself for the cost of living. I consider myself lucky as i am sheltered, with a roof over my head however when i look at the \$500 a week i am receiving and the near \$250 of that that goes towards groceries, while still needing to cover things such as board payment, public and private transportation due to not having the capacity to drive, and any savings in case of future emergencies, I feel a sink in my stomach as I realise that if this continues I will never be able to find peace.

Name withheld, *Submission 40*.

I am a retiree on a fixed income and while my grocery costs keep rising my pension and annuity are not keeping pace with the rising cost of living.

Ian Warway, *Submission 41*.

In light of inflation outpacing wage growth in recent years, some stakeholders recommended that the Victorian Government advocate to the Australian Government for increases to income support payments.¹⁰¹

The Committee notes the financial stress faced by many Victorians, particularly those experiencing unemployment, underemployment, wage stagnation, and inadequate income supports. It understands the negative impact of these stressors on cost-of-living pressures for Victorians, including the ability to afford adequate food.

The Committee further acknowledges the level of income support provided to Australians is a matter for the Commonwealth. However, given the strength of the

¹⁰¹ See, for example, The Salvation Army, *Submission 103*, p.3; Islamic Council of Victoria, *Submission 115*, p. 7; Sustain: The Australian Food Network, *Submission 76*, p. 7.

relationship between financial stress and food insecurity, it believes the Victorian Government could advocate to the Australian Government to increase income support payments, such as the Age Pension, Disability Support Pension, and JobSeeker Payment.

2.4 Avoiding a siloed response to food insecurity

Food insecurity rarely occurs in isolation. It typically results from a combination of intersecting needs such as low incomes, financial hardship and other significant life events. The increased demand for food relief is symptomatic of deeper issues exacerbated by factors like rising inflation and escalating housing and energy costs. Addressing food insecurity requires a comprehensive range of services to respond to the underlying factors causing food insecurity.

Victorian Government, *Submission 167*, p. 11.

The underlying drivers of food insecurity in Victoria are complex and interconnected. Drivers range from the rising cost of food and other essential goods and services such as housing, to broader social and economic issues including unemployment, wage stagnation and social security support.

Therefore, any policy response to food insecurity must involve a coordinated and comprehensive approach that takes proper account of these underlying drivers and their interconnectedness. Moreover, it must occur at all levels of government.

Notwithstanding the need for a national response, the Victorian Government has options available to it to address food insecurity in Victoria and should seek to respond to the issue in a way that avoids ‘siloes’. This was highlighted by Sharon Laurence, Manager of Food Systems at VicHealth, who told the Committee:

VicHealth calls for strength in governance and a shift from the silos where the responsibility of food is fragmented across a range of departments, including health, agriculture, trade, industry, transport, climate, education, families and regions. We think a whole-of-government approach is needed to develop a Victorian food system strategy and investment plan which takes a human right to food informed approach. This will shift the balance of Victorian policies and investments and strengthen the impact in securing safe, nutritious, affordable and more sustainable food in public and business settings for all Victorians. This approach is also designed to rebalance the reliance on food relief to address the root causes of food insecurity in the longer term.¹⁰²

Taking a whole-of-government, cross-departmental approach will also consider the interconnection of social issues that cause food insecurity. Several stakeholders

¹⁰² Sharon Laurence, Manager, Food Systems, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth), public hearing, Melbourne, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 65–66.

highlighted this interconnection to the Committee,¹⁰³ including Financial Counselling Victoria's Advocacy Coordinator Amanda Chan in a public hearing:

I think what is really important is that you can see that food security does not stand alone as a social issue. Social problems are interconnected and they are intersectional, so to address one you have to address them all. We are not economists; we work in the community sector, so we cannot tell you which economic levers to pull. But we can tell you what social services and what systemic structures can and should be addressed to have the most significant impact on the most vulnerable communities.¹⁰⁴

The Committee outlines specific policy options available to the Victorian Government to address food insecurity—including a comprehensive food security strategy for Victoria—in Chapters 4 to 6.

FINDING 8: The social and economics drivers of food insecurity in Victoria are complex and interconnected, requiring a comprehensive whole-of-government approach.

¹⁰³ See, for example: Bendigo Foodshare Inc, *Submission 116*, p. 11; Common Ground Project, *Submission 147*, p. 8; Yuen Yan Li, *Submission 161*, p. 9.

¹⁰⁴ Amanda Chan, Advocacy Coordinator, Financial Counselling Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 20.

Chapter 3

The impacts of food insecurity

3.1 Introduction

Chapter 1 of this Report examined rates of food insecurity in Victoria. This Chapter examines the impacts of food insecurity.

The Chapter explores the complex relationship between food insecurity and its broader social, economic, and health implications in Victoria. It examines how food insecurity is not only a result of socioeconomic stressors but also a significant contributor to worsening health outcomes and deepening poverty, particularly among the most vulnerable populations. By highlighting these connections, the Chapter underscores the need for a multifaceted approach that goes beyond immediate relief and addresses the root causes of food insecurity.

3.2 Measuring the impacts of food insecurity

As addressed in Chapter 1, the Inquiry identified significant challenges with the current data collection on rates of food insecurity in Victoria, which hampers a comprehensive assessment of the issue within the state. The lack of reliable and detailed data makes it difficult to fully understand the scope and impact of food insecurity, particularly among vulnerable populations such as culturally and linguistically diverse communities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Without precise and nuanced data, it is challenging to design effective interventions and allocate resources appropriately to address this critical issue.

To address these challenges, the Committee reiterates its recommendation to improve data capturing mechanisms related to food insecurity in Victoria. Enhanced data collection should focus on capturing more detailed, disaggregated information that reflects the diverse experiences of different communities. Improving data collection is essential for developing effective strategies to combat food insecurity and its associated impacts across Victoria.

3.3 Health impacts of food insecurity

Access to adequate, safe, and culturally appropriate nutritious food is a key determinant of health.

Victorian Government, Submission 167, p. 7.

Food insecurity can exacerbate a health risks and conditions, both in the short-term and chronically. Stakeholders emphasised that food insecurity can be a major contributor to physical health issues across the population.

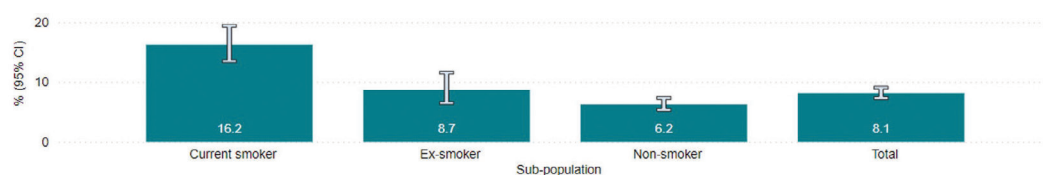
As noted in Chapter 1, the Victorian Agency for Health Information's (VAHI) Victorian Population Health Survey (VPHS) is the only source of first-hand health surveillance data for Victorians aged 18 and older. In regard to food insecurity, the survey asks respondents to identify whether they 'ran out of food and couldn't afford to buy more' in the previous 12-month period.¹

Chapter 1 canvasses data from the latest survey results (2022) as well as historical trends. However, the survey also offers insights into other comorbidities which can exacerbate, or be worsened, by food insecurity.

The survey clearly showed a correlation between respondents who identified poorer health indicators and experiences of food insecurity. For example, the 2022 survey reported that respondents who identified as a current smoker are significantly more likely to experience food insecurity (see Figure 3.1). Additionally, the survey also showed that respondents with either a lower or higher body mass index (BMI) reported higher rates of food insecurity (see Figure 3.2).

It is important to emphasise that the survey does not prove that food insecurity causes other social or health issues (or vice versa). It only shows that these issues may occur together alongside food insecurity.

Figure 3.1 Proportion (%) of people who experienced food insecurity, by tobacco smoking status, 2022



Source: Victorian Agency for Health Information, *Victorian Population Health Survey 2022*, <<https://vahi.vic.gov.au/reports/victorian-population-health-survey>> accessed 23 August 2024.

Figure 3.2 Proportion (%) of people who experienced food insecurity, by BMI, 2022

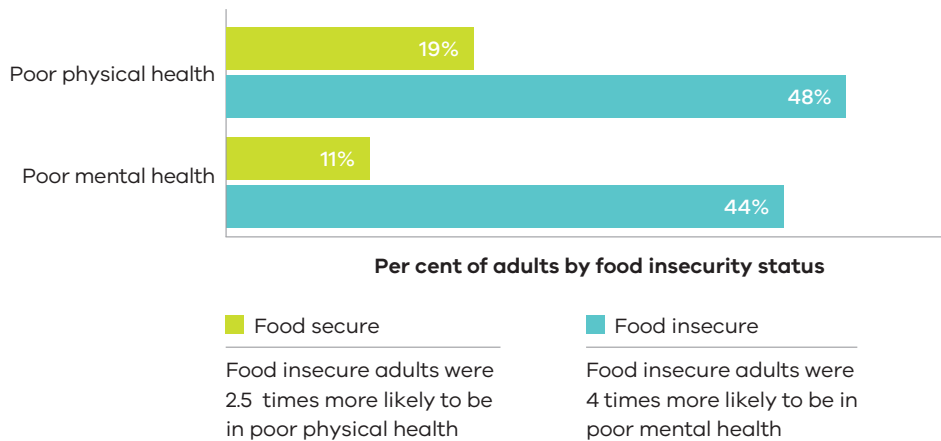


Source: Victorian Agency for Health Information, *Victorian Population Health Survey 2022*, <<https://vahi.vic.gov.au/reports/victorian-population-health-survey>> accessed 23 August 2024.

¹ Victorian Agency for Health Information (VAHI), *Victorian Population Health Survey 2022*, 2024, <<https://vahi.vic.gov.au/reports/victorian-population-health-survey>> accessed 23 August 2024.

VAHI’s 2017 report into *Challenges to healthy eating: food insecurity in Victoria*² clearly demonstrated the link between poor physical and mental health and food insecurity. Figure 3.3 from VAHI’s report shows the scale of poorer health outcomes linked to food insecurity.

Figure 3.3 Poor health outcomes in food-insecure adults



Source: Victorian Agency for Health Information (VAHI), *Challenges to healthy eating: Food insecurity in Victoria*, 2017 (updated 2021), <https://vahi.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-12/190226-1_VAHI-food-insecurity-full%20report.pdf> accessed 26 August 2024.

The Victorian Government identified poor diet, or ‘dietary risks’, as the third leading risk factor contributing to the burden of disease in Australia, closely linked to conditions such as obesity and hypertension.³ Food insecurity can exacerbate these health risks, leading to a higher prevalence of chronic diseases including cardiovascular disease and diabetes, as well as mental health issues like depression and high stress levels (see Section 3.4). The Government’s submission noted that international research supports these findings. For example, a Canadian study showed that young people who frequently experience hunger are more likely to develop chronic conditions later in life.⁴

In the Victorian context, the Government examined some health concerns it linked with food insecurity. Using data from the 2022 VPHS, the Government stated that the:

prevalence of food insecurity (at the severe end of the continuum) significantly increased by 40 per cent from 5.8 per cent in 2020 to 8.1 per cent in 2022. Similarly, obesity prevalence increased from 21 per cent in 2020 to 25 per cent in 2022, which is substantially higher than any increase observed prior to 2020. Similarly, the prevalence of type 2 diabetes significantly increased by 31 per cent from 5.8 per cent in 2020 to 7.5 per cent in 2022.⁵

2 The report is based on the analysis of data collected in the 2014 Victorian Population Health Survey. VAHI did not resume collecting information of food insecurity until 2017.

3 Victorian Government, *Submission 167*, pp. 7–8.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

The Better Health Network echoed these concerns, stating that food insecurity has ‘a major impact on both physical and mental health, leading to serious and long-lasting consequences, especially for communities that have been historically marginalised’.⁶ The organisation argued that food insecurity is closely associated with a range of health issues, including nutrient deficiencies, malnourishment, diabetes, and other chronic diseases.⁷

Healthy Loddon Campaspe also highlighted the broad spectrum of effects that food insecurity can have on individuals of all ages, stating:

impacts can include anaemia, malnutrition, asthma, cognitive issues, aggression, anxiety, behavioural problems, and depression in children. In adults, food insecurity can lead to malnutrition, hypertension, high cholesterol, poor overall health, mental health issues, depressive symptoms, and poor sleep. Additionally, both children and adults experiencing food insecurity are at a higher risk of overweight, obesity, and chronic diseases such as diabetes.⁸

Dr Nick Rose, Executive Director of Sustain: The Australian Food Network (Sustain), noted that poor nutrition can increase pressure on the healthcare system.⁹

The following Sections examine the physical health impacts of food insecurity on vulnerable populations. These cohorts were highlighted by stakeholders as being particularly vulnerable to food insecurity.

FINDING 9: The strong correlation between food insecurity and poor health outcomes suggests that food insecurity is a significant contributor to issues such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, obesity, and other related diseases.

Young people and students

The evidence presented to the Inquiry highlights the significant impact of food insecurity on children’s health and development. Food insecurity during childhood is associated with a range of health and developmental challenges that can extend into adulthood.

Several stakeholders explained that children who experience food insecurity are more likely to develop chronic health conditions in adulthood. The Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition (IPAN) and the Institute for Health Transformation (IHT) at Deakin University explained that food-insecure children are more likely to experience

⁶ Better Health Network, *Submission 125*, p. 7.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Healthy Loddon Campaspe, *Submission 104*, p. 6.

⁹ Dr Nick Rose, Executive Director, Sustain: The Australian Food Network, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 28.

conditions such as obstructive pulmonary disease, depression, autoimmune diseases, and cancers.¹⁰ Additionally, there is a higher likelihood of obesity in some groups.¹¹

Health Loddon Campaspe indicated that children from food-insecure households are:

- nearly twice as likely to have asthma
- almost three times as likely to suffer from iron-deficiency anaemia
- 2.5 times more likely to experience emotional and behavioural issues.¹²

The Victorian Council of Social Services highlighted data from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare which found that, of children aged 12–17:

- 96% do not meet recommended daily serves of vegetables
- 36% do not meet recommended daily serves of fruits.¹³

Like other stakeholders, the Council emphasised that food-insecure children ‘may present signs of nutritional deficiencies, disordered eating and stress’ but can also present in other ways.¹⁴ Other ways food insecurity can ‘manifest’ in children include developmental delays, being underweight or overweight, slow growth and dental problems.¹⁵ Additionally, the Council explained that food-insecure children are ‘more likely to have worse general health, increased emergency department presentations, and higher rates of deferred or forgone medical care’.¹⁶

VicHealth’s evidence further supported evidence showing poorer health outcomes for food-insecure children. It noted that household food insecurity can impede children from reaching their ‘full physical, cognitive, and psychosocial potential’.¹⁷ The agency explained that children from food-insecure households tend to experience poorer general health, including a higher risk of birth defects or increased hospitalisations.¹⁸

Furthermore, VicHealth also stressed the potential long-term developmental consequences of food insecurity, indicating that it ‘can affect children’s school readiness and is associated with reduced school attendance and academic achievement’.¹⁹ The agency contended that this could have intergenerational effects, as these challenges can be ‘transferred from generation to generation’.²⁰

Similarly, IPAN and IHT provided results from a ‘systematic review’ which found that even marginal levels of food insecurity in children living in high-income countries are

¹⁰ Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition (IPAN) and the Institute for Health Transformation (IHT), *Submission 136*, p. 8.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Health Loddon Campaspe, *Submission 104*, p. 6.

¹³ Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 176*, p. 10.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 9.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ VicHealth, *Submission 177*, p. 8.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

associated with ‘impaired academic performance, hyperactivity, inattention, increased absences from school, and mental health concerns’.²¹

Concerns about school performance and general physical health issues associated with food insecurity were also raised in the context of university students. Student representatives also reported that university students are impacted by food insecurity, affecting their ability to study and participate in university life.²²

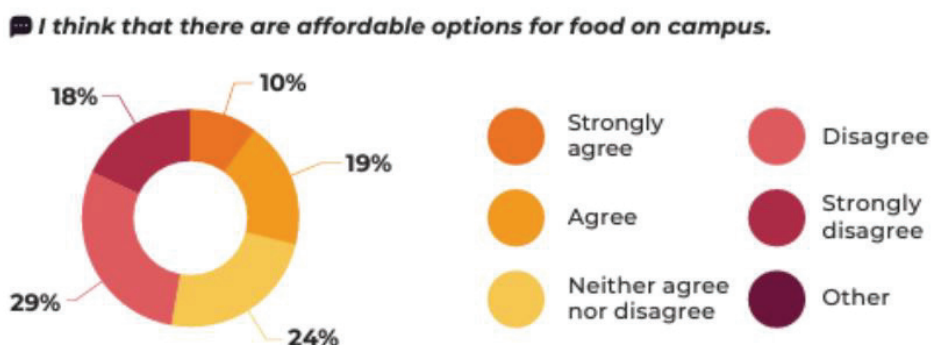
A domestic graduate research student, University of Melbourne

“I now have high cholesterol following recent blood test. I worry about food access constantly and am often hungry. My energy levels are low. I spend a lot of time calculating grocery costs and planning meals patched together from discount grocery stores (Cheaper Buy Miles) because it’s the only way I can make it to 2 meals a day.”

Source: University of Melbourne Graduate Student Association, *Submission 96*, p. 10.

The University of Melbourne Student Union (UMSU) provided data from its *Cost of Living Crisis Survey* conducted in 2024. Figure 3.4 shows that 67% of students reported that the cost-of-living crisis negatively impacted their physical health. Comparatively, only 9% indicated that it did not have a negative impact their physical health.

Figure 3.4 Proportion (%) of students who reported the cost of living impacted their physical health, UMSU 2024 *Cost of Living Crisis Survey*



Source: University of Melbourne Student Union, *Submission 162*, p. 12.

Evidence to the Inquiry clearly demonstrates that young people can be acutely impacted by food insecurity. This impact is not confined to just their immediate physical health but can extend to cognitive, emotional, and social development.

21 Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition (IPAN) and the Institute for Health Transformation (IHT), *Submission 136*, p. 8.

22 See: Jaime Morrison, Policy and Advocacy Officer, University of Melbourne Graduate Student Association, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

As noted in Chapter 1, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience higher rates of food insecurity. Stakeholders emphasised that the physical health impacts of food insecurity are also often experienced more acutely in Victoria's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

The George Institute for Global Health explained that:

Food insecurity has long-term health impacts. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples experience diet-related chronic diseases such as type-2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease, at much higher rates than non-Indigenous Australians. There is no evidence that diseases such as diabetes or cardiovascular disease affected Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples maintaining traditional diets before colonisation.²³

This was echoed by the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO). It stated that consultations with Aboriginal communities 'identified that health complications arising from malnutrition and imbalanced diets can heavily impact education and employment opportunities'.²⁴ VACCHO further explained that this can increase 'stigma and racism toward Aboriginal people'.²⁵

IPAN and IHT's submission noted data from a 2017 VAHI report into *The health and wellbeing of Aboriginal Victorians*, which found that 66.8% of 'Aboriginal adults who experienced food insecurity had fair or poor health'.²⁶

To improve physical health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the George Institute advocated for Victoria to embed:

New ways of thinking about improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health are needed, that prioritise the cultural determinants of health including self-determination, First Nations knowledges, cultural expression, and Connection to Country.²⁷

The need for culturally led responses to food security is discussed further in Chapter 4.

Culturally and linguistically diverse communities

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.

Refugee Council of Australia, *Submission 131*, p. 2.

²³ The George Institute for Global Health, *Submission 117*, p. 4.

²⁴ Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, *Submission 152*, p. 6.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition (IPAN) and the Institute for Health Transformation (IHT), *Submission 136*, p. 7.

²⁷ The George Institute for Global Health, *Submission 117*, p. 4.

Some submitters highlighted that culturally and linguistically diverse communities often face unique challenges in meeting their cultural dietary requirements, such as limited access to appropriate foods. The Refugee Council of Australia emphasised that marginalised communities, such as refugees or asylum-seeking families, are at greater risk of food insecurity. As such, they are more prone to ‘suffer from eating less, eating poorer quality and variety of food, malnutrition, and compounded health issues’.²⁸

At a public hearing, Rebecca Eckhard, Director of Policy and Research, at the Refugee Council of Australia, discussed that asylum-seeking children face competing vulnerabilities to food insecurity:

Our members have shared their experiences supporting families dealing with the devastating impact of malnutrition among children that have arrived from places like Sudan and Gaza. What may surprise you is that our members have been reporting malnutrition and the associated developmental delays among asylum-seeking children who have grown up in Australia. While the timeframe and circumstances of food scarcity that led to this malnutrition are not the same, the outcome is. Over many years children of asylum-seeking families living in Victoria have been without sufficient nutritious food, which has led to medically diagnosed malnutrition and its devastating effects.²⁹

The Asylum Seeker Resource Centre added that food insecurity can lead people to make compromises on their healthcare which can worsen their overall physical health.³⁰

3.3.1 Physical health risks associated with compromised food choices

The Committee heard about the significant physical health risks associated with compromised food choices. When families are forced to prioritise affordability over nutrition, they often resort to less healthy options, leading to diets high in unhealthy fats, sugars, and refined carbohydrates.

The Victorian Government highlighted that food insecurity means people ‘compromise the quality and/or quantity of their food intake, including the substitution of nutritious food with lower cost, higher energy, nutrient poor food’.³¹

In a 2021 report, VAHI examined challenges to healthy eating in Victoria. Figure 3.5 below shows the impact of people’s perceptions of the cost of healthy food on food choice.

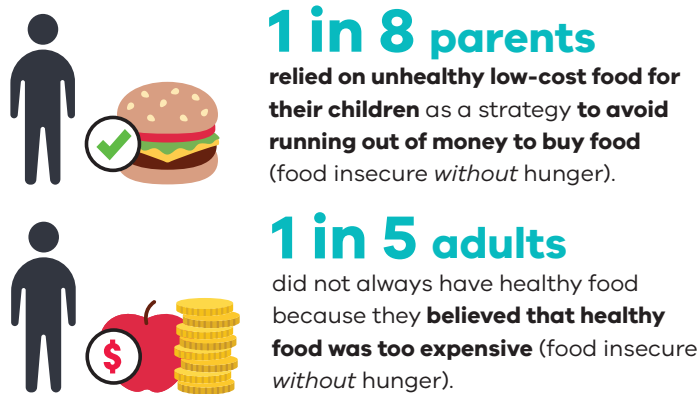
²⁸ Refugee Council of Australia, *Submission 131*, p. 2.

²⁹ Rebecca Eckhard, Director, Policy and Research, Refugee Council of Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 54.

³⁰ Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, *Submission 170*, p. 7.

³¹ Victorian Government, *Submission 167*, p. 7.

Figure 3.5 Perceptions about the cost of healthy food



Source: Victorian Agency for Health Information, *Challenges to healthy eating: Food insecurity in Victoria*, 2021, p. 10.

The Victorian Council of Social Service highlighted that financial hardship severely limits families' ability to meet basic nutritional needs, leading to increased stress and widening developmental gaps among children from different socioeconomic backgrounds. The Council argued that these disparities are rooted in structural issues such as taxation, social security, and income support policies, which contribute to ongoing cycles of poverty and poor health outcomes.³²

Name Withheld

"I work two jobs, one of which is full time (38+ hours a week). I can barely afford basic necessities and rent is skyrocketing through the roof. I have resorted to simple, low cost & prep meals (e.g. 2 minute noodles) over fresh, nutritious produce because it is overall cheaper and doesn't spoil as quickly. I can barely get through my day, let alone get out of bed. The cost of living has gone up, and the cost to eat a nutritious, balanced diet shouldn't be dependent on whether or not I can splurge \$100+ a week just for a few vegetables"

Source: Name Withheld, *Submission 15*.

VicHealth discussed the link between food insecurity and unhealthy dietary choices, noting that even mild food insecurity often forces individuals and families to compromise on their food choices. Fresh fruits and vegetables are typically the first items to be sacrificed, resulting in diets that are low in essential nutrients and high in refined carbohydrates, sugars, and unhealthy fats. The agency explained that such diets are strongly associated with an increased risk of developing serious health conditions, including type 2 diabetes, obesity, stroke, heart disease, and various forms of cancer.³³

³² Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 176*, p. 10.

³³ VicHealth, *Submission 177*, p. 7.

VicHealth pointed out that poor diet, overweight, and obesity are leading contributors to chronic disease and premature death in Victoria, accounting for 5.4% and 8.4% of the preventable burden of disease, respectively.³⁴ This not only places a substantial burden on individuals but also on the healthcare system. According to the National Obesity Strategy 2022–2032, the economic cost of obesity to the Australian community was \$11.8 billion in 2018, and if current trends continue, this figure could rise to an estimated \$87.7 billion by 2032.³⁵

VACCHO echoed concerns that food-insecure families do not have adequate access to healthy food, compromising their physical health:

When families are unable to afford or access healthy foods, it is more likely that cheaper, less nutritious foods, usually high in salt, sugar and unhealthy fats, are considered the only viable options available to them. As a result, healthy foods are excluded from food purchasing patterns, leading to poorer longer-term health outcomes.³⁶

Wayne

“The increasing cost of basic food items is impacting the quality of food I can purchase. I can no longer afford many of the healthier options I was previously able to afford. I have many friends in a similar position, some with young families. The impact of less healthy food options has many health implications - obesity, heart and circulatory conditions and mental health concerns.”

Source: Wayne Jury, *Submission 50*.

Some stakeholders contended that, whilst there are certainly cost restrictions on food for many people, the marketing of unhealthy food contributes to the impression that it is more affordable and accessible.³⁷ Abe Ropitini from VACCHO expressed concern about the ‘conduct of market and the predatory targeting of multimedia messages’. He argued that this is ‘increasing the likelihood that they will opt for more convenient, cheaper but less healthy food options is a major concern with our Aboriginal communities’.³⁸

Food-insecure people in rural and remote areas are more likely to be forced to compromise on their food choices, a situation exacerbated by the more limited options available compared to metropolitan areas. The Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance

³⁴ Ibid., p. 8.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO), *Submission 152*, p. 6.

³⁷ See, for example: National Heart Foundation of Australia, *Submission 135*, p. 7.

³⁸ Abe Ropitini, Executive Director, Population Health, Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO), public hearing, Melbourne, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 86.

discussed research based on the experience of Aboriginal communities in New South Wales which found:

in some rural and remote areas, local shops are pushing up their prices, and people are left with no choice but to buy cheaper (and often less healthy) options to feed their families.³⁹

Cathie Steele, Board Chair of the Regional Food Security Alliance, also highlighted this issue, stating:

It is harder in the country. Prices are higher and distance to good food sources is harder in the country. If you are on a farm, you have got to drive somewhere to get food. Now, if you are doing it tough, you are going to not do that very often. Even if you are living in a small town, you may not have good and easy access to good food.⁴⁰

The cost of food leading to compromised and poorer food choices was echoed by a variety of stakeholders, including local councils,⁴¹ food provider or relief services,⁴² health agencies,⁴³ social service providers,⁴⁴ and advocacy groups.⁴⁵

FINDING 10: Food insecurity can cause people to make compromised eating choices, leading to an overreliance on unhealthy food options. This has far-reaching consequences for physical health, contributing to the growing burden of chronic diseases and increasing strain on the health system.

3.4 Mental health and food insecurity: a complex relationship

We also see how food stress has negative impacts on the health of community members. Not knowing where your next meal is going to be coming from or how to provide for your family can become all consuming for people. The reality that many of our community members choose between heating and eating every day is crushing not only to their physical but also to their mental health.

Warren Elliot, External Communications Manager, Victoria, The Salvation Army Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 45.

³⁹ Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance, *Submission 139*, p. 8.

⁴⁰ Cathie Steele, Board Chair, Regional Food Security Alliance, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 23.

⁴¹ See, for example: City of Melbourne, *Submission 78*; Hume City Council, *Submission 140*; Warrnambool City Council, *Submission 141*.

⁴² See, for example: The Community Plate, *Submission 138*; The Community Grocer, *Submission 73*; Common Ground Project, *Submission 147*.

⁴³ See, for example: Bellarine Community Health, *Submission 153*.

⁴⁴ See, for example: Uniting Church in Australia (Synod of Victoria and Tasmania), *Submission 165*, p. 6.

⁴⁵ See, for example: Healthy Food Systems Australia, *Submission 150*.

Section 3.3 highlighted that individuals who are food insecure are more likely to suffer from chronic health conditions such as obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. These conditions have a reciprocal relationship with mental health, as managing chronic illness can lead to increased stress and mental health challenges. The cycle of poor health and poor mental health creates a ‘feedback loop’ that is difficult to break without strong interventions.⁴⁶

At a public hearing, Jerry Ham, Group Manager of Homelessness and Community Support at Uniting Victoria Tasmania, pointed out that individuals seeking emergency relief services often face a range of overlapping issues that extend beyond food insecurity. He told the Committee:

we are increasingly referring people to support services for mental health, domestic violence and alcohol and other drug issues that they face. So our emergency relief services are not a solution to food insecurity on their own, but they do play an important role in supporting people at a time of crisis, providing a safety net as they work themselves back into a situation of more self-independence.⁴⁷

Sustain described the relationship between mental health and food insecurity as ‘circularly linked’.⁴⁸ Dietitians Australia’s submission also reinforced the link between mental health and food insecurity. The organisation explained that food insecurity is ‘thought to be more prevalent amongst people with mental illness’.⁴⁹ It described the ‘disruptions’ which contributed to a higher causal link, stating that people with mental health challenges experience:

higher rates of insecure housing with limited cooking facilities, changes in capacity to access transport and food stores, as well as difficulties preparing food. People living with a mental health condition may also experience decreased economic participation and an associated lower income, which may lead to food insecurity.⁵⁰

Hope City Mission contended that the primary driver of food insecurity among their clients was ‘trauma’, stating:

Our daily experience indicates that the primary problem facing our clients is trauma. Subsequently, our clients struggle to make good social or financial decisions. Long term food insecurity is a symptom of this greater underlying social problem, which the current economic conditions have exacerbated.⁵¹

⁴⁶ See, for example: Foodprint Melbourne, *Submission 157*; Central Goldfields Shire Council, *Submission 156*; Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO), *Submission 152*; Healthy Food Systems Australia, *Submission 150*; Warrnambool City Council, *Submission 141*.

⁴⁷ Jerry Ham, Group Manager, Homelessness and Community Support, Uniting Victoria and Tasmania, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 44.

⁴⁸ Sustain: The Australian Food Network, *Submission 76*, p. 14.

⁴⁹ Dietitians Australia, *Submission 121*, p. 5.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Hope City Mission, *Submission 107*, p. 4.

Name Withheld

“Suffering from general anxiety, the lingering concern I feel as I see our grocery fund lowering and nearing \$0 as we approach payday is a horrific feeling. A constant feeling of uncertainty and conflict, knowing that for our mental and physical wellbeing we need to eat not only healthy and balanced meals, but also an adequate amount of it. I find we constantly have to find a way to sacrifice, whether that be through rationing out our medications to have a little extra for 1 week, or by reducing the amount, or the quality of food that we eat.

‘My heightened anxiety leads me to constantly be trying to think of the best way to approach our grocery shop or amend our budget, which is consuming of not only time but also energy, leading to burnout and being unwell.’

Source: Name Withheld, *Submission 23*.

The Victorian Government’s submission defined ‘marginal food insecurity’ as a condition where individuals are worried about running out of food or money to buy more. According to 2020 data, 43% of people in this group experienced high psychological distress, illustrating the close link between food insecurity and mental health challenges.⁵²

Further emphasising this connection, Foodbank Victoria reflected on data from the 2019 *Hunger Report* which found that 70% of food-insecure Australians experience high or very high levels of psychological distress, compared to only 13% of the general population.⁵³

VicHealth’s submission also highlighted the profound impact of food insecurity on a range of mental health issues, including chronic stress, anxiety disorders, and depression.⁵⁴ Additionally, diets that are low in fruit and vegetables and high in refined carbohydrates, sugars, and unhealthy fats are linked to higher rates of anxiety and depressive disorders.⁵⁵

Depression, suicidal ideation and suicide were raised as significant mental health concerns linked to food insecurity.⁵⁶ Dr Nick Rose from Sustain told the Committee that:

Food insecurity severely compromises mental wellbeing, with strong links to suicidal ideation, especially for adolescents. Between August 2022 and January 2023 Lifeline

⁵² Victorian Government, *Submission 167*, p. 12.

⁵³ Foodbank Victoria, *Submission 137*, p. 8.

⁵⁴ VicHealth, *Submission 177*, p. 8.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ See, for example: Warrnambool City Council, *Submission 147*; Regional Food Security Alliance, *Submission 58*; Knox City Council, *Submission 79*; Greater Dandenong City Council, *Submission 113*.

saw a 49 per cent increase in referral searches by helpline counsellors specifically relating to financial issues and homelessness, along with a significant increase in demand for food distribution at their face-to-face crisis support centres.⁵⁷

The Geelong Food Relief Centre discussed the results of the 2022 survey conducted by Suicide Prevention Australia which found that 88% of suicide prevention services experienced an increase in service use. Reflecting on the survey results, the Centre stated this was 'primarily as a result of financial hardship, housing insecurity, and food insecurity'.⁵⁸

Several councils expressed their concern about the link between food insecurity and mental health, with many providing local data on the mental health outcomes in their municipalities. Box 3.1 below provides a selection of this evidence.

Box 3.1 Local governments' reporting of mental health outcomes associated with food insecurity among their constituents

The City of Melbourne Social Indicator Survey tracks the issue of food insecurity as a rapidly growing public health issue for the community; 1 in 2 community members in our municipality report food insecurity in 2024 (48%)... City of Melbourne's recent research into food insecurity in our city reports members of our community experiencing decreased energy, poor physical health, and increased isolation because of food insecurity.

City of Melbourne, *Submission 78*, pp. 1-3.

Local data shows that food insecurity is also linked to poorer mental health outcomes specifically, increased levels of stress and anxiety due to an increased uncertainty of not having consistently safe and sufficient nutritious food. Mitchell Shire has a higher proportion of people who are at very high risk of developing poor mental health outcomes with 32.93% of people living in the Shire diagnosed with anxiety and/or depression, coupled with increased rates of financial stress with a higher than average stress level relating to mortgage and/or housing (9.4% compared to the Victorian average of 7.5%).

Mitchell Shire Council, *Submission 168*, p. 1.

(Continued)

⁵⁷ Dr Nick Rose, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 28.

⁵⁸ Geelong Food Relief Centre, *Submission 158*, p. 5.

Box 3.1 Continued

In the past year, [food relief] providers in Manningham have had a 30–40% increase in requests, with most local food relief organisations needing to take bookings, establish an eligibility criterion and turn people away... These users are turning up to services with increasingly complex needs with overall poor health, dysfunction in daily life, inability to prepare healthy meals, weight gain/loss and isolation from family/friends. Their mental wellbeing is showing feelings of anxiety, depression, shame, loss of face, devalued identity and a sense of hopelessness.

Manningham City Council, *Submission 123*, p. 2.

Constant worry about food availability and the need to make trade-offs between food and other basic needs can create a chronic state of stress, impacting cognitive function and emotional wellbeing. Individuals experiencing food insecurity report higher levels of psychological distress, depression, and anxiety.

City of Greater Geelong, *Submission 83*, p. 7.

Young people and students

Young people and students are particularly vulnerable to the mental health impacts of food insecurity. Children, in particular, are vulnerable to the psychological effects of food insecurity, which can lead to long-term mental health challenges.

Rachna Madaan Bowman, a Financial Counsellor at South-East Community Links, highlighted the mental health consequences of food insecurity on children.⁵⁹ Children who go to school without lunches or have to cut back on extracurricular activities—essential for their mental health and wellbeing—experience a significant decline in their overall psychological health. This situation contributes to a broader sense of distress within the family, further exacerbating the issue.⁶⁰

VCOSS identified four ‘potential mechanisms’ whereby children experience food insecurity-related mental health challenges:

1. Food insecurity often coincides with other factors that affect children’s psychological well-being, such as low income.
2. Both food insecurity and children’s mental health problems may stem from common underlying causes, like parental mental health issues.

⁵⁹ Rachna Madaan Bowman, Financial Counsellor, South-East Community Links, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 20.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

3. Food insecurity itself might directly impact children's psychological and behavioural well-being.
4. Food insecurity can contribute to parental depression, which in turn affects children's mental health.⁶¹

The impact of food insecurity on mental health is not limited to children and adolescents. University students, particularly those from international backgrounds, also face significant mental health challenges related to food insecurity.

International graduate coursework student

“Living with food insecurity can cause significant stress, anxiety, and depression. The constant worry about where the next meal will come from and the inability to provide enough food for oneself or one's family can take a toll on mental well-being. Moreover, the stigma associated with food insecurity can exacerbate feelings of shame and isolation.”

Source: University of Melbourne Graduate Student Association, *Submission 96*, p. 11.

The University of Melbourne Graduate Student Association and a joint submission from University of Melbourne academics further emphasised the negative impact of food insecurity on students' mental health. Many students reported feeling stressed and anxious about accessing food, which often negatively impacted their studies.⁶² The sense of shame and embarrassment experienced by students struggling with food insecurity led to low levels of confidence and self-esteem, and the social isolation that accompanies this struggle made it difficult for students to engage with classmates and friends.⁶³

According to a survey by the University of Melbourne Student Union, 76% of respondents 'agreed or strongly agreed' that the 'current cost of living crisis was having a negative impact on their mental health'.⁶⁴

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

we have evaluated not just the relationship between food, culture and health and wellbeing but actually culture, kinship, affirmations of identity and outcomes in health and wellbeing for Aboriginal people. There is an absolute link.

Abe Ropitini, Executive Director, Population Health, Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 85.

⁶¹ Victorian Council of Social Services (VCOSS), *Submission 176*, p. 11.

⁶² Joint submission from University of Melbourne academics, *Submission 101*, p. 3; University of Melbourne Graduate Student Association, *Submission 96*, p. 11.

⁶³ Joint submission from University of Melbourne academics, *Submission 101*, p. 3.

⁶⁴ University of Melbourne Student Union, *Submission 162*, p. 11.

Several stakeholders emphasised the deep connection between food, culture, and mental health and wellbeing within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

At a public hearing, Abe Ropitini, Executive Director of Population Health at VACCHO, stated that food plays a critical role not only in health and wellbeing but also in affirming identity, kinship, and cultural safety.⁶⁵ The Committee was informed that food is used as a tool to bring people together, share knowledge, and create environments of togetherness, which are integral to the mental health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people. This cultural approach to food is a key aspect of the services provided by Aboriginal community-controlled health organisations, yet VACCHO argued that it remains under-recognised and under-supported by government funding.⁶⁶

Dietitians Australia further supported this perspective, noting that the right to food encompasses not just nutritional needs but also the cultural, social, and relational aspects of food, all of which significantly influence mental health, wellbeing, and community connection.⁶⁷

Culturally and linguistically diverse communities

Food insecurity has a strong impact on the mental health of culturally and linguistically diverse communities, where food holds significant cultural importance. Like Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Victorians, members of these communities often view food as a vital connection to their cultural identity and heritage.

An inability to access culturally appropriate foods can lead to feelings of disconnection and isolation, which, in turn, exacerbate mental health issues such as chronic stress, anxiety, and depression.⁶⁸ The stress of navigating unfamiliar food systems in a new cultural context, combined with financial constraints, intensifies the psychological burden on individuals and families.⁶⁹ This burden is further compounded by the stigma associated with food insecurity, leading to social isolation and a reluctance to seek help.⁷⁰

The Islamic Council of Victoria explained that for refugee or migrant communities food insecurity ‘can exacerbate pre-existing mental health conditions and hinder recovery and integration efforts’.⁷¹

⁶⁵ Abe Ropitini, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 85.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ellyn Bicknell APD, BMedSci GCertHumNutr MNutrDiet, Dietitians Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 60.

⁶⁸ See Dietitians Australia, *Submission 121*, p. 5; The Community Plate, *Submission 138*, pp. 9, 20.

⁶⁹ See Islamic Council of Australia, *Submission 115*, p. 5.

⁷⁰ See Regional Food Security Alliance, *Submission 58*, p. 6; Foodbank Victoria, *Submission 137*, p. 12; City of Greater Bendigo, *Submission 72*, p. 7.

⁷¹ Islamic Council of Victoria, *Submission 115*, p. 6.

FINDING 11: Food insecurity is closely linked with poor mental health, including chronic stress, anxiety, and depression. This is particularly the case for groups such as:

- a. young people
- b. low-income groups
- c. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- d. culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

FINDING 12: Mental health challenges can both cause and exacerbate food insecurity.

3.4.1 Stigma and shame associated with food insecurity

People accessing emergency food relief can experience stigma and shame, which can be a barrier to using services. A Foodbank survey in 2022 found that less than 40 per cent of food insecure households surveyed had accessed those services.

Rachel Carey, Melbourne University, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 35.

A common mental health challenge associated with food insecurity is experiencing stigma associated with accessing food relief services.⁷²

Dr Sue Kleve, an academic at Monash University, discussed that the stigma and shame associated with seeking food assistance can be so powerful that many Victorians choose not to access food relief services even when they desperately need them. This reluctance to seek help can lead to social isolation, further compounding mental health issues.⁷³

Lucas

“I feel like I’m being watched when I go there. I think since we don’t have any other sources of food access, it’s hard to have a balanced and healthier diet. You don’t have the luxury of getting necessarily fresh food. You just eat what you get and that’s it. You can’t really complain.”

Source: Story provided by Sue Kleve, Monash University, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 36.

⁷² Yarra Ranges Emergency Relief Network (YRERN), *Submission 120*, p. 9; City of Ballarat, *Submission 99*, p. 5.

⁷³ Dr Sue Kleve, Monash University, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 36.

At a public hearing, Madelaine Griffith, Manager of Research and Design at Foodbank Victoria, told the Committee that:

what we know from last year's Hunger Report from Foodbank Australia was that about half of people who are food insecure are not reaching out and seeking food relief, and the biggest reason for that is stigma and the stress and the shame of accessing food relief.⁷⁴

To emphasise this issue, she also shared the story of a child affected by food insecurity:

Last week a young mother came to a Foodbank Victoria warehouse with her child in the car. This mother told our receptionist that their child was refusing to go to school because they had no food to take and they were too ashamed to go.⁷⁵

Other stakeholders also stigma and shame linked to food insecurity.⁷⁶

FINDING 13: Stigma and shame associated with accessing food relief services can prevent people from seeking assistance.

3.4.2 Increased social isolation due to food insecurity

People are in need for a myriad of reasons, but typically there is correlation to some type of isolation or disconnection.

The One Box Limited, *Submission 97*, p. 2.

Food insecurity has far-reaching impacts beyond just nutritional deficiencies, it also can significantly contribute to social isolation. Individuals and families facing food insecurity often find themselves withdrawing from social activities to cut costs, which can lead to a sense of loneliness and disconnection.⁷⁷

Uniting Victoria and Tasmania noted that food-insecure people may attend fewer social events, avoid inviting others to their homes, or, in the case of parents, prevent their children from visiting other people's homes due to the inability to reciprocate hospitality.⁷⁸ A similar observation was made by the Give Where You Live Foundation.⁷⁹

Food insecurity can also disrupt or prohibit people's social lives. Some individual submitters expressed that they can no longer enjoy social activities because of the cost

⁷⁴ Madelaine Griffith, Manager, Research and Design, Foodbank Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁷⁶ See, for example: Cathie Steele, *Transcript of evidence*; Rachel Carey, Melbourne University, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*; Elise Cook, Co-Chief Executive Officer, Eat Up Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*; City of Greater Bendigo, *Submission 72*; Knox City Council, *Submission 79*; City of Greater Geelong, *Submission 83*.

⁷⁷ See City of Melbourne, *Submission 78*, p. 3; Uniting Victoria and Tasmania, *Submission 151*, p. 8.

⁷⁸ Uniting Victoria and Tasmania, *Submission 151*, p. 8.

⁷⁹ Give Where You Live Foundation, *Submission 95*, p. 8.

of food is too prohibitive for them, particularly alongside other cost of living pressures. Box 3.2 below presents a selection of this evidence to demonstrate stakeholder's concerns.

Box 3.2 Submitters' experiences of social isolation due to food insecurity

The cost of living and the cost of food has meant that we no longer go out and socialise, we don't go out and help the economy and small business who are also struggling.

Mieka Torrens, *Submission 21*.

We can no longer afford other necessities often like new school shoes because we are scraping so hard just to have everyone fed and a roof over our heads. It feels like another lifetime ago but it was not that long ago that we could take days off, go for day trips or weekends away.

Name Withheld, *Submission 9*.

I don't get to go out as often as I used to because of the cost of food. I don't even know where to go for food services to help.

Name Withheld, *Submission 109*.

It's hard to navigate not being able to afford eating out when your peers and colleagues are always doing so, e.g. going to a restaurant to catch up, social occasions at work/in my research group/school etc.

Domestic Graduate Research Student, University of Melbourne Graduate Student Association, *Submission 96*.

Similarly, culturally and linguistically diverse communities face additional layers of social isolation due to food insecurity. The Refugee Council of Australia observed that food banks are often not religiously or culturally appropriate for people seeking asylum, making these resources less accessible and socially acceptable.⁸⁰ This lack of culturally appropriate food can exacerbate feelings of isolation and displacement among these communities.

FINDING 14: Food insecurity contributes to social isolation, as individuals and families withdraw from social activities due to financial constraints and the stigma associated with being unable to provide food.

⁸⁰ Refugee Council of Australia, *Submission 131*, p. 4.

3.5 Poverty and hardship

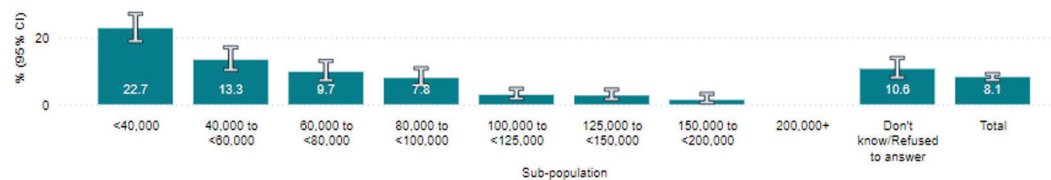
As noted in Chapter 2, food insecurity is a critical issue that deeply intersects with poverty and hardship, significantly exacerbating the struggles faced by vulnerable populations. Evidence to the Inquiry highlighted the impact that food insecurity has on individuals and communities, particularly those already experiencing economic strain.

The Victorian Government's submission identified 'people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage' as one of several 'groups at higher risk of marginal food insecurity'.⁸¹ It referred to data from 2020 which showed that 'of the people who reported running out of money to buy food':

- 45% were unemployed
- 29% did not have a university qualification
- 35% had a total annual household income of \$40,000 to \$60,000, increasing to 50.5% for households with a total annual income of less than \$20,000.⁸²

This is consistent with more contemporary data. The 2022 Victorian Population Health Survey found that 22.7% of respondents with an annual household income of less than \$40,000 indicated they were food insecure (see Figure 3.6).

Figure 3.6 Proportion (%) of people who experienced food insecurity, by annual household income



Source: Victorian Agency for Health Information, *Victorian Population Health Survey 2022*, <<https://vahi.vic.gov.au/reports/victorian-population-health-survey>> accessed 30 August 2024.

Table 3.1 compiles data from the 2022 survey to demonstrate other socioeconomic risk factors which are associated with higher risks of food insecurity.

⁸¹ Victorian Government, *Submission 167*, p. 12.

⁸² *Ibid.*

Table 3.1 Socio-economic determinants of food insecurity

Survey category	Proportion of respondents who indicated they experienced food insecurity (%)
Employment Status	
Employed	6
Unemployed	18
Not in the labour force	14.9
Educational attainment	
Year 9 or lower	23.5
Year 10 or 11	13.6
Year 12 +/- diploma/graduate certificate/certificate I-V	9.3
University	3.9
Home ownership status	
Owned – no mortgage	4.6
Owned – with mortgage	4.5
Rented – privately	13.8
Rented – state government	34.9
Rented – community housing agency	25.1
Other	8.3

Source: Victorian Agency for Health Information, *Victorian Population Health Survey 2022*, <<https://vahi.vic.gov.au/reports/victorian-population-health-survey>> accessed 30 August 2024.

Stakeholders reported that it is often households with lower total incomes who spend the highest percentage of their income on food. Yarra Ranges Emergency Relief Network explained that there are ‘various access issues that may lead to this’:

- reaching food outlets can be challenging
- people with low incomes may work irregular shifts, making it difficult to visit shops during their open hours
- lack of food literacy and limited time can make it difficult to prepare meals at home.⁸³

Madelaine Griffith from Foodbank Victoria emphasised that ‘food insecurity is essentially an economic issue’,⁸⁴ closely linked to the broader cost-of-living crisis. This crisis includes rising costs in housing, utilities, and basic necessities, making it increasingly difficult for many Victorians to afford adequate and nutritious food.

Like other challenges linked to food insecurity, such as physical and mental health issues, poverty and hardship were also identified as both a driver and a consequence. Better Health Network stated:

⁸³ Yarra Ranges Emergency Relief Network, *Submission 120*, p. 11.

⁸⁴ Madelaine Griffith, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 4.

Socioeconomic factors, power imbalances, and unstable living conditions all contribute to worsening food insecurity. Economic inequality and unequal access to resources can limit people's ability to obtain sufficient food. Poor living conditions exacerbate this problem, making it more difficult for individuals to secure enough food. These issues create a cycle where some groups in our community face additional barriers.⁸⁵

This issue is explored in detail in Chapter 2, where the Committee has clearly identified the cost of living and other socio-economic factors as key drivers of food insecurity. The Committee concluded that without government intervention to alleviate these underlying stressors, it will be impossible to effectively address food insecurity at its root cause.

FINDING 15: Poverty and hardship are both drivers and consequences of food insecurity.

3.5.1 Budget trade-offs: choice between food and other essentials

The fact that families have to choose between food and housing. That is a crisis.

Zakaria Wahid, General Manager, Islamic Council of Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 63.

Individuals living in poverty frequently encounter challenging decisions between securing food and meeting other essential needs such as housing, healthcare, and utilities. Christine Crowley, Melbourne City Manager at OzHarvest, noted that food insecurity is driven by various factors including housing instability, health issues, and family violence. She pointed out that 'food is usually the first thing to go if people have a choice between rent or other costs'.⁸⁶

This was echoed by Jerry Ham from Uniting Victoria and Tasmania who said:

Not having an income that covers the basics of life forces people to make impossible choices, and that does impact on their security, their health and also their wellbeing. It can be the choice between skipping a meal and experiencing homelessness. It can be the choice between your child's medication and paying the rent. It can be the choice between warmth and having the lights on, and food is often the first thing that a person cuts back on to meet their or their family's basic needs.⁸⁷

Several individual submitters made a similar point.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Better Health Network, *Submission 125*, p. 6.

⁸⁶ Christine Crowley, Melbourne City Manager, OzHarvest, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 6.

⁸⁷ Jerry Ham, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 44.

⁸⁸ See, for example: Kass Halastanis, Social Policy Officer, Knox City Council, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*; Rachna Madaan Bowman, *Transcript of evidence*; Hiruni Walimunige, Co-Manager, Policy and Advocacy, The University of Melbourne Graduate Student Association, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*.

Name Withheld

“I used to get my groceries delivered by Coles (I am half blind so I can’t drive) but now it’s too expensive to do that. I can’t afford much. After bills, I don’t have a lot of money left. Rent takes half of my income.”

Source: Name Withheld, *Submission 18*.

Numerous other stakeholders also raised that food insecurity often causes people to make compromised food choices.⁸⁹

FINDING 16: In severe cases of food insecurity, individuals and families are forced to make difficult choices between basic necessities, such as food, housing, and healthcare.

3.6 The importance of addressing food insecurity directly

The issue of food insecurity in Victoria demands focused and immediate attention. While addressing broader factors such as the cost of living is undeniably essential, it is crucial that these efforts do not overshadow the specific challenges posed by food insecurity itself. The Inquiry has highlighted significant gaps in current data collection and the profound impact food insecurity has on both physical and mental health, particularly among vulnerable populations such as culturally and linguistically diverse communities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

These findings underscore the necessity of a targeted approach that directly addresses food insecurity as a standalone issue, rather than solely as a byproduct of economic hardship. Without these focused efforts, the broader measures aimed at improving living conditions may fall short of addressing the root causes and consequences of food insecurity.

Chapters 4 to 6 of this Report focuses on practical recommendations to tackle food insecurity, which the Committee urges the Victorian Government to implement alongside efforts to address broader socio-economic stressors. While food insecurity is ultimately a product of these stressors and will fluctuate with them, addressing it head-on ensures that the system is equipped to appropriately manage, support, and respond when future shocks occur. Governments can be prepared for future shocks which increase food insecurity rates by addressing broader socioeconomic issues and supporting the food relief sector.

FINDING 17: Addressing food insecurity in Victoria requires both targeted interventions to support existing food relief services and measures to address structural socioeconomic issues. These approaches are complementary and should not be pursued in isolation.

⁸⁹ See, for example: National Heart Foundation of Australia, *Submission 135*; Foodprint Melbourne, *Submission 157*; Geelong Food Relief Centre, *Submission 158*; Victorian Government, *Submission 167*.

Chapter 4

The importance of nutritious and culturally appropriate food

4.1 Introduction

Access to nutritious and culturally appropriate food is a fundamental aspect of maintaining health and wellbeing. Ensuring that individuals have reliable access to food that meets their dietary needs and aligns with their cultural practices is crucial in supporting diverse communities.

Nutritious food helps prevent diet-related health issues, while culturally appropriate food allows individuals to preserve their traditions and identities. This Chapter examines the importance of integrating both nutrition and cultural relevance into food security strategies, highlighting the challenges and opportunities in ensuring equitable access to food for all.

4.2 Healthy eating education

Food education, or food literacy, in Victoria is typically a mix of government-run initiatives and ad hoc programs organised by non-governmental organisations, community groups, and educational institutions (some of which receive government funding).

The Department of Health's *Healthy eating programs and services* website outlines the healthy eating programs and services supported by the Victorian Government. These are summarised in Table 4.1 below.

Table 4.1 Food literacy programs supported by the Victorian Government

Program/Service	Description	Target Audience
Healthy Eating Advisory Service	Supports healthier food and drink options in schools, early childhood services, and workplaces.	Schools, early childhood services, workplaces
INFANT Program	Focuses on early childhood nutrition and healthy eating habits from birth to two years old.	Families with young children
Vic Kids Eat Well	Promotes better food environments for children in schools and communities	Children and schools
Life! Program	Aims to reduce the risk of type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and stroke through healthy lifestyle changes.	Adults at risk of chronic diseases
Achievement Program	A free health and wellbeing service for early childhood services, schools and workplaces to create healthier environments.	General
Future Healthy Food Hubs	Run by VicHealth to create resilient local food systems in regional Victoria and Melbourne's growth corridors through seven community-driven hubs.	Growth corridors
VicHealth Local Government Partnership	Helps councils engage with children and young people to build healthier communities.	Young people

Source: Department of Health, *Healthy eating program and services*, 2023, <<https://www.health.vic.gov.au/preventive-health/healthy-eating-programs-and-services>> accessed 3 September 2024.

Additionally, the Victorian Government also supports, including via funding, a range of food relief organisations and initiatives, including the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO) to 'improve food security and nutrition outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across Victoria'.¹

Chapter 6 considers the Victorian Government's funding commitments and outputs related to food security in more detail.

Alongside government initiatives, there are numerous ad hoc programs run by community organisations, charities, and local councils. These programs can be more flexible and tailored to specific community needs. They often focus on practical skills such as cooking, gardening, and understanding nutrition. Many of these programs also target specific groups like low-income families, culturally diverse communities, or people experiencing food insecurity. Food literacy programs can run as a discrete service or as a component of wrap-around social support.

4.2.1 Food literacy

Food literacy, encompassing the knowledge and skills required to grow, cook, and make informed decisions about food, is increasingly recognised as an important component in addressing food insecurity. Food literacy can mitigate the burden on local healthcare systems, improve quality of life, and contribute to the overall health of communities, particularly those that are vulnerable and young.

¹ Department of Health, *Healthy eating program and services*, 2023, <<https://www.health.vic.gov.au/preventive-health/healthy-eating-programs-and-services>> accessed 3 September 2024.

A lack of health and food literacy is a pervasive issue across various communities, particularly among young people and families. The Central Goldfields Shire Council highlighted this long-standing problem, noting its ‘intensifying impact on local healthcare systems and its contribution to the consumption of packaged and less nutritious foods’.² The Council argued that this not only affects the health of citizens but also the economic burden on families who struggle to make informed food choices.

At a public hearing, Christine Crowley, Melbourne City Manager at OzHarvest, emphasised the importance of teaching people how to eat healthily on a budget. She explained that food literacy encompasses several factors:

It is teaching healthy eating on a budget, how to read food labels and how to make healthy choices – if you have only got so much money to spend, how do you cook healthier?³

Stakeholders were highly supportive of increasing food literacy in Victoria to help mitigate food insecurity as it:

- improves nutritional health and reduces the risk of diet-related illnesses⁴
- supports households to better manage food resources, reduce waste and optimise budgets, which is particularly important for low-income households⁵
- supports sustainable eating practices and food production, contributing to the long-term sustainability of the Victorian food system⁶
- where literacy programs are culturally appropriate, bridges the gap between local food systems and cultural needs⁷
- reduces health system burden⁸
- enhances general cooking confidence and skills improving people’s independence and capacity to manage their diet.⁹

A key need in food literacy programs is the development of educational tools that are both accessible and practical for the community. Therese Watson, Advocacy Officer for Greater Dandenong City Council, highlighted the complexity of current food labelling systems, contending that ‘you need a degree to read a food label these days’.¹⁰ She emphasised the need for simpler, more intuitive labelling, akin to the straightforward indicators found on household appliances, which could help consumers quickly assess

² Central Goldfields Shire Council, *Submission 156*, Attachment 1, p. 22.

³ Christine Crowley, Melbourne City Manager, OzHarvest, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 6.

⁴ Dietitians Australia, *Submission 121*.

⁵ Hume City Council, *Submission 140*; Dietitians Australia, *Submission 121*.

⁶ Yuen Yan Li, *Submission 161*.

⁷ Refugee Council of Australia, *Submission 131*.

⁸ Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance, *Submission 139*.

⁹ See, for example: OzHarvest, *Submission 143*; Gateway Health, *Submission 144*; Common Ground Project, *Submission 147*.

¹⁰ Therese Watson, Advocacy Officer, Strategic Growth and Advocacy, Greater Dandenong City Council, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 9.

whether a product is healthy or not.¹¹ This approach would prevent consumers from wasting money on nutritionally poor choices.

Additionally, Kass Halastanis, Social Policy Officer at Knox City Council, discussed the importance of targeted educational programs that empower vulnerable populations. She provided examples of initiatives such as Foothills Community Care, which focuses on teaching young women survivors of domestic violence how to cook and manage their budgets effectively.¹² Another program, Feed One Feed All, is evolving to include cooking classes on a low budget for various community groups, further illustrating the need for food literacy programs that are both supportive and adaptable to the specific needs of different groups within the community.¹³

Madelaine Griffith of Foodbank Victoria underscored the need for tailored food literacy programs that address different levels of food insecurity. She explained that for those experiencing moderate food insecurity, ‘something more like food literacy programs that can help them learn about how to budget and get nutritious foods at a lower price could be something that is suitable for them’.¹⁴

The Committee was informed about a variety of food literacy programs being run across Victoria by local councils, food relief agencies, social service organisations, schools and other stakeholders. Some of these are standalone food literacy programs or services, others are part of holistic, wrap-around support services. Food literacy programs do not only encompass improving the cooking skills of people but may also include education on how to grow food or source sustainable, local food.

A few examples of food literacy programs provided to the Committee are highlighted in the Box below.

Box 4.1 Example food literacy programs

Nutrition Education Skills Training (OzHarvest)

OzHarvest’s NEST program is a six-week initiative designed to teach healthy eating habits and simple, low-cost cooking skills. Each weekly session lasts 2.5 hours and includes interactive activities, practical cooking classes, and shared meals. The program aligns with the Australian Dietary Guidelines and helps participants set and review realistic healthy eating goals.

(Continued)

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Kass Halastanis, Social Policy Officer, Knox City Council, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 9.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Madelaine Griffith, Manager, Research and Design, Foodbank Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5.

Box 4.1 Continued

OzHarvest provides all necessary materials, and at the final session, participants receive a certificate, a take-home toolkit with infographic fact sheets, and a budget-friendly cookbook. The fact sheets are available in multiple languages, including Arabic, Mandarin, and Greek.

At a public hearing, Christine Crowley, Melbourne City Manager of OzHarvest, described NEST:

NEST is our nutrition program that is for adults – we have also got a youth one at the moment, but that is run directly in communities and it is the same thing – so the focus of that is English food literacy. It is teaching healthy eating on a budget, how to read food labels and how to make healthy choices – if you have only got so much money to spend, how do you cook healthier? We have a range of different clients. That is supported by quite a few councils across Melbourne, so we run them at neighbourhood houses, we run them at different charities, like Men’s Shed, and it is teaching food skills on a budget.

‘Meals to make ends meet’ and other cook books (Salvation Army)

To improve food and financial literacy, the Salvation Army has produced a number of educational resources, such as cookbooks.

The Project 614 cookbook (‘Meals to make ends meet’) is a social initiative by the Salvation Army, aimed at providing practical support to vulnerable communities. The cookbook includes affordable, nutritious recipes designed to help individuals facing food insecurity.

The purpose of the cookbook is to provide ‘recipes based on everyday kitchen supplies but with additional tips to make the food budget go further’. The resource includes advice on:

- creating variants from one recipe
- cooking techniques
- growing own ingredients
- minimising food waste.

In its submission, the Salvation Army reflected on its cooking resources explaining that they have ‘been popular and effective methods of communicating tips to build community and eat nutritiously on a budget’.

Source: OzHarvest, *NEST*, 2024, <<https://www.ozharvest.org/education/nest>> accessed 3 September 2024; Christine Crowley, Melbourne City Manager, OzHarvest, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 6; Salvos Online, *Project 614 cookbook has all the ingredients of hope*, 2023, <<https://www.salvosonline.org.au/post/project-614-cookbook-has-all-the-ingredients-of-hope>> accessed 4 September 2024; The Salvation Army Australia, *Submission 103*.

While improving food literacy is a critical step toward reducing food insecurity, its effectiveness is limited unless broader socioeconomic pressures are addressed. To effectively utilise food literacy skills, people must have access to and be able to afford the food items necessary for a healthy diet. Dr Kelly Donati, Co-Founder and Acting Chair for Sustain: The Australian Food Network, highlighted that while cooking skills and knowledge are essential, ‘making healthy choices, that kind of education, is just falling really flat right now with people who cannot afford to buy food or pay their rent’.¹⁵

This sentiment was echoed by Briony Blake from Dietitians Australia, who stated that ‘if people cannot afford to buy food, all the knowledge in the world is not going to be helpful for them to prep it’.¹⁶ She further argued that food literacy must be integrated into schools, workplaces, and community settings to reach a broader audience.¹⁷

FINDING 18: Improving food literacy reduces food insecurity. It equips individuals with the knowledge and skills to make informed food choices, manage their resources effectively, and maintain a healthy diet.

4.2.2 Building food literacy through a place-based approach

Many stakeholders advocated for a place-based approach to food literacy.¹⁸ A place-based approach to food literacy focuses on developing food knowledge and skills within the context of a specific community, utilising local resources, relationships, and cultural practices. It emphasises the use of locally grown produce, community partnerships, and hands-on learning opportunities to tailor food education to the unique needs and characteristics of the community.¹⁹

Stakeholders advocated for programs such as workshops, cooking classes, and community gardens as effective ways to build practical skills while encouraging social connections around food. For example, Maroondah City Council urged for ‘capital and recurrent funding’ from the Victorian Government for communities to develop education programs to ‘locate, grow, choose, and prepare affordable, sustainable, healthy, and culturally appropriate foods’.²⁰

The Community Plate emphasised that multicultural and First Nations communities may particularly benefit from a place-based approach:

These communities often face unique challenges related to food insecurity, including limited access to culturally appropriate foods and unfamiliarity with local food systems.

¹⁵ Dr Kelly Donati, Co-Founder and Acting Chair, Sustain: The Australian Food Network, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 36.

¹⁶ Briony Blake APD, BbioMed, MDietPra, Dietitians Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 61.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 61–62.

¹⁸ See, for example: Yarra Ranges City Council, *Submission 86*; Maroondah City Council, *Submission 87*; The Community Plate, *Submission 138*; Hume City Council, *Submission 140*; Hobsons Bay City Council, *Submission 67*.

¹⁹ Joint submission from G21 organisations, *Submission 95*.

²⁰ Maroondah City Council, *Submission 87*, p. 11.

Providing targeted nutrition education can help these communities navigate these challenges, improve their dietary habits, and enhance their overall health.²¹

Hume City Council described the lack of community education as a ‘gap in the food system’.²²

Various stakeholders provided examples of community-based food literacy programs operating in their regions (see Box 4.2 below for a selection of example programs). Some place-based programs have been developed within the community, others are available more broadly but are tailored to the community’s needs.

Box 4.2 Examples of place-based food literacy programs

My Smart Garden

‘My Smart Garden’ was established in 2012 to establish a ‘free sustainable gardening community education program’ which is run by partner councils across metropolitan Melbourne. It was initially launched by Hobsons Bay City Council and Moonee Valley City Council. In 2024, the program has 11 partner councils and over 6,500 participants.

The program offers free workshops, online resources, and community events to help residents create sustainable gardens. Its primary objectives include increasing awareness of sustainability issues, achieving environmental outcomes like waste reduction and biodiversity enhancement, and promoting social benefits such as improved physical and mental health.

In its submission, Hobsons Bay City Council described the program:

The My Smart Garden program teaches residents to grow food in small rental gardens or larger backyards using low-cost and sustainable methods. This award-winning program is free for residents and delivered by eleven partner councils in metropolitan Melbourne. Data collected through the program show that 89 per cent of participants reported that My Smart Garden was saving them money.

This program was acknowledged by other stakeholders, including Sustain and Maribyrnong City Council.

Foodshare Community Gardens (Seymour)

In partnership with local service providers, Foodshare Community Gardens provide regional communities with affordable access to food, allowing people to ‘leave what they can and take what they need’. These gardens, along with cooking workshops in local schools, help communities grow traditional ingredients and share foodways, while promoting sustainable practices such as bulk cooking to reduce waste.

(Continued)

²¹ The Community Plate, *Submission 138*, p. 23.

²² Hume City Council, *Submission 140*, p. 5.

Box 4.2 Continued**Grow it Local**

In partnership with councils and others, Grow it Local provides education on nutrition, cooking and budgeting. It comprises a free platform where residents and community groups can grow and share fresh produce. The platform allows local growers to register, connect with others, and exchange produce, knowledge, and skills. Open to individuals, community organisations, schools, and businesses, it fosters local engagement and promotes sustainable food practices.

Source: My Smart Garden, *About*, 2024, <<https://mysmartgarden.org.au/about>> accessed 3 September 2024; First Person Consulting, *My Smart Garden: Program Evaluation*, 2022; Hobsons Bay City Council, *Submission 67*, p. 4; Mitchell Shire Council, *Submission 168*; Grow It Local, *About*, <<https://www.growitlocal.com/about>> accessed 12 September 2024; Maribyrnong City Council, *Submission 85*; Hobsons Bay City Council, *Submission 67*; Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance, *Submission 139*.

Stakeholders also emphasised the need to strengthen partnerships between food literacy programs and local food producers, ensuring communities have access to fresh, locally grown produce.²³ Involving local producers was seen as an opportunity to achieve the dual purpose of increased food literacy skills and giving people direct access to healthier food.²⁴

For example, the Committee heard about the success of farm-to-school initiatives, where local produce is integrated into school meals and educational programs, teaching children about nutrition and sustainable agriculture. Section 4.2.4 below discusses food literacy in schools in more detail. Urban agriculture initiatives, for example the Footscray community garden, were also cited as a way of repurposing unused public land for food production, offering educational opportunities that support local farmers and enhance community food literacy.

Community gardens were another example highlighted by stakeholders as an ideal place-based initiative to improve food literacy and supply local food. These gardens were also considered an opportunity to increase provision and knowledge of culturally appropriate food. At a public hearing, Abe Ropitini from the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation told the Committee that:

Aboriginal community gardens are an important policy response to food insecurity in communities. We have a couple at the moment, and they are extraordinarily productive and successful in not only providing nutritious and healthy food to local communities but also providing a place for knowledge transfer and knowledge generation. A little bit of what I was talking about before around the history of this country and the knowledge

²³ Yarra Ranges Council, *Submission 86*.

²⁴ City of Ballarat, *Submission 99*.

that was lost around food and the complex food systems that used to exist and the need to revive them, that needs to happen through Aboriginal-led initiatives like community gardens, similar to revival of the aquaculture system at Budj Bim.²⁵

Other benefits of place-based programs include:

- fostering personal, or even professional, development by building skills in food cultivation and cooking
- provide places for communities to gather and build connections
- increase local food supply, possibly offering opportunity to provide local produce to food relief organisations
- promoting self-sufficiency and self-determination in relation to people's diet and eating habits.²⁶

In the Committee's view, a place-based approach to food literacy offers a powerful framework for addressing food insecurity and promoting healthy, sustainable eating practices. Stakeholders consistently emphasised the value of localised initiatives that leverage community resources, cultural knowledge, and local food production. Programs such as community gardens, workshops, and farm-to-school initiatives provide not only practical skills in food cultivation and preparation but also foster social cohesion, support local economies, and enhance access to fresh, culturally appropriate food. Strengthening partnerships between local producers, community organisations, and educational institutions will be key to building food literacy that is responsive to the unique needs of diverse communities across Victoria.

FINDING 19: A place-based approach to food literacy, emphasising local resources, cultural relevance, and community partnerships, can aid food security and foster sustainable, healthy eating habits across the community.

Identified gaps in place-based food literacy programs in Victoria

Food literacy plays a crucial role in addressing food insecurity, particularly in low-income and rural areas where access to affordable, nutritious food remains limited. The expansion of food literacy resources is essential to ensure all community members, especially the most vulnerable, have access to the knowledge and skills required for healthy eating. The Committee was told that there is a need to increase the accessibility of food literacy resources.²⁷ Further, there may be a role for broader public awareness campaigns to supplement a community-led approach as discussed in Section 4.2.3 below.

²⁵ Abe Ropitini, Executive Director, Population Health, Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 84.

²⁶ Hume City Council, *Submission 140*, p. 2.

²⁷ Islamic Council of Victoria, *Submission 115*.

Stakeholders underscored that the demand for food literacy programs is higher than ever. They stressed the need for these programs to reach underserved areas, particularly low-income and rural communities where access to food resources is more limited. The Victorian Government's submission acknowledged that rural communities have limited healthier food options, notably:

- limited food outlet availability or infrastructure, and
- often simultaneously, higher density of take-away outlets compared to healthier food outlets.²⁸

Limited food options, coupled with a higher availability of unhealthy options compared to healthier options, may place greater onus on food literacy to ensure people have knowledge to optimise their diets with choices available to them. However, the Committee does reiterate that the utility of food literacy is significantly reliant on appropriate and accessible food options.

Nonetheless, ensuring food literacy is widely accessible involves more than providing educational materials. It can include ensuring that regional or rural or low-income communities have sufficient access to things such as affordable cooking tools and ingredients as well as community-based education programs.

As discussed in Section 4.2.2 above, local infrastructure, such as community centres and schools, can serve as hubs for food education, helping individuals and families develop essential cooking skills and make healthier choices, even with limited budgets. To ensure that vulnerable or low-resourced communities can support these activities, there may be additional funding and other resource supports required.

The Committee received evidence from a number of stakeholders, particularly rural and regional councils, about programs aimed at improving food literacy. However, many of these stakeholders noted there are logistical and resource challenges to maintaining them. These challenges threaten their ongoing viability.

For example, Golden Plains Shire Council's submission outlined the barriers it has experienced to delivering food security initiatives:

- Insufficient funding from the state government hinders our ability to implement impactful, long-term, sustainable solutions to address food insecurity.
- Insufficient State government leadership and coordination of an organised, collective framework to addressing food insecurity.
- Significant transport disadvantage, exacerbating food insecurity and poverty rates.

²⁸ Victorian Government, *Submission 167*, p. 13. See also: Uniting Victoria and Tasmania, *Submission 157*; Victorian Council of Social Services, *Submission 176*.

- Addressing food insecurity in isolation fails to achieve impactful outcomes and requires a broader approach that acknowledges the social determinants of health.
- Readily available access to data on food security at an LGA level that is regularly updated to reflect the current food environment.²⁹

Similar challenges were highlighted by other councils, particularly rural but also in some metropolitan areas. Chapter 6 discusses supporting local councils to lead a place-based response to food insecurity in greater detail. However, the challenges outlined have the clear potential to limit capacity for communities to develop strong food literacy programs.

FINDING 20: Improving food literacy is not a standalone solution. It must be partnered by addressing cost-of-living pressures and broader socioeconomic issues.

4.2.3 Public awareness and engagement campaigns

Beyond resource accessibility, stakeholders have called for public awareness campaigns to increase food literacy. The Committee heard these campaigns can help communities recognise the importance of healthy eating, using various media platforms to engage a wide audience. Public awareness initiatives are vital for ensuring food literacy is viewed as a key component of public health.

The Victorian Government indicated it does provide ‘public health campaigns and education programs to really lift awareness about nutrition and food security’.³⁰ For example, the Department of Health has developed the *Healthy Choices* strategy, which is used to ‘create better health-promoting environments throughout the State, including in schools, hospitals and public spaces’.³¹ In its submission, the Government explained that:

The Healthy Choices policy framework improves the provision and promotion of healthier foods and drinks in key public settings, such as hospitals and health services, sport and recreation centres, and parks. Funded health promotion partners and other organisations support implementation of the policy guidelines in these settings.³²

The Committee was also made aware that other stakeholders, such as food relief providers, have developed public health campaigns to promote nutrition and raise awareness of food insecurity. Some examples are highlighted in Box 4.3 below.

²⁹ Golden Plains Shire Council, *Submission 84*, p. 5.

³⁰ Argiri Alisandratos, Deputy Secretary, Disability, Fairness and Emergency Management, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 56.

³¹ Department of Health, *Healthy eating and nutrition*, 2024, <<https://www.health.vic.gov.au/preventive-health/healthy-eating-nutrition>> accessed 13 September 2024.

³² Victorian Government, *Submission 167*, p. 26.

Box 4.3 Examples of public campaigns about nutrition or food security

Support Our Own. Choose Locally Grown (Healthy Loddon Campaspe)

A campaign to promote Loddon Campaspe-grown fruit and vegetables, enhancing awareness and consumption of healthy, local produce. The campaign has partnered with growers and retailers in the region. Several stakeholders noted this initiative in their evidence, such as City of Greater Bendigo, Mount Alexander Shire Council, and Healthy Loddon Campaspe.

Food from Home (enliven Victoria)

In December 2020, enliven Victoria launched the Food from Home social marketing campaign to promote home gardening and cooking among Victorian families. Using health promotion and behaviour change strategies, the campaign aims to increase homegrown food production and cooking by highlighting the health benefits of gardening while addressing barriers.

The campaign's activities focus on three pillars:

- engaging the online community through social media
- providing accessible, beginner gardening resources
- implementing community-based projects to spread its message.

Source: Healthy Loddon Campaspe, *Support Our Own. Choose Locally Grown. campaign*, 2023, <<https://www.healthyloddoncampaspe.au/chooselocallygrown#:~:text=Support%20Our%20Own.-.Choose%20Locally%20Grown..and%20at%20local%20food%20retailers.>> accessed 13 September 2024; enliven Victoria, *Food from Home: 3 Year Impact Report*, 2024; The Community Plate, *Submission 138*.

Many stakeholders advocated for the Victorian Government to implement, or support, public awareness campaigns on issues relating to food literacy including:

- nutrition
- budgeting
- reducing food waste
- sourcing local and healthy produce
- accessing food relief services, including reducing stigma and shame associated with food insecurity.³³

³³ See, for example: Melton City Council, *Submission 74*; Sustain: The Australian Food Network, *Submission 76*; City of Melbourne, *Submission 78*; Maroondah City Council, *Submission 87*; The University of Melbourne Graduate Student Association, *Submission 96*; Dietitians Australia, *Submission 121*; Yuen Yan Li, *Submission 161*; Mark Morante, *Submission 169*.

The City of Melbourne contended that a statewide public health campaign could ‘raise community awareness of the health implications of their food choices’.³⁴ As an example, the Council suggested that there could be a ‘junk food advertising campaign...at key public transport hubs and educational precincts’.³⁵

The Uniting Church in Australia (Synod of Victoria and Tasmania) advocated that a public health campaign focused on healthy eating should be ‘evidence-based and designed to effect behaviour change and increase public support for changes made to the food environment’.³⁶

Public awareness campaigns play an important role in promoting food literacy and addressing food insecurity in Victoria. Stakeholders have highlighted the value of these initiatives in increasing awareness about nutrition, budgeting, food waste reduction, and access to food relief services. Expanding these initiatives through evidence-based, statewide campaigns could further integrate food literacy into broader public health efforts.

FINDING 21: Public awareness campaigns that focus on food literacy, nutrition, and food security benefit public health more broadly.

4.2.4 Food literacy in schools

A recurring theme raised throughout this Inquiry was the need to integrate food education more thoroughly into school curriculums and community programs.³⁷ Submissions highlighted that school programs can provide practical skills around food preparation, cooking and nutrition, helping young people build confidence and knowledge in healthy eating practices.³⁸ The value of teaching these life skills early is seen as a fundamental step toward empowering youth to make healthier food choices.

In its submission, the Victorian Government acknowledged that one of the key challenges faced by young people is ‘limited nutrition literacy’, as well as ‘insufficient opportunity to source and cook nutritious food’.³⁹ As shown in Box 4.4, food education in Victorian schools is administered on an ad-hoc basis. Some schools have embedded food literacy as a mandatory component of the curriculum, others on an elective basis.

³⁴ City of Melbourne, *Submission 78*, p. 7.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 7–8.

³⁶ Uniting Church in Australia (Synod of Victoria and Tasmania), *Submission 165*, p. 1.

³⁷ See, for example: Robyn Erwin, *Submission 164*; Hobsons Bay City Council, *Submission 67*.

³⁸ Dietitians Australia, *Submission 121*.

³⁹ Victorian Government, *Submission 167*, p. 13.

Box 4.4 An overview of food education in Victorian schools

In Victoria, food education is incorporated into the Victorian Curriculum, but its implementation can vary across schools. Some schools may include food education as part of its core curriculum program (primary), others may offer it on an elective basis (secondary). It is primarily integrated within the broader subject areas of Health and Physical Education and Design and Technologies.

Victorian Curriculum F–10

The Victorian Curriculum F–10 incorporates food education through the Health and Physical Education and Design and Technologies subjects. The aim is to teach students about nutrition, food selection, preparation, and the impact of processed and convenience foods. Students are equipped with the knowledge and skills to make healthy food choices, develop problem-solving abilities, and understand the influence of societal factors on their wellbeing. The curriculum also focuses on practical skills related to food preparation and contemporary food issues.

Food Studies (Victorian Certificate of Education)

The Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) Food Studies curriculum (2023–2027) is supported by Home Economics Victoria through teaching materials, including course outlines, lesson plans, worksheets, and video resources. The curriculum focuses on food systems, food production, nutrition, and contemporary food issues.

Local education initiatives in schools

The Committee received evidence on schools involved in local initiatives to improve the food literacy and wellbeing of students. For example, Shepparton Foodshare^a has partnered with Mooroopna Primary School to ‘provide meals and education on food skills to students’.

- a. Shepparton Foodshare is one of six regional foodshares in Victoria. Regional Foodshares are a food relief service which seeks to increase capacity and capability of regional supply and distribution of food.

Source: Home Economics Victoria, *Victorian Curriculum*, 2024, <<https://www.homeeconomics.com.au/curriculum-support/victorian-curriculum>> accessed 9 September 2024; Home Economics Victoria, *Victorian Certificate of Education*, 2024, <<https://www.homeeconomics.com.au/curriculum-support/victorian-certificate-of-education>> accessed 9 September 2024; Victorian Government, *Submission 167*, p. 23.

In its submission, Regional Food Security Alliance advocated that introducing school meals and teaching food literacy from primary school can ensure that no child goes without adequate food.⁴⁰ However, it emphasised that strong standards are needed to avoid meals reflecting ‘the least nutritious food’ found in the community.⁴¹ The

⁴⁰ Regional Food Security Alliance, *Submission 58*, p. 13.

⁴¹ Ibid.

Alliance noted several programs, some Victorian based and others international, to demonstrate the positive impact of food literacy programs in schools. It contended that:

- the United Kingdom's *Let's Get Cooking*,⁴² which has over 1.7 million participants, has shown that cooking clubs help reduce food insecurity
- Bendigo Foodshare's *Cooking for Change*⁴³ program highlights the importance of engaging students in a way that meets their social and emotional needs, motivating them through cooking to assist others
- Western District Food Share, which partners with local growers and nurseries to produce and donate spray-free vegetables, engages students in hands-on learning programs where they participate in farm visits, harvest produce, and help build emergency food orders for distribution across southwest Victoria.⁴⁴

At a public hearing, Gerry Goswell, Executive Director of Community Inclusion, Veterans and Youth at the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, reflected on the benefits of food literacy in schools:

some schools also offer cooking classes as part of the [School Breakfast program], and that is really designed to help build food literacy skills. I know again as a Committee you have heard quite a bit about healthy food and that being a sort of critical component of this work. We hear positive feedback about the flexibility to adapt that cooking class model to help young people and children from a pretty early age build the skills to prepare healthy and nutritious meals at home.⁴⁵

Madelaine Griffith from Foodbank Victoria also reflected on cooking classes telling the Committee:

we know from those schools that have participated in that that families are cooking more together at home. There is a real sense of connection for families within the class that obviously feeds back into the home. That is a particularly important aspect for reaching families for schools that might be harder to connect with, so it is a really fantastic program.⁴⁶

There was widespread support for expanding food literacy in schools. Several stakeholders recommended that the Victorian Government mandate healthy eating education in all Victorian educational settings, including providing resources.⁴⁷ Others

42 See: The Association of UK Dietitians, *Let's Get Cooking*, 2024, <<https://www.bda.uk.com/food-health/lets-get-cooking.html>> accessed 9 September 2024.

43 See: Bendigo Foodshare, *Cooking for Change*, <<https://bendigofoodshare.org.au/cooking-for-change>> accessed 9 September 2024.

44 Regional Food Security Alliance, *Submission 58*, p. 13.

45 Gerry Goswell, Executive Director, Community Inclusion, Veterans and Youth, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 53.

46 Madelaine Griffith, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 9.

47 See, for example: City of Greater Bendigo, *Submission 72*; Sustain: The Australian Food Network, *Submission 76*; Dietitians Australia, *Submission 121*.

supported expanding education, but did not discuss it in terms of a mandatory component of the school curriculum.⁴⁸

VACCHO argued for mandatory education in schools in its *FoodPATH* project. FoodPATH investigated policy recommendations to improve food security and nutrition outcomes for Aboriginal communities in Victoria. It made ten recommendations, including that the Victorian Government should ‘mandate nutrition and cooking education in schools’.⁴⁹ This project report was referenced and endorsed by a variety of stakeholders to the Inquiry, including food advocacy organisations,⁵⁰ academics and educational organisations,⁵¹ social service organisations⁵² and community organisations.⁵³

A common theme among stakeholders that supported expanding food literacy in schools was taking a place-based approach that involves local organisations and responds to local needs.⁵⁴ Place-based food literacy programs in schools offer significant opportunities to engage students and communities. These programs often involve partnerships between schools, local businesses, and community organisations to teach students about food systems, healthy eating, and sustainable practices. The central idea is to use local resources—such as nearby farms, community gardens, and local food producers—to connect students with their food environment.

In many place-based food literacy programs, local farmers, chefs, or food-related businesses collaborate with schools to provide hands-on learning experiences. These experiences might include farm visits, cooking classes, or gardening projects, which help students develop practical skills like growing, cooking, and preparing nutritious meals.⁵⁵ A common goal is to enhance students’ connection to their local food systems, fostering both a sense of community and a deeper understanding of sustainable, healthy eating practices.

Evidence to the Inquiry highlighted myriad benefits for a place-based approach to food literacy in schools:

- supports local economies and strengthens students ties to their communities
- can be culturally responsive to the diverse needs of the community by incorporating local food traditions and practices
- build a more robust understanding of food literacy and healthy eating.

⁴⁸ See, for example: The Salvation Army Australia, *Submission 103*; Yarra Ranges Emergency Relief Network (YRERN), *Submission 120*; Joint submission from University of Melbourne academics, *Submission 101*.

⁴⁹ Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, et. al., *FoodPATH Community Report: Food Policies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health*, 2023, p. 9.

⁵⁰ See, for example: Sustain: The Australian Food Network, *Submission 76*.

⁵¹ See, for example: Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition (IPAN) and Institute for Health Transformation, *Submission 136*.

⁵² See, for example: Joint submission from G21 organisations, *Submission 95*.

⁵³ See, for example: Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, *Submission 152*.

⁵⁴ See, for example: Joint submission from G21 organisations, *Submission 95*; City of Ballarat, *Submission 99*.

⁵⁵ Regional Food Security Alliance, *Submission 58*; The University of Melbourne Graduate Student Association, *Submission 96*; Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition (IPAN) and Institute for Health Transformation, *Submission 136*.

Committee comment

The Committee received significant evidence on the role of food literacy in reducing long-term risks of food insecurity. Stakeholders highlighted the importance of incorporating food education into school curriculums, noting the benefits of practical skills such as cooking, nutrition, and food preparation. Local initiatives have shown that engaging students in food literacy programs can enhance health outcomes and encourage community involvement.

FINDING 22: Including food literacy in school curriculums can equip young people with practical skills related to food preparation, nutrition, and healthy eating practices.

RECOMMENDATION 1: That the Victorian Government provide support to schools who wish to expand their food education programs, including encouraging them to take a place-based approach by working collaboratively with local communities to meet the specific needs and challenges of each region.

4.2.5 Culturally appropriate food literacy

Addressing food insecurity within multicultural communities requires a culturally sensitive approach that recognises and integrates their diverse dietary needs and food practices. Culturally appropriate food literacy is essential for supporting the health and well-being of multicultural and multifaith communities, particularly in Victoria, where diverse populations face unique challenges related to food access and education. For these communities, food literacy also encompasses an awareness of where to go to access food which meets an individual's needs. This can be particularly important for new immigrants and refugees.

Culturally and linguistically diverse communities, including refugees and people seeking asylum, face significant challenges related to food literacy and nutrition education. The Victorian Government highlighted that some of the factors increasing the risk of food insecurity in these communities are issues such as:

- poor food literacy and nutrition education
- a departure from traditional diet when migrating to Australia
- language barriers and difficulties with sourcing culturally appropriate and healthy food.⁵⁶

These challenges are compounded by other resettlement difficulties, including unemployment, poverty, and visa conditions, which further hinder access to nutritious food. Additionally, many individuals lack knowledge or understanding of the types

⁵⁶ Victorian Government, *Submission 167*, p. 13.

of foods available in Australian supermarkets, making it harder for them to make informed food choices.⁵⁷

This approach helps bridge the gap between unfamiliar food environments and the cultural preferences of these communities, making food literacy programs more relevant and impactful. Therese Watson from Greater Dandenong City Council provided an example:

recently we had Foodbank come with their Farms to Families markets, which are fabulous, but they had pumpkin. Our Afghan community do not eat pumpkin; they did not know what to do with this pumpkin. So at North Dandenong Neighbourhood House, Golsum, one of the women there, did classes on learning how to eat pumpkin, how to cook pumpkin, what you do with pumpkin.⁵⁸

The preservation and revival of traditional food knowledge was seen as vital components of culturally appropriate food literacy programs, especially in supporting the health and well-being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Abe Ropitini, Executive Director of Population Health at the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, emphasised the need for reviving and preserving Indigenous food knowledge. Mr Ropitini stated that ‘the knowledge is definitely still there, but the urgency of the need for its revival has never been more pressing’.⁵⁹ He argued that traditional food knowledge should be integrated into food literacy programs, highlighting initiatives like the community garden at Moogji⁶⁰ and the aquaculture system⁶¹ at Budj Bim.⁶²

Committee comment

Culturally appropriate food literacy is an important element to strengthen food security within Victoria’s diverse communities. By focusing on the unique dietary needs and cultural practices of multicultural and First Nations groups, food literacy programs can become more effective and meaningful. Supporting culturally safe spaces, preserving traditional food knowledge, and providing access to culturally appropriate food are essential components of a comprehensive strategy to improve food security and health outcomes for all Victorians.

An important aspect of food literacy in culturally and linguistically diverse communities is ensuring individuals know where to access culturally appropriate food. Access to familiar foods helps maintain cultural identity, supports dietary health by preserving traditional eating habits, and fosters community connections. Understanding where

57 Ibid.

58 Therese Watson, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 8–9.

59 Abe Ropitini, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 85.

60 Refer to: Moogji Aboriginal Council, *FoodPATH and Community Garden Program, 2023*, <<https://moogjiaboriginalcouncil.org.au/community-garden-program>> accessed 4 September 2024.

61 Refer to: Budj Bim Cultural Landscape, *About Us*, <<https://www.budjbim.com.au/about-us>> accessed 4 September 2024.

62 Abe Ropitini, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 85.

to find culturally relevant foods ensures that individuals can buy food that aligns with their heritage and preferences.

FINDING 23: Culturally appropriate food literacy that aligns food education with cultural practices and needs helps improve food security in multicultural and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

RECOMMENDATION 2: That the Victorian Government support Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to deliver place-based food literacy programs.

RECOMMENDATION 3: That the Victorian Government support First Nations communities with policies and resources to advance their goals and aspirations for food sovereignty. This should begin with implementing the recommendations outlined in the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation's *FoodPATH* report.

RECOMMENDATION 4: That the Victorian Government work with culturally and linguistically diverse community groups to deliver place-based food literacy programs.

4.2.6 Ensuring best practice programs: funding and continuous monitoring

Continuous evaluation and research into food literacy programs are necessary to assess their effectiveness and identify areas for improvement. This can involve tracking health outcomes, food security status and community engagement to refine program content and delivery methods. This ongoing evaluation can also be used to assess government funding requirements supports. Consistent investment is needed to ensure these programs can reach all segments of the population and adapt to changing needs.

RECOMMENDATION 5: That the Victorian Government establish a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation framework for food literacy and security programs it implements, funds or otherwise supports. Evaluation should ensure that programs are effective, with strategies refined where needed, and appropriately supported.

4.3 Accessing healthy food

Access to healthy food is a critical component of ensuring community well-being and reducing food insecurity across Victoria. Chapter 6 will consider the need for a Victorian food security strategy. An important component of any strategy is ensuring access to healthy food and ensuring people have adequate choice to have a nutritious diet.

This Section highlights issues that may sit distinctly from the development of a formal strategy:

- Victoria’s School Breakfast Clubs programs
- food retail planning
- food labelling.

These areas present unique challenges and opportunities to address food access and have a significant role in supporting food security at a community level.

4.3.1 Victoria’s School Breakfast Clubs program

The brekkie club is such a positive culture in our school. It is at regular time when students, staff and community members come together and share food. There is no judgement, no exclusion and no segregation. Everyone is invited, the doors are always open and everyone can have as much to eat as they want.

Respondent to annual school survey provided by Madelaine Griffith, Manager, Research and Design, Foodbank Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

One of the most significant government investments into food security in Victoria is the School Breakfast Clubs program. The program offers ‘free and healthy food in all Victorian government schools that opt in’.⁶³ Box 4.5 below provides an overview of the program, including the 2024/25 Budget expansion.

Box 4.5 Victoria’s School Breakfast Clubs program

The Victorian Government’s School Breakfast Clubs program provides free healthy breakfasts, lunches, snacks, and take-home packs to students in participating government schools. Launched in 2016, the program has served over 40 million meals and aims to address food insecurity and improve educational outcomes for disadvantaged students. The program’s current delivery partner is Foodbank Victoria.

The program provides:

- healthy breakfasts to students in participating schools
- nutritious lunches, snacks and take-home packs for students in need
- cooking classes for families at 115 participating schools.

The program operates under a ‘flexible delivery model’ where schools can tailor it to their specific needs, such as operating a ‘café style breakfast set up or a ‘grab and go’ service.

(Continued)

⁶³ Victorian Government, *School Breakfast Clubs Program*, 2024, <<https://www.vic.gov.au/school-breakfast-clubs-program#about-the-school-breakfast-clubs-program>> accessed 13 September 2024.

Box 4.5 Continued**2024/25 Budget commitment**

In the 2024/25 Budget, the Victorian Government announced it would fund a further \$21.1 million to expand the program to all government schools who wish to opt in. This funding built on the \$141.2 million invested in the program since 2016, with \$69.5 million provided in the 2023/24 Budget to continue the program.

The expanded program will invite 150 additional schools to join by June 2025, with schools on the waiting list being given priority for 2024. From July 2025, all Victorian government schools will be invited to participate in the program.

Source: Victorian Government, *School Breakfast Clubs Program, 2024*, <<https://www.vic.gov.au/school-breakfast-clubs-program#about-the-school-breakfast-clubs-program>> accessed 13 September 2024; Victorian Government, *Submission 167*, p. 25.

Gerry Goswell from the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing highlighted the program's expansion, stating that it could provide breakfast to an additional 200,000 students, increasing the reach of the program by 50%.⁶⁴ This expansion is expected to enhance student attendance, concentration, and academic outcomes.

Food donations are an integral part of the school breakfast program. For example, Paul Harker, Chief Commercial Officer of the Woolworths Group, explained the company's contribution to the program (as well as broader efforts to provide healthy food to children):

In the 2023 financial year in Victoria we donated \$11.5 million worth of food, which is the equivalent of more than 6 million meals, to food relief programs. This is in addition to the \$300,000 worth of food donated directly to local school breakfast programs and the 5.9 million pieces of fruit given away through our free fruit for kids program in stores.⁶⁵

As noted in Box 4.5 above, Foodbank Victoria is the delivery partner for the program. Its submission highlighted that since 2016, Foodbank Victoria has delivered 45 million meals to participating Victorian primary and secondary schools.⁶⁶ Representatives from the food relief service reflected on the 'long history of the benefit of the program'.⁶⁷ Madelaine Griffith discussed some recent feedback Foodbank received in its annual survey on the outcomes of the program for students, telling the Committee:

it has an impact on children's attendance at school, children's concentration, their ability to learn, the relationships between the school and the home, and the relationships between the school and the students. It is really wide reaching in terms of the benefits

⁶⁴ Gerry Goswell, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 53.

⁶⁵ Paul Harker, Chief Commercial Officer, Woolworths Group, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 40.

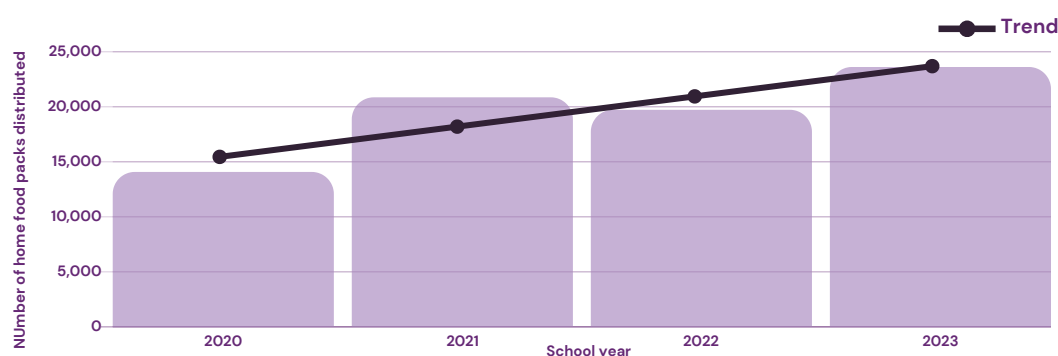
⁶⁶ Foodbank Victoria, *Submission 137*, p. 14.

⁶⁷ Madelaine Griffith, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 9.

of it, and obviously the more schools that it can be in, the more children are supported – and families.⁶⁸

Through the program, Foodbank Victoria also provides at-need students and families with ‘home food packs’. Its submission suggested that the rising demand for this service is linked to the cost-of-living crisis many households are experiencing. It noted that ‘during COVID years, schools reported an unexpected number of families approaching them for food relief and these numbers continue to rise’.⁶⁹ Foodbank Victoria provided data to demonstrate the increased demand for the home food packs (see Figure 4.1 below).

Figure 4.1 Distribution of home food pack units via the School Breakfast Clubs program



Source: Foodbank Victoria, *Submission 137*, p. 15.

Foodbank added that schools are developing their own initiatives (such as ‘pantries’) to assist families at need.⁷⁰

Other stakeholders also discussed the broader benefits of school-based food relief initiatives, including reducing stigma and fostering a sense of community. Stakeholders identified these initiatives as beneficial because:

- improving school performance and behaviour, including concentration and emotional self-regulation⁷¹
- increased school attendance⁷²
- reduction of stigma associated with food insecurity, especially due to the universal nature of the program⁷³
- enhances social connections in the school and broader community⁷⁴

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Foodbank Victoria, *Submission 137*, p. 14.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 15.

⁷¹ See, for example: Victorian Government, *Submission 167*; Elise Cook, Co-Chief Executive Officer, Eat Up Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*.

⁷² See, for example: Foodbank Victoria, *Submission 137*; Victorian Council of Social Services (VCOSS), *Submission 176*.

⁷³ See, for example: Brimbank City Council, *Submission 173*.

⁷⁴ See, for example: Eat Up Australia, *Submission 111*; Brimbank City Council, *Submission 173*.

- reduces parental burden, particularly important for low-income and struggling households⁷⁵
- improved health and wellbeing, including physical health, growth and development.⁷⁶

Stakeholders also advocated for the expansion of this program, not only in terms of the breadth of the project, but related services provided through schools.

The Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation, a charity organisation which educates young people on growing, harvesting and preparing fresh food, described school-based food relief as ‘fragmented’:

Some schools have free food provided by their local Food Hub and Department of Education funded food is also provided from Melbourne for many school breakfast programs. Some have Stephanie Alexander programs, some cover the gamut from teaching growing and cooking to reduce food insecurity in their communities. Some have no food security programs at all.⁷⁷

It contended that a place-based approach to assisting schools providing student food relief was more appropriate:

Schools know what best they need and how they can integrate it into their programs, so a localised purchasing system rather than the current centralised system of food into schools should be implemented.⁷⁸

A place-based approach to equipping schools to provide food relief to students and their families was supported by other stakeholders. At a public hearing, Madelaine Griffith from Foodbank Victoria outlined that many schools provide food relief outside of the breakfast program and argued they are ‘trust space’ so a place-based expansion of food relief in schools would be a good opportunity.⁷⁹

The Committee was informed that Mooroopna Park Primary School’s approach to food relief may offer a compelling example of how to effectively expand this service for students. Several stakeholders highlighted the primary school’s approach, specifically:

- Victorian Council of Social Service (Submission 176)
- Regional Food Security Alliance (Submission 58)
- Hume and Greater Shepparton Community Hubs (Submission 110)
- Eat Up Australia (Submission 111).

Mooroopna Park Primary School’s Healthy Food Program is outlined in Case Study 4.1 below.

⁷⁵ See, for example: Bellarine Community Health, *Submission 153*.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation, *Submission 82*, p. 4.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Madelaine Griffith, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 9.

Case Study 4.1 Mooroopna Park Primary's Healthy Food Program

Mooroopna Park Primary School runs a Healthy Food Program providing daily nutritious meals for all students. Meals include breakfast, morning tea, and lunch, with options like cereals, fruit, muffins, and a variety of cooked dishes. The program is free to all students. To ensure its ongoing sustainability, it is supported by local sponsors such as businesses and organisations.

According to Eat Up Australia, Mooroopna Park is in the top 3% of the most disadvantaged schools in country. Its submission outlined that:

- 43% of families experience family violence
- 46% have involvement with the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing
- 16 students are in out-of-home care
- 60% of students are from single-parent homes
- 40% of students are from an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander background
- 8% of students are from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Eat Up Australia further noted that part of the rationale for Mooroopna Park's program was 'discovering 80% of their students were coming to school with no food or small amounts of food with low nutritional value'.

Teachers report that students are more focused, better behaved, and perform better academically since the program's introduction. The initiative is part of a broader effort to address food insecurity and has had a significant impact on both the wellbeing and academic performance of students.

Source: Mooroopna Park Primary School, *Healthy Food Program*, <<https://www.mpps.vic.edu.au/page/12/Healthy-Food-Program>> accessed 16 September 2024; Schools Vic, *Regional primary school wins a Victorian Early Years Award, 2023*, <<https://www.schools.vic.gov.au/regional-primary-school-wins-victorian-early-years-award>> accessed 16 September 2024; Will Kendrew, 'Mooroopna Park Primary School wins award as free food transforms behaviour, attendance', *ABC News*, 22 August 2022, <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-08-22/mooroopna-park-school-free-food-profound-student-improvements/101346996>> accessed 16 September 2024; Eat Up Australia, *Submission 111*.

A common compliment of Mooroopna Park Primary School's Healthy Foods Program was that it extended beyond a breakfast program, providing food to students throughout the day.⁸⁰

Several stakeholders believed that Victoria should investigate options for an in-school meal program, particularly for the highest needs schools, or at least increasing existing

⁸⁰ Hume and Greater Shepparton Community Hubs, *Submission 110*; Eat Up Australia, *Submission 111*.

investments.⁸¹ Amanda Chan, Advocacy Coordinator at Financial Counselling Victoria, called for a ‘wholesale investment into school breakfast and lunch clubs’.⁸²

At a public hearing, Eat Up Australia representatives discussed the opportunity for the Victorian Government to take a leadership role in expanding in-school meal programs. Eat Up proposed piloting a program targeted at schools with the highest levels of food insecurity. This pilot would focus on feeding all students at these schools, with the aim of reducing stigma and improving nutritional intake.⁸³ Elise Cook, Co-Chief Executive Officer of Eat Up Australia, noted it could be a first-of-its-kind by ‘directly address[ing] socioeconomic disadvantage’.⁸⁴

We hear anecdotally from teachers that there are many kids who prior to having the lunch program at the school were being kept home from school, possibly because parents were embarrassed to send their kids to school without lunch or fearful that it would trigger a department of human services contact from the school. Then once they learn that the lunches are at the school, the attendance increases, which is really phenomenal. Then there are all the other flow-on benefits of having a full tummy at school – being able to engage better in the classroom and improved educational outcomes.

Elise Cook, Co-Chief Executive Officer, Eat Up Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 76.

Committee comment

In the Committee’s view, the success of the Victoria’s School Breakfast Clubs program in fostering inclusion and improving student outcomes—such as concentration, attendance, and social connectedness—underscores the need for its expansion to all schools across the State. By making this program universally available, both government and non-government schools would be able to provide a safety net against food insecurity, ensuring that every child has access to nutritious meals. The Committee believes that this program should be based on identifying the most vulnerable students regardless of whether they are a government or non-government school.

Further, the Committee recommends that the Victorian Government expand food relief in schools by trialling a comprehensive school meal program that provides breakfast through to lunch in the most at-risk schools. This targeted initiative would aim to support students facing food insecurity by improving access to nutritious meals throughout the school day. The trial should prioritise schools with the highest vulnerability indicators, using partnerships with local food providers and community organisations to ensure the program is sustainable and meets the needs of the most disadvantaged students.

⁸¹ See, for example: Eat Up Australia, *Submission 111*; Regional Food Security Alliance, *Submission 58*.

⁸² Amanda Chan, Advocacy Coordinator at Financial Counselling Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 20.

⁸³ Elise Cook, Co-Chief Executive Officer, Eat Up Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 73–74.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

By prioritising schools with the highest levels of food insecurity, the program can help address immediate nutritional needs, promote academic engagement, and enhance student wellbeing. Partnering with local food suppliers, community organisations, and businesses would create a sustainable framework that supports all children, regardless of their school type, in achieving better educational and health outcomes.

The Committee understands that, if the trial were to prove successful, a school meal program would replace the Victorian School Breakfast Clubs program.

RECOMMENDATION 6: That the Victorian Government expand the Victorian School Breakfast Clubs program so that it is available to all Victorian schools who wish to opt in.

RECOMMENDATION 7: That the Victorian Government trial and evaluate a school meal program that provides breakfast through to lunch, using partnerships with local food providers and community organisations. The trial should target schools with high rates of food insecurity and other forms of disadvantage.

RECOMMENDATION 8: Following a review of the outcome of the trial, that the Victorian Government investigate the delivery of a school meal program to all schools in need.

4.3.2 Land use planning and access to healthy food options

The Committee received evidence from several stakeholders on the need to align land-use planning with health and food security priorities. Advocates called for reforms to Victoria's planning laws that prioritise community well-being, promote sustainable food systems, and ensure access to healthy food.

At a public hearing, Dr Nick Rose, Executive Director of Sustain, argued that the choices people make are not solely individual but are 'shaped by the planning framework, by government policy, and by the interests of corporations – very powerful corporations'.⁸⁵ He emphasised the role of the 'commercial determinants of health'.⁸⁶ Dr Rose highlighted the importance of understanding 'the context and the environments in which individuals, particularly in low-SES [socioeconomic status] communities, are making their choices', as they are influenced by external factors such as marketing.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Dr Nick Rose, Executive Director, Sustain: The Australian Food Network, public hearing, 21 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 34.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

Sustain advocated for the Victorian Government to revise:

the Victorian planning provisions (Planning & Environment Act 1987) to mandate health and food security as primary considerations when local governments and other planning authorities are making planning decisions.⁸⁸

This submission was endorsed by several local councils as well as other stakeholders to the Inquiry.⁸⁹

The Common Ground Project argued changes to Victoria's planning provisions are necessary to 'decrease the prevalence of unhealthy food outlets built disproportionately in new housing developments where they are also close to schools and daycares'.⁹⁰

Similarly, the City of Greater Bendigo contended that changes to planning provisions would:

allow local governments flexibility in controlling fast food outlets, including zoning amendments that require permits for all fast-food outlets regardless of zone; consideration of current fast food outlet density in the area; proximity to schools and early years services and health indicators of the community.⁹¹

4.3.3 Food labelling

Concerns were raised with the Committee about the adequacy of food labelling. Stakeholders highlighted that labels are an important tool for households to understand how healthy their food is. However, there were criticisms about the quality and consistency of food labelling, such as their readability and limited uptake.⁹²

The Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance provided an example from Chile of effective food labelling aimed at promoting healthy choices. Chile introduced the Law of Food Labelling and Advertising in 2012 to address 'obesity and non-communicable disease epidemics'.⁹³ The law requires front-of-package nutritional warnings on foods that exceed sugar, sodium, or saturated fat thresholds. Consequently, the Alliance argued it has reduced consumption of ultra-processed foods and improved consumer information and awareness of food quality.⁹⁴ Other countries have since adopted similar food labelling models.⁹⁵

⁸⁸ Sustain: The Australian Food Network, *Submission 76*, p. 6.

⁸⁹ See, for example: Mount Alexander Shire Council, *Submission 119*; Maribyrnong City Council, *Submission 85*, Common Ground Project, *Submission 147*; VicHealth, *Submission 177*.

⁹⁰ Common Ground Project, *Submission 147*, p. 3.

⁹¹ City of Greater Bendigo, *Submission 72*, p. 13.

⁹² See, for example: Joint submission from G21 organisations, *Submission 95*; Greater Dandenong City Council, *Submission 113*; Sustain: The Australian Food Network, *Submission 76*; Dietitians Australia, *Submission 121*; Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition and Institute for Health Transformation, *Submission 136*; Uniting Church in Australia (Synod of Victoria and Tasmania), *Submission 165*.

⁹³ Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance, *Submission 139*, p. 21.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Such as Mexico, Peru and Brazil.

Box 4.6 About the Health Star rating

The Health Star Rating is a front-of-pack labelling system that rates the overall nutritional profile of packaged food, helping consumers make healthier choices by providing a rating from 0.5 to 5 stars. The more stars, the healthier the food option.

Figure: Example Health Star rating



The rating is calculated using a formula that considers both risk components (total energy, saturated fat, sodium, and sugar) and beneficial components (fibre, protein, and content of fruits, vegetables, nuts, and legumes). The system does not factor in other health effects like preservatives or organic production. Ratings are provided per 100g or 100mL for easy comparison, along with additional nutrient information such as energy or protein content.

The system is voluntary and generally applies to packaged products, with some exceptions like fresh produce, condiments, single-ingredient foods (e.g., flour), and non-nutritive items (e.g., tea, coffee). Excluded categories include alcohol, infant foods, sports foods, and medical-purpose foods.

Source: *Health Star Rating System*, <<http://www.healthstarrating.gov.au/internet/healthstarrating/publishing.nsf/Content/About-health-stars>> accessed 18 September 2024.

Several stakeholders believed that the Health Star rating should be mandatory across all packaged food.⁹⁶ The 2023 *FoodPATH* report, jointly developed by six Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations and Deakin University, also recommended that the Health Star system be mandated and that governments should ensure ‘plain language information on food labels to improve food knowledge and skills’.⁹⁷ This report was recognised by several stakeholders in their evidence.⁹⁸

The Committee was made aware of potential inadequacies in the Health Star system. The Uniting Church in Australia (Synod of Victoria and Tasmania) noted the findings of a 2018 study into the Health Star rating system.⁹⁹ This study found in 2018 only 31% of

⁹⁶ Sustain: The Australian Food Network, *Submission 76*; Dietitians Australia, *Submission 121*; Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition (IPAN) and Institute for Health Transformation (IHT), *Submission 136*.

⁹⁷ Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, et. al., *Food policies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health (FoodPATH): Community Report, 2023*, p. 22.

⁹⁸ See, for example: Joint submission from Monash University academics, *Submission 108*; Dietitians Australia, *Submission 121*; Common Ground Project, *Submission 147*; Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO), *Submission 152*; Melton City Council, *Submission 74*; Sustain: The Australian Food Network, *Submission 76*; Joint submission from G21 organisations, *Submission 95*.

⁹⁹ Uniting Church in Australia (Synod of Victoria and Tasmania), *Submission 165*, pp. 7–8.

eligible products displayed the rating, and that some discretionary foods with high star ratings misled consumers to thinking they were healthier.¹⁰⁰

The Synod also noted that previous evidence has shown that ‘misalignments existed between the Health Star rating system and the Australian Dietary Guidelines, often promoting discretionary and ultra-processed foods’.¹⁰¹ Further, while consumers found the system helpful for ‘quick comparisons’, many lacked confidence in the criteria, particularly for highly processed foods.¹⁰²

FINDING 24: While some consumers find the Health Star rating system helpful, others believe the system should be improved to provide more reliable information.

4.4 Accessing culturally appropriate food

Stakeholders called for an increase in the availability of culturally appropriate food, largely focusing on ways to improve its provision in the food relief sector. Improving access to culturally appropriate food is crucial for meeting the diverse needs of Victoria’s multicultural communities, especially those relying on food relief services. Culturally appropriate food is defined as food that aligns with the religious, cultural, and dietary practices of different populations. The Victorian Government noted that multicultural communities, including refugees and asylum seekers, often face challenges such as:

- departure from traditional diet when migrating to Australia
- language barriers and difficulties with sourcing culturally appropriate and healthy food
- challenges faced during resettlement (unemployment, poverty, visa conditions)
- lack of knowledge or understanding of the types of foods available in Australian supermarkets.¹⁰³

In its submission, Foodbank Victoria highlighted the high demand for culturally appropriate food products:

Foodbank Victoria compiled data on requested products from our charity partners over a 12-month period and found that, particularly in highly culturally diverse local government areas, the products most requested were foods that would allow these communities to cook their cultural and familiar foods in the home.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ MP Consulting, *Health Star Rating System: Five Year Review Report*, 2019, p. 23.

¹⁰¹ Uniting Church in Australia (Synod of Victoria and Tasmania), *Submission 165*, p. 8.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Victorian Government, *Submission 167*, p. 13.

¹⁰⁴ Foodbank Victoria, *Submission 137*, p. 12.

The food relief provider outlined the experience of its charity partners', noting they have found that:

some cultures find it more challenging to reach out for food relief. Stigma and shame play a huge part in the reluctance to access available food relief ... Diverse perceptions of health can also influence community experience of food relief and food insecurity. For example, items such as canned food, which are very common in food relief programs, are perceived as unhealthy and there is a preference for fresh or dried items in their place.¹⁰⁵

This was echoed in the Government's submission which emphasised that culturally appropriate food 'mitigates some multicultural Victorians lack of awareness of Australian food'.¹⁰⁶ By taking a culturally diverse approach to food service it can support the health and wellbeing of Victoria's multicultural and multifaith communities.¹⁰⁷

Stakeholders argued that some food insecurity solutions do not sufficiently consider the cultural and dietary needs of diverse communities. Foodprint Melbourne's submission stated that efforts to ensure equitable access to culturally appropriate food must be embedded in broader food security strategies.¹⁰⁸ This includes a 'food systems approach' that addresses not only food availability but also access culturally appropriate food.¹⁰⁹

Zakaria Wahid from the Islamic Council of Victoria highlighted the need for culturally appropriate food aid, particularly halal food for Muslim communities, stating that many major food bank providers 'do not have any capacity to provide it at this time, because they are overloaded'.¹¹⁰ He also noted the additional barriers faced by multicultural communities, including language difficulties in navigating and accessing food aid, which are further compounded by larger family sizes, increasing the strain on resources.¹¹¹

when it comes to CALD communities specifically there is a need for culturally appropriate food aid. In the context of Muslim communities – of course halal food – and other multicultural communities there are going to be various different needs, and when it comes to the major food bank providers, most of them cannot provide culturally appropriately.

Zakaria Wahid, General Manager, Islamic Council of Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 56.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Victorian Government, *Submission 167*, p. 14.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Foodprint Melbourne, *Submission 157*.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Zakaria Wahid, General Manager, Islamic Council of Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 56.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

Gateway Health indicated that rural and regional areas are ‘not always equipped to provide culturally appropriate food relief support’.¹¹² During crisis periods, it can be even more difficult for rural and regional areas to source culturally appropriate food for people in need. Reflecting on Shepparton’s experience in the aftermath of the 2022 flood event, Warren Elliot, External Communications Manager (Victoria) for The Salvation Army Australia, stated:

In Shepparton there were definitely cultural issues around that as well with culturally appropriate food, and the Sikhs and the Salvation Army and other groups were able to work together.¹¹³

To address these challenges, stakeholders recommended working with organisations that are closely connected to their communities. Using South East Community Links as an example, Zyl Hovenga-Wauchope from Financial Counselling Victoria told the Committee:

for South East Community Links, I think it is about 25 per cent of the client base is Afghan. You know, they are very well attuned to the needs of their communities. What I would suggest is ... actually looking for partners in the community to listen to what their community’s needs are and who is coming for support, so that then they can make those kinds of adaptations.¹¹⁴

This localised approach allows food relief providers to adapt their services to the specific cultural needs of the communities they serve, rather than relying on a centralised, one-size-fits-all model.

A place-based approach could also extend to grocery retail, not just food relief services. At a public hearing, Christine Crowley, Melbourne City Manager at OzHarvest, reflected on what may constitute ‘essential grocery items’ acknowledging these will differ based on diverse cultural and dietary needs.¹¹⁵

To ensure affordability, some stakeholder suggested exploring a ‘social supermarket’ model. Not only would this support access to healthy food, but it can also be tailored to local needs to ensure access to culturally appropriate food as well. According to the Centre for Social Impact, a social supermarket refers to ‘a community hub that provides an alternative way for people to access affordable food, as well as social support, services, and opportunities for connection’.¹¹⁶ A not-for-profit grocery shop is an example of a social supermarket.

Madelaine Griffith from Foodbank Victoria explained that these supermarkets can offer culturally appropriate food at an affordable price, allowing individuals to select

¹¹² Gateway Health, *Submission 144*, p. 1.

¹¹³ Warren Elliot, External Communications Manager, Victoria, The Salvation Army Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 48.

¹¹⁴ Zyl Hovenga-Wauchope, Executive Officer, Financial Counselling Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 21.

¹¹⁵ Christine Crowley, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 7.

¹¹⁶ Centre for Social Impact, *What is a social supermarket and how do they tackle food insecurity?*, 2024, <<https://www.csi.edu.au/news/what-is-a-social-supermarket-and-how-do-they-tackle-food-insecurity/>> accessed 8 October 2024.

items that align with their cultural preferences.¹¹⁷ The food relief service found that in culturally diverse areas, the most requested products were those that allowed communities to ‘cook their cultural and familiar foods in the home’.¹¹⁸

In addition to social supermarket, other initiatives to increase access to culturally appropriate food include:

- community gardens
- informal markets
- open pantries
- school-based food distribution
- shared cooking
- cultural food literacy and cooking classes.¹¹⁹

In the Committee’s view, improving access to culturally appropriate food requires a comprehensive approach that includes infrastructure investments like social supermarkets, as well as partnerships with local organisations. By addressing both the cultural and nutritional needs of diverse communities, food security programs can provide more meaningful and effective support. As the Victorian Government noted, ensuring food relief is culturally appropriate not only reduces food waste but also provides a ‘dignified experience’ and supports the health and wellbeing of multicultural and multifaith communities. This approach is essential to ensuring equitable access to food for all Victorians.

FINDING 25: Access to culturally appropriate food is essential for meeting the needs of Victoria’s diverse communities, particularly those relying on food relief services.

4.5 Examining a *Food is Medicine* approach

a patient might present to their GP and they might be early diagnosed or at risk of diabetes. As part of a care plan that the GP might develop with the patient, instead of just putting them on some early medication, so first-line drug therapy for the prevention of diabetes, they would actually have as part of their care plan ... a referral to such programs as our Food is Medicine program. This Food is Medicine program would then allow them to, for example, access subsidised fresh fruit and vegetables or subsidised healthy preprepared meals that are home delivered.

Kristy Law, Research Associate and PhD Candidate, Food Policy, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 15.

¹¹⁷ Madelaine Griffith, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 7.

¹¹⁸ Foodbank Victoria, *Submission 137*, p. 16.

¹¹⁹ See, for example: Foodbank Victoria, *Submission 137*.

An emerging approach in mitigating food insecurity is ‘Food is Medicine’. This approach sits at the intersection of nutrition and healthcare, including initiatives such as medically tailored meals and groceries or fresh produce prescriptions from healthcare professionals. In its submission, Foodbank Victoria—who supported exploration of this approach—explained:

Produce prescription programs are associated with increased consumption of fruit and vegetables per day and other clinically significant improvements in chronic disease markers, especially in settings where people have limited access to and knowledge of nutritious foods. They typically have a nutrition education component to the programs as well. Recent US research into the economic impacts of produce prescription programs demonstrated that as well as generating long-term health gains, they can be highly cost effective.¹²⁰

Foodbank noted that there is a ‘research project currently underway in Australia, exploring the efficacy and cost-effectiveness of providing free fresh fruits and vegetables to food insecure patients with type 2 diabetes’.¹²¹ Box 4.7 below provides an overview of this research project.

Box 4.7 ‘Produce prescription’ project

The ‘Produce Prescription’ project, led by The George Institute for Global Health and UNSW Sydney, provides free fruit and vegetables to financially disadvantaged patients with Type 2 diabetes (T2D) in Sydney to improve diet-related health outcomes.

This four-year trial aims to assess whether subsidising fresh produce can improve blood sugar control, reduce the reliance on medications, and cut healthcare costs. It is due for completion in 2027.

Source: Future Food Systems, *Produce prescriptions: Delivering free fruit & veg to cut T2D costs*, 2023, <<https://www.futurefoodsystems.com.au/produce-prescriptions-delivering-free-fruit-veg-to-cut-t2d-costs>> accessed 19 September 2024.

At a public hearing, representatives from The George Institute for Global Health (one of the leads in the project) explained the Food is Medicine approach to food insecurity further. Kristy Law, Research Associate and PhD Candidate in Food Policy, stated:

Food is Medicine represents a range of food-based interventions integrated into the healthcare system for people with specific diet-sensitive conditions and social needs, such as food insecurity ... Food is Medicine programs reflect a simple but powerful concept: access to nutritious food is crucial for good health and mental resilience.¹²²

¹²⁰ Foodbank Victoria, *Submission 137*, p. 13.

¹²¹ Ibid. See: <https://www.futurefoodsystems.com.au/produce-prescriptions-delivering-free-fruit-veg-to-cut-t2d-costs>.

¹²² Kristy Law, Research Associate and PhD Candidate, Food Policy, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11.

SecondBite | FareShare, a food relief service provider, highlighted the ‘growing interest’ in Food is Medicine initiatives. It contended that ‘traditional food relief does not often take the health condition of a recipient into account when providing support’.¹²³ The provider also noted ‘emerging evidence’ which showed medically tailored meals for people experiencing socioeconomic hardship had ‘improve[d] health and wellbeing, reduce[d] nutrition insecurity and subsequently, inequality surrounding access to nutritious food’.¹²⁴ However, it acknowledged that ‘Australia lacks high-quality evidence demonstrating the benefit that targeted healthy meal plans have on particular health conditions’.¹²⁵

FINDING 26: ‘Food is Medicine’ initiatives are an emerging approach to healthcare which integrate food-based interventions into care plans. These initiatives aim to address both nutritional needs and health conditions by providing access to healthy, tailored food options through medical referrals.

4.6 Mitigating food insecurity must prioritise nutritious and culturally appropriate food

Ensuring access to both nutritious and culturally appropriate food is critical in addressing food insecurity across Victoria. Nutritious food is vital for maintaining health, while culturally appropriate food allows individuals and communities to preserve their dietary practices and cultural identities. Both of these are essential for wellbeing and social inclusion. Recognising the importance of both elements in food security strategies will promote not only physical health but also social and cultural resilience.

The Committee acknowledges that food security programs must move beyond simply providing food, to ensuring that it is nutritious and aligns with the cultural preferences of the diverse communities in Victoria. This requires collaboration with local organisations and community groups to tailor food relief services and food literacy programs to meet specific needs.

Food literacy, which encompasses knowledge about nutrition, budgeting, and food preparation, should also reflect Victoria’s diversity. Ensuring that educational programs are culturally relevant enhances their effectiveness, enabling communities to make informed choices that respect both their nutritional needs and cultural heritage.

¹²³ SecondBite | FareShare, *Submission 171*, p. 8.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

Chapter 5

Improving access to food: short-term solutions

5.1 Introduction

This Report has established that food insecurity is a multifaceted issue driven by factors such as rising living costs and inadequate income support, fuelling increased demand for food relief. Stakeholders have identified a range of potential interventions, including policy changes, social enterprise initiatives, and strategies to address food waste. This Chapter examines short-term actions that the Victorian Government can take to improve access to food for vulnerable populations, addressing immediate challenges while laying the groundwork for long-term strategies.

The Committee's recommendations seek to offer solutions that can be implemented in the near term to improve food access for individuals and families across Victoria. These initiatives are intended to complement longer-term efforts—particularly the development of a Victorian Food Security Strategy (see Chapter 6)—necessary to create a more equitable and sustainable food system in Victoria.

5.2 A right to food?

The right to adequate food is a well-established right under the International Bill of Rights. The 1966 *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (ICESCR), for example, states that everyone has the right to 'an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food', as well as the right to 'be free from hunger'.¹ A similar right is found in the 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR).² Australia is a signatory to both these documents.

Although Australia has an obligation to realise the rights under the ICESCR by all appropriate means, it has not fully incorporated the treaty into legislation. In 2017, the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) expressed its concern about this and recommended that Australia 'take immediate steps to incorporate fully the Covenant provisions into the State party's legal order so as to render them justiciable in domestic courts'.³

¹ *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, United Nations General Assembly, signed 16 December 1966, UNTS 993, (entered into force 3 January 1976) art 11.

² *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, United Nations General Assembly, adopted 10 December 1948, GA Res 217, art 25.

³ Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, *Concluding observations on the fifth periodic report of Australia*, 11 July 2017, p. 2.

Beyond its failure to incorporate the ICESCR into domestic legislation, the Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance argued that Australia has failed to achieve the right to food in light of '[i]ncomes that are inadequate for covering the costs of living', '[h]igh rates of diet-related diseases', and '[w]ater being undrinkable in many remote communities'.⁴

CESCR has similarly drawn a connection between poverty and the right to food, elaborating that the right to adequate food:

is indivisibly linked to the inherent dignity of the human person and is indispensable for the fulfilment of other human rights enshrined in the International Bill of Human Rights. It is also inseparable from social justice, requiring the adoption of appropriate economic, environmental and social policies, at both the national and international levels, oriented to the eradication of poverty and the fulfilment of all human rights for all.⁵

A number of stakeholders called on the Victorian Government to enshrine the right to food in state legislation.⁶ In doing so, many adopted the wording of a cross-sector Consensus Statement prepared by VicHealth and the Food System and Food Security Working Group, recommending that the Government:

Create an enabling policy environment to transform Victoria's food system by legislating the right to food in Victoria and embedding it into all relevant State and Local Government policies, budgeting processes and activities.⁷

Published in 2022 and reflected in various submissions to this Inquiry, the Consensus Statement contended that:

while Australia is a signatory to international human rights laws that recognise and agree to the fundamental right to food in principle, this right is not recognised in domestic law, including the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities ... and relevant government policy frameworks, meaning it cannot be legally enforced in practice.⁸

In light of this, it argued that the Government should:

introduce a Right to Food Act to amend the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006 and provide the formal mechanism to uphold these rights. Implementation of the Right to Food law, and in particular, where local governments and communities have responsibility, must have adequate financing and resourcing ...⁹

⁴ Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance, *Submission 139*, p. 9.

⁵ Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, *General comment 12: The right to adequate food (Art.11)*, 12 May 1999, p. 2.

⁶ See, for example, City of Greater Bendigo, *Submission 72*, p. 16; Sustain: The Australian Food Network, *Submission 76*, p. 6; Dietitians Australia, *Submission 121*, p. 2.

⁷ Victorian Food Security and Food Systems Working Group, *Towards a Healthy, Regenerative, and Equitable Food System in Victoria: A Consensus Statement*, 2022, p. 5.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

If it were enshrined in the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* (Vic), the right to adequate food would be reflected in:

- statements of compatibility created in respect of Bills introduced in Parliament
- interpretations of the law, which must as far as possible be compatible with human rights
- the conduct of public authorities, which must be compatible with human rights
- the actions of the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, which can intervene in court or tribunal proceedings where questions of law arise in relation to human rights.¹⁰

Regarding the recommendation to embed the right to food into all relevant state and local government policies, budget processes and activities, stakeholders argued that any whole-of-government food security strategy should be grounded in the human right to food.¹¹

At a public hearing, Dr Rachel Carey pointed to Scotland's *Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act 2022* as 'the best example of a comprehensive legislative and policy framework which is being underpinned by a human right to food approach'.¹² The Act requires Scottish Ministers to prepare and publish a national good food nation plan that, among other things, sets out the relevant outcomes, indicators, and policies for food-related issues.¹³ In doing so, the Act requires the Ministers to have regard to a number of things, including the ability of high quality, nutritious and culturally appropriate food to improve the health and physical and mental wellbeing of people, and the fact that adequate food is a human right.¹⁴

Committee comment

The Committee acknowledges the right to adequate food as a fundamental human right, and the importance of adopting a right-to-food approach to addressing food insecurity in Victoria. Notwithstanding that the Australian Government has yet to enshrine the ICESCR into federal legislation, Victoria has in the past taken a leading role in enshrining human rights into law via its *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities 2006* (Vic). The Committee believes there is therefore value in legislating the right to adequate food in the Victorian Charter.

¹⁰ *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* (Vic) pt 3.

¹¹ See, for example, Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition (IPAN) and Institute for Health Transformation, Deakin University, *Submission 136*, p. 9; The Community Plate, *Submission 138*, p. 7; Foodprint Melbourne, The University of Melbourne, *Submission 157*, p. 3.

¹² Dr Rachel Carey, School of Agriculture, Food and Ecosystem Sciences, Melbourne University, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 38.

¹³ *Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act 2022* s 1.

¹⁴ *Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act 2022* s 2.

RECOMMENDATION 9: That the Victorian Government amend the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities 2006* (Vic) to enshrine the right to adequate food.

5.3 Reducing the cost of food

One of the principal concerns for stakeholders was the rising costs of food, occurring within the broader context of a cost-of-living crisis. It was broadly argued that the cost of food is one of the, if not the primary, key drivers of food insecurity. Box 5.1 provides a selection of excerpts from the Inquiry's evidence to demonstrate the widespread concerns about food costs among stakeholders.

Box 5.1 Stakeholders' views on the rising costs of food

Any visit to the shops for groceries will cost me a minimum of \$50.00, and that food may only get me through a couple of days at best. I have found out of a newly formed, subconscious habit I am simply eating less meals in a day and opting to tide myself over with less nutritionally dense meals to get me through.

Name Withheld, *Submission 10*.

The cost of groceries in this country is astronomical.

Name Withheld, *Submission 24*.

The cost of what I consider essential food is becoming prohibitively expensive. I urge the Government to place price controls on vegetables, fruit and meat.

Bernard Parsons, *Submission 36*.

I am a retiree on a fixed income and while my grocery costs keep rising my pension and annuity are not keeping pace with the rising cost of living.

Ian Warway, *Submission 41*.

The increasing cost of basic food items is impacting the quality of food I can purchase. I can no longer afford many of the healthier options I was previously able to afford. I have many friends in a similar position, some with young families.

Wayne Jury, *Submission 50*.

Chapter 2 examines the rising cost of food as a driver of food insecurity in more detail.

Regulations and management of food corporations and competition are a federal responsibility. In Australia, grocery pricing is largely unregulated, allowing retailers to set their own prices based on market competition, supply chains, and operating costs. However, federal consumer laws govern pricing practices to ensure they are not

misleading or deceptive.¹⁵ Penalties apply if businesses advertise inaccurate prices, fail to honour the lowest displayed price, or engage in unfair practices like drip pricing (where a single price is initially advertised but further fees and charges are slowly added).¹⁶ Additionally, watchdogs like the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) oversee and investigate potential pricing misconduct.¹⁷

Given the significant concern about the cost of food, many stakeholders made recommendations for Victoria to reduce the cost food. Whilst some recommendations, such as subsidies, grants or vouchers, are within the remit of the Victorian Government, many recommendations are the responsibility of the Commonwealth.

Some of the recommendations put forward by stakeholders included:

- pricing caps on essential grocery items¹⁸
- urgently implementing the recommendations from the Senate Select Committee on Supermarket Prices (see Box 5.2 below for a summary)¹⁹
- requiring the Essential Services Commission to monitor and report on prices²⁰
- designating food or grocery retail as an essential service.²¹

Box 5.2 Summary of Senate Select Committee on Supermarket Price's final report

The Senate Select Committee on Supermarket Prices' final report was tabled in May 2024 and primarily focuses on addressing competitive practices and regulatory measures within Australia's supermarket sector.

The report made 14 recommendations including:

- introducing legislation to prohibit grocery retailers or wholesalers charging excess prices, often referred to as 'price gouging'
- establishing a Commission on Prices and Competition
- making the Food and Grocery Code of Conduct mandatory
- requiring supermarkets to adopt a mandatory standard for unit pricing.

Source: Parliament of Australia, *Senate Select Committee on Supermarket Prices: Final Report*, May 2024.

¹⁵ See *Competition and Consumer Act 2010* (Cth) sch 2.

¹⁶ See Australian Competition & Consumer Commission, *Price displays*, <<https://www.accc.gov.au/business/pricing/price-displays>> accessed 21 October 2024.

¹⁷ See Australian Competition & Consumer Commission, *Pricing*, <<https://www.accc.gov.au/business/pricing>> accessed 21 October 2024.

¹⁸ See, for example: OzHarvest, *Submission 143*; Financial Counselling Victoria, *Submission 124*; Sustain: The Australian Food Network, *Submission 76*.

¹⁹ See, for example: OzHarvest, *Submission 143*.

²⁰ See, for example: Sustain: The Australian Food Network, *Submission 76*.

²¹ Ibid.

As mentioned, some of the suggested actions for governments to lower the cost of food may fall within Victoria's jurisdiction. This included calls for the Victorian Government to directly supply, or fund third-parties, food vouchers (which effectively lower the cost of food). Neighbourhood Houses Victoria contended that food vouchers:

not only provide Victorians with the dignity of selecting the food that they and their families require in the same way as other Victorians, but also better accommodate the needs of those with cultural or dietary requirements that make commonly available foods at food relief centres unsuitable.²²

It recommended that the Victorian Government 'investigate voucher systems' to help tackle food insecurity.²³

The Open Food Network, which is conducting a pilot food access voucher system in Victoria, identified the need for:

public investment in operational and food access subsidies for the community food enterprise sector.²⁴

Other stakeholders also supported recommendations for the Government to explore food voucher systems.²⁵

Many charities or organisations involved in food relief offer various vouchers to assist people, however, this is often contingent on available funding. Further, these organisations often struggle to meet the demand for vouchers.²⁶ Food voucher systems were seen as an important tool for ensuring a 'food with dignity' approach.²⁷ Food with dignity empowers people to have choice in what they eat and seeks to minimise any stigma or shame with accessing food relief.

Committee comment

Lowering the cost of food at the retail level is primarily the responsibility of the federal government, given its jurisdiction over national consumer laws, pricing practices, and the regulation of market competition. The Victorian Government, however, has a critical role to play in advocating for urgent and necessary changes at the federal level to address the pressures caused by rising food costs. These changes should aim to alleviate the financial strain on households, especially those most vulnerable to food insecurity.

In addition to advocating for federal reforms, the Victorian Government should also explore options within its own scope to provide immediate relief to those facing food insecurity. One such option is the introduction or expansion of food voucher systems, either through direct government funding or by supporting third-party organisations

²² Neighbourhood Houses Victoria, *Submission 145*, p. 4.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²⁴ Open Food Network, *Submission 148*, p. 3.

²⁵ See, for example: Geelong Food Relief Centre, *Submission 158*; Southern Peninsula Community Support, *Submission 159*.

²⁶ See Southern Peninsula Community Support, *Submission 159*, p. 2.

²⁷ Foodprint Melbourne, *Submission 157*; VicHealth, *Submission 177*; Regional Food Security Alliance, *Submission 58*.

with grant funding to offer these services. Food vouchers not only give people in need the dignity of choice, allowing them to select foods that meet their cultural or dietary preferences, but also help ensure more equitable access to food.

FINDING 27: State governments are limited in what they can do to lower the cost of food, as the primary responsibility rests with the Commonwealth.

RECOMMENDATION 10: That the Victorian Government explore options to expand the provision of food vouchers to Victorians facing food insecurity. The Government should consider the appropriateness of a government program or providing grant support to relief services.

5.4 Responding to food insecurity through social enterprise

The Committee received some evidence on the role of social enterprise in mitigating food insecurity. In particular, stakeholders highlighted social initiatives operating in Victoria seeking directly to assist food insecure households. A common focus of these social enterprises was to provide nutritious, locally sourced food to vulnerable people.

Box 5.3 below highlights examples of social enterprises operating in Victoria to address food insecurity.

Box 5.3 Example social enterprises tackling food insecurity in Victoria

Meals with Impact

Meals with Impact creates employment opportunities for culturally and linguistically diverse women by:

- co-creating culturally appropriate halal food for their Docklands café
- corporate catering aligned with the Victorian Social Procurement framework
- a self-funded food relief program promoting diversity and inclusion.

Common Ground Project

Common Ground Project is a regenerative farming social enterprise focused on promoting food security by providing fair access to locally grown, healthy food. It offers training, employment, and educational programs, supporting community collaboration and empowerment. The project also runs a Food Hub connecting local producers with the community and operates a café serving regenerative food, providing a community space and employment opportunities.

(Continued)

Box 5.3 Continued**Eat Up Australia**

Eat Up Australia is an Australian-registered charity which does undertake some social enterprise work to support its food relief activities. Eat Up Australia provides free lunches to children who lack adequate food at school, improving their nutrition and educational outcomes. Supporting 912 schools nationwide, they deliver nearly 1 million lunches annually, including many in regional Victoria. Eat Up uses a community-led model, engaging volunteers to prepare low-cost lunches and is exploring a whole-school lunch program for disadvantaged schools.

Source: Meals with Impact, *Submission 1*; Common Ground Project, *Submission 147*; Eat Up Australia, *Submission 111*; Elise Cook, Co-Chief Executive Officer, Eat Up Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 75.

A key challenge faced by organisations using social enterprise to mitigate food insecurity is procuring sufficient funding.²⁸

The Open Food Network described social enterprises as the ‘backbone of potential solutions’ to food insecurity, as such it advocated for increased government support:

For social enterprises and other alternative value chain actors to survive and thrive – while internalising costs that are routinely externalised by everyone else – they need to be funded.²⁹

The Community Grocer, a social enterprise praised by several stakeholders in this Inquiry, also reflected on its need for increased funding in order to meet demand:

We are experiencing a significant demand for new markets across communities in Victoria, both from people experiencing food insecurity and from service providers and funders who want a broader and more sustainable solution than emergency food relief. To meet this demand, we need to scale our operations significantly, and introduce new ways of sharing what we know about our approach.³⁰

The Committee was informed by multiple stakeholders that The Community Grocer was a strong example of the positive influence of social enterprise in tackling food insecurity. An overview of The Community Grocer’s services and stakeholders views are contained in Box 5.4 below.

²⁸ Common Ground Project, *Submission 147*, p. 11.

²⁹ Open Food Network, *Submission 148*, pp. 1-2.

³⁰ The Community Grocer, *Submission 73*, p. 3.

Box 5.4 The Community Grocer

The Community Grocer (TCG) is a not-for-profit social enterprise established in 2014 to improve access to fresh, affordable, and culturally relevant produce for communities at risk of food insecurity in Melbourne. TCG operates weekly pop-up markets that are, on average, 35% cheaper than other outlets and aims to address the physical, economic, and social barriers to accessing healthy food while fostering community connections and inclusivity.

TCG also runs the Grocer Gift Card program, which provides dignified food access through vouchers, allowing low-income households to buy food instead of relying on emergency food relief.

In 2023, TCG, in collaboration with Monash University, conducted an evaluation of its model, which found it held 141 weekly markets, providing 230,000 serves of produce and served 17 nationalities. Overall, 93% rated the produce quality as excellent and 72% increased their intake in fresh produce.

Several stakeholders to the Inquiry praised TCG's fresh food market service, emphasising it as an effective means to provide fresh, locally produced food to vulnerable families. Sharon Laurence from VicHealth described TCG as a 'beautiful example of accessing fresh produce on a weekly basis and at much lower cost'.

Briony Blake from Dietitians Australia told the Committee:

They have Flemington, Carlton and Fitzroy markets. The one in Fitzroy is actually at the bottom of one of the public housing buildings. If we talk about accessibility of fresh, affordable food that is on your doorstep, that is a really fantastic example of a model.

Melton City Council highlighted that TCG provides 'convenient, dignified and nutritious offerings' to local communities.

Source: The Community Grocer, *Submission 73*; Sharon Laurence, Manager, Food Systems, VicHealth, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*; Briony Blake APD, BbioMed, MDietPra, Dietitians Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*; Melton City Council, *Submission 74*.

Committee comment

The Committee acknowledges the important work social enterprises play in addressing food insecurity in Victoria, often with limited and non-recurrent government funding. The Community Grocer recommended that 'any future Victorian food security policy [should] include sustained investment in social enterprises and community-run food alternatives'.³¹ It emphasised the importance of a whole-of-government approach to

³¹ Ibid.

food security, informed by the human right to food and incorporating dimensions like access, stability, and sustainability (see Section 5.2).³²

The Committee calls on the Government to continue its support for these initiatives.

FINDING 28: Social enterprises play an important role in addressing food insecurity in Victoria.

RECOMMENDATION 11: That the Victorian Government continue to support social enterprises tackling food insecurity.

5.5 Managing food waste

in Australia nearly 8 million tonnes of food a year is wasted

Cathie Steele, Board Chair, Regional Food Security Alliance, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 21.

Many stakeholders expressed concern about the extent of food waste and missed opportunities to increase food relief supplies from donations. In its submission, SecondBite | FareShare underscored the significant food waste in Australia, stating:

Australia produces more than enough food for its population, yet nearly 30% of that food is wasted. Bananas that are slightly too bent, apples with some hail damage, potatoes that have retained too much water, all are deemed unsuitable for market and without financial incentives to donate, farmers resort to ploughing this nutritious produce back into the soil, leaving it on vines to rot or sending it to landfill.³³

Food waste does not only occur at the ‘farm gate’ but across the whole supply chain. Christine Crowley from OzHarvest explained that waste can occur in ‘farms, in factories, in warehouses, at the supermarkets, but also at homes’.³⁴

Stakeholders advocated for the redirection of viable food waste from the supply chain, including both producers and supermarkets, to food relief services. Reflecting on surplus food in supermarket, Yarra Ranges Council contended that the lack of regulation around food donation means more food is wasted:

Supermarkets often have surplus food, much of which is processed, contributing to overall food waste. Redirecting this surplus through the food relief system could alleviate hunger. However, the absence of specific regulations governing the types of foods suitable for donation to food relief organisations remains a challenge. Implementing

³² Ibid.

³³ SecondBite | FareShare, *Submission 171*, p. 5.

³⁴ Christine Crowley, Melbourne City Manager, OzHarvest, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5.

policies that restrict the amount of processed food waste going to food relief in favour of nutritious options would trigger significant benefits.³⁵

Reducing household food waste is a critical component in addressing food insecurity and improving sustainability in Australia. A significant portion of food waste occurs at the consumer level, with estimates indicating that households contribute to around 30% of all wasted food.³⁶

Household food waste is estimated to cost households in Australia \$19.3 billion per year.

National Heart Foundation of Australia, *Submission 135*, p. 6.

Other stakeholders identified education as a key tool for influencing household food waste behaviour. Maroondah City Council acknowledged the effectiveness of programs like the Victorian Government's *Love Food Hate Waste* campaign have been effective.³⁷ However, without recurrent or long-term funding these initiatives can be 'piecemeal'. The Council argued that 'education and engagement on food waste avoidance is our primary tool to influence households'.³⁸

Several possible solutions to combatting, or reducing, food waste were proposed by stakeholders:

- **Promote circular economy strategies:** A circular economy can help reduce food waste by designing waste out of food systems, focusing on the reuse of surplus food and ensuring all parts of the food supply chain are used efficiently.³⁹
- **Encourage urban farming and local food systems:** Community gardens, wicking systems (a water reservoir system used in raised edible garden beds), and urban farming initiatives can localise food production and reduce food miles. These systems also help in reducing waste by keeping production local and making it easier to match supply with demand, as well as giving unused food to relief programs.⁴⁰
- **Support food redistribution initiatives:** Social enterprises and food relief programs can redistribute surplus food to communities in need.⁴¹
- **Increase food literacy and consumer awareness:** Educating individuals on how to store, prepare, and use food efficiently can significantly reduce waste. Public awareness campaigns, as well as educational programs in schools and

³⁵ Yarra Ranges Council, *Submission 86*, p. 12.

³⁶ National Heart Foundation of Australia, *Submission 135*, p. 6.

³⁷ Maroondah City Council, *Submission 87*, p. 12.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ See, for example: Meals with Impact, *Submission 1*, p. 1; Maribyrnong City Council, *Submission 85* p. 2; Women's Health Goulburn North East, *Submission 122*, p. 7; The Community Plate, *Submission 138*, p. 7.

⁴⁰ See, for example: Meals with Impact, *Submission 1*, p. 1; Sustain: The Australian Food Network, *Submission 76*, p. 9; Yarra Ranges Council, *Submission 86*, p. 12; Greater Shepparton City Council, *Submission 112*, p. 1; Darebin Information, Volunteer & Resource Service, *Submission 134*, p. 6; Mitchell Shire Council, *Submission 168*, p. 5.

⁴¹ See, for example: Refugee Council of Australia, *Submission 131*, p. 5; Melton City Council, *Submission 74*, p. 6.

communities, can teach food planning, preservation techniques, and creative use of leftovers.⁴²

- **Enhance food supply chain transparency:** Greater transparency in the food supply chain can prevent waste by allowing consumers and businesses to better understand where and why food waste occurs.

Another well-supported recommendation was to introduce a federal tax incentive for farmers and primary producers to donate surplus food. Section 5.5.1 below examines this recommendation in greater detail.

FINDING 29: Food waste remains a significant issue in Australia, with estimates suggesting 30% of food is wasted across the entire supply chain, from farms to households.

5.5.1 National food tax donation incentive

The Committee was made aware that a key driver of supermarket food waste is blemished or misshapen food. The Yarra Ranges Emergency Relief Network explained that supermarkets ‘impose product standards’ and as a result up to 30% of produce is rejected (representing approximately 2.4 billion kilograms of waste annually).⁴³ The Network stated:

These perceived blemishes that lead to food being rejected bear no impact on its suitability for consumption. However, farmers are forced to bear the cost of growing the food that will be rejected.⁴⁴

It was suggested that a food donation tax incentive might increase the capacity of farmers and primary producers to donate food to relief services.

Foodbank Victoria, who was involved in developing and advocating for the original 2020 proposal (see Box 5.5 below), estimated that the tax incentive could save the equivalent of around 100 million meals annually, while contributing to the goal of halving food waste by 2030.⁴⁵ The food relief provider also reflected on the findings made by KPMG, emphasising that it clearly showed that a tax incentive could significantly mitigate food waste and has a number of social, economic and environmental benefits.⁴⁶

⁴² See, for example: Melton City Council: *Submission 74*, p. 6; Maroondah City Council, *Submission 87*, p. 12.

⁴³ Yarra Ranges Emergency Relief Network, *Submission 120*, p. 11.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Foodbank Victoria, *Submission 137*, p. 17.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Box 5.5 National Food Tax Donation Incentive

The National Food Tax Incentive was a proposal developed in 2020 by several food relief agencies in conjunction with modelling conducted by KPMG. The proposal aims to reduce food waste and boost food donations by offering tax benefits to businesses that contribute to food relief efforts. In its 2020 proposal paper, KPMG considered two options:

1. A refundable or non-refundable tax offset similar to the R&D tax incentive. Smaller businesses (with turnover below \$20 million) would receive a 45% refundable tax offset, while larger businesses would receive a 40% non-refundable offset.
2. An enhanced deduction, allowing businesses to deduct 200% of the cost or 120% of the market value of donated goods or services.

KPMG estimated that the tax incentive would cost the Australian government between \$50 and \$100 million annually, a relatively modest figure compared to the expected benefits. These benefits could reach up to \$2 billion per year, including economic growth, job creation, and a significant reduction in food waste.

In 2024, KPMG made a submission to the Senate's Inquiry into the Tax Laws Amendment (Incentivising Food Donations to Charitable Organisations) Bill 2024. It reiterated its support for the incentive proposal, making several recommendations such as:

- extending the offset eligibility to partnerships and trusts
- broadening the definition of registered food charities
- revising the offset structure to ensure medium-sized businesses with high turnover but low profit margins can benefit
- enhancing reporting and clarity on eligible expenses to prevent overclaims.

Source: KPMG Australia, *A National Food Waste Tax Incentive: Boosting food relief through Australia's tax system*, 2020; KPMG Australia, *Incentivising food donations to charitable organisations*, August 2024.

SecondBite | FareShare, who jointly advocated for an incentive with Foodbank and OzHarvest, noted that the incentive was a 'key recommendation' of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture's *Inquiry into Food Security in Australia*. SecondBite | FareShare also contended that an incentive scheme has widespread backing from both representative organisations and businesses in the Australian food industry.⁴⁷

Following the Tax Laws Inquiry, Senator Dean Smith introduced a Private member's Bill to the Senate. The Bill seeks to amend the *Income Tax Assessment Act 1997* and *Income Tax (Transitional Provisions) Act 1997* 'to provide a tax offset for companies

⁴⁷ SecondBite | FareShare, *Submission 171*, p. 6.

for certain expenditure incurred in undertaking food donations activities for registered food charities'.⁴⁸ Box 5.6 below summarises the proposed private members bill.

In July 2024, the Bill was referred to the Senate Economics Legislation Committee for consideration and reporting. The Committee is due to report back on the Bill by 15 November 2024. Several stakeholders in this Inquiry called on the Victorian Government to advocate for its passage through the Parliament of Australia.⁴⁹

Box 5.6 Tax Laws Amendment (Incentivising Food Donations to Charitable Organisations) Bill 2024 (Cth)

The Tax Laws Amendment (Incentivising Food Donations to Charitable Organisations) Bill 2024 is a Private Member's Bill introduced to the Senate in July 2024 by Senator Dean Smith.

The Bill introduces a 'food donations tax offset', which allows companies to claim a tax offset for expenditures related to food donation activities. This tax offset is intended to encourage the donation or sale of food and services to food charities, with the objective of reducing food waste and supporting charitable food distribution.

Key features of the Bill include:

Eligibility for the tax offset: companies that donate or sell food to registered food charities or provide services related to such activities are eligible for the tax offset.

- **Structure of the tax offset:**
 - companies with a turnover of less than \$20 million, the tax offset is refundable and set at 45% of the eligible expenditure, with a cap of \$5 million per year; or
 - companies with turnovers between \$20 million and \$50 million, the offset is 40%, and for those with turnovers above \$50 million, it is 30%.
- **Expenditure coverage:** eligible expenditures include costs associated with the production, transportation, and storage of food donated or sold to charities.
- **Integrity provisions:** to ensure that companies do not receive the offset for expenses where they receive compensation that exceeds or matches the value of the expenditure. It also limits the offset to market value when dealing with related parties.
- **Review mechanism:** mandates independent reviews every 36 months to assess the operation of the tax offset, including its effectiveness and the potential for extension or modification.

Source: Tax Laws Amendment (Incentivising Food Donations to Charitable Organisations) Bill 2024 (Cth).

⁴⁸ Parliament of Australia, *Tax Laws Amendment (Incentivising Food Donations to Charitable Organisations) Bill 2024*, <https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Bills_LEGislation/Bills_Search_Results/Result?bld=s1421> accessed 6 October 2024.

⁴⁹ For example: Foodbank Victoria, OzHarvest, SecondBite | FareShare, Uniting Victoria and Tasmania, Geelong Food Relief Centre, Regional Food Security Alliance, Hope City Mission and the Refugee Council of Australia.

Solly Fahiz, a Director at SecondBite | FareShare, highlighted the financial barriers primary producers face that could be alleviated by a donation incentive:

the treatment of food donated into the food relief sector has the same tax treatment as if farmers, for example, ploughed it back into the ground. Obviously there are other costs incurred to put it on the truck and send it into town, for example, to support a charity, so the crux of the incentive is to allow for that to become easier because of those costs that are endured by a farmer or a grower or an abattoir, for example.⁵⁰

The Victorian Farmers Federation supported the tax incentive, believing it could provide relief for costs like transport and packaging. However, it noted that it does not account for the value of the produce itself. The Federation further explained:

The proposed offset will be based on the size of the donating business, with smaller businesses receiving a larger offset ... The VFF considers that the tax offset proposed in the bill would provide farmers with a greater incentive to donate surplus produce to benefit those facing food insecurity and we encourage the Victorian Government to make representations to the Commonwealth in support of it.⁵¹

Committee comment

The Committee recognises the critical issue of food waste in the agricultural and retail sectors, particularly in relation to produce that is deemed unsuitable for sale despite being fit for consumption. This not only contributes to significant waste but also places an undue financial burden on producers. In response to this, stakeholders have strongly supported the introduction of a national food donation tax incentive, which is seen as an effective measure to reduce waste and improve food security.

The Committee acknowledges the potential benefits of such an incentive, including its capacity to alleviate the costs associated with donating surplus food, encourage greater participation from food businesses, and support the broader efforts to address food insecurity. The Committee considers this initiative to be a practical step forward and encourages the Victorian Government to advocate for the implementation of a national food donation tax incentive, recognising the positive impact it could have on reducing food waste and supporting those in need.

The Committee is aware that the Victorian Government could be active in this area. However, it did not receive enough evidence on how a State incentive would work to make a recommendation.

RECOMMENDATION 12: That the Victorian Government advocate to the Commonwealth Government to support the implementation of a national food donation tax incentive.

⁵⁰ Solly Fahiz, Director, Advocacy, Strategy and Impact, SecondBite | FareShare, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 76.

⁵¹ Victorian Farmers Federation, *Submission 166*, p. 6.

RECOMMENDATION 13: That the Victorian Government explore potential penalties for food waste occurring along the supply chain to prevent the wastage of food that could otherwise be consumed.

5.6 Strengthening food security through immediate actions and the path forward

This Chapter has outlined several short-term actions that can be taken to alleviate food insecurity in Victoria, while acknowledging that systemic solutions are required in the long term. By focusing on immediate, practical interventions—such as enshrining the right to adequate food in the Victorian Charter of Human Rights, expanding food voucher systems, and advocating for a national food donation tax incentive—the Victorian Government can make significant progress in improving access to food for all Victorians.

The Committee recognises that the rising cost of living, compounded by food inflation, remains a critical driver of food insecurity. While many of the broader economic factors lie beyond the control of state governments, there are actions that can be taken within Victoria's jurisdiction to ease the burden on households. Expanding voucher programs and supporting the work of social enterprises can empower individuals and families to access nutritious and culturally appropriate food with dignity.

The Committee also stresses the importance of reducing food waste to increase the availability of food for relief services. By working in collaboration with the Commonwealth to advocate for a food donation tax incentive and supporting local initiatives that redirect surplus food, Victoria can address both food insecurity and environmental sustainability.

Ultimately, these short-term initiatives should not be seen as a substitute for the long-term need to develop a comprehensive Victorian Food Security Strategy. This is discussed in Chapter 6.

Chapter 6

Improving access to food: a long-term food security strategy for Victoria

6.1 Introduction

Food security is a critical issue that extends beyond individual wellbeing and health. It involves a systemic approach that integrates multiple sectors, including health, agriculture, trade, education, and more. A diverse group of stakeholders has argued for a comprehensive, whole-of-government food security strategy for Victoria to address these intersecting needs effectively.

This Chapter explores the perspectives shared with the Committee on the need for a Victorian Food Security Strategy. Stakeholders argued that a centralised and coordinated approach, transitioning from emergency food relief to a focus on resilience, would help mitigate the root causes of food insecurity. Such a strategy could harmonise the responsibilities currently distributed across various portfolios, aiming for an inclusive framework that ensures all Victorians have access to safe, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food. In the context of this Chapter, ‘resilience’ means strengthening people’s food security in such a way that food relief providers are only required for emergency relief or crises.

In the following Sections, the Chapter will present the proposed structure and benefits of a statewide food security strategy, the importance of diversifying food systems, and the need for consistent support for the food relief sector. The insights gathered reflect a shared belief that moving towards an integrated and resilient food system will lay the foundation for long-term food security in Victoria.

6.2 Food security strategy for Victoria

A significant number of stakeholders advocated for the development of a whole-of-government Victorian food security strategy.¹ It was contended that a bespoke strategy is essential for transitioning the State’s approach from emergency

¹ For example: Sustain: The Australian Food Network, Regional Food Security Alliance, Dietitians Australia, Women’s Health Goulburn North East, Wingate Avenue Community Centre, National Heart Foundation, Foodbank Victoria, Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition (IPAN) and Institute for Health Transformation, OzHarvest, The Community Plate, Healthy Food Systems Australia, Foodprint Melbourne, Victorian Council go Social Service (VCOSS), Community Information and Support Victoria, and The One Box Group Ltd.

relief to long-term resilience. Sharon Laurence, Manager of Food Systems at VicHealth, argued that a statewide policy could shift Victoria away:

from the silos where the responsibility of food is fragmented across a range of departments, including health, agriculture, trade, industry, transport, climate, education, families and regions.²

Laurence further contended that a strategy would:

shift the balance of Victorian policies and investments and strengthen the impact in securing safe, nutritious, affordable and more sustainable food in public and business settings for all Victorians. This approach is also designed to rebalance the reliance on food relief to address the root causes of food insecurity in the longer term.³

Like many stakeholders, Sue Kleve from Monash University called for the:

implementation of a whole-of-government food security strategy developed through collaboration with all relevant government portfolios; that has an action plan, targets for implementation of the human right to food and a requirement for regular reporting against those targets; and that establishes an independent advisory board to advise on the development of the strategy and an action plan to monitor its effectiveness.⁴

A submission from the City of Port Phillip and City of Melbourne noted that:

The Victorian Health and Wellbeing Plan 2023–27 identifies food insecurity as an ongoing issue but is not an area targeted for action, instead focusing on healthy choices. Poverty is also not identified as a critical challenge for health equity.

A strategy set by State government (that could be led by the Victorian Government's Food Relief Taskforce) would provide a framework for local government to support and deliver aligned policies and programs. A food security strategy could be focused on systemic issues (e.g. poverty, built environment etc).⁵

A Victorian strategy could achieve two central aims for building food security:

- ensuring access to nutritious and culturally appropriate food
- ensuring the food relief sector can adequately support vulnerable Victorians and manage sudden shocks which may increase rates of food insecurity.

In relation to ensuring access to food, the Committee was told a State strategy could achieve this by supporting local and community-based food production, which in turn increases the variety of foods available. Sustain's submission emphasised the importance of:

decentralis[ing] and diversify[ing] food production, storage, and retail, for example via the expansion of local markets, urban agriculture (including community gardens as well

2 Sharon Laurence, Manager, Food Systems, VicHealth, public hearing, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 65.

3 *Ibid.*, pp. 65–66.

4 Sue Kleve, Monash University, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 35.

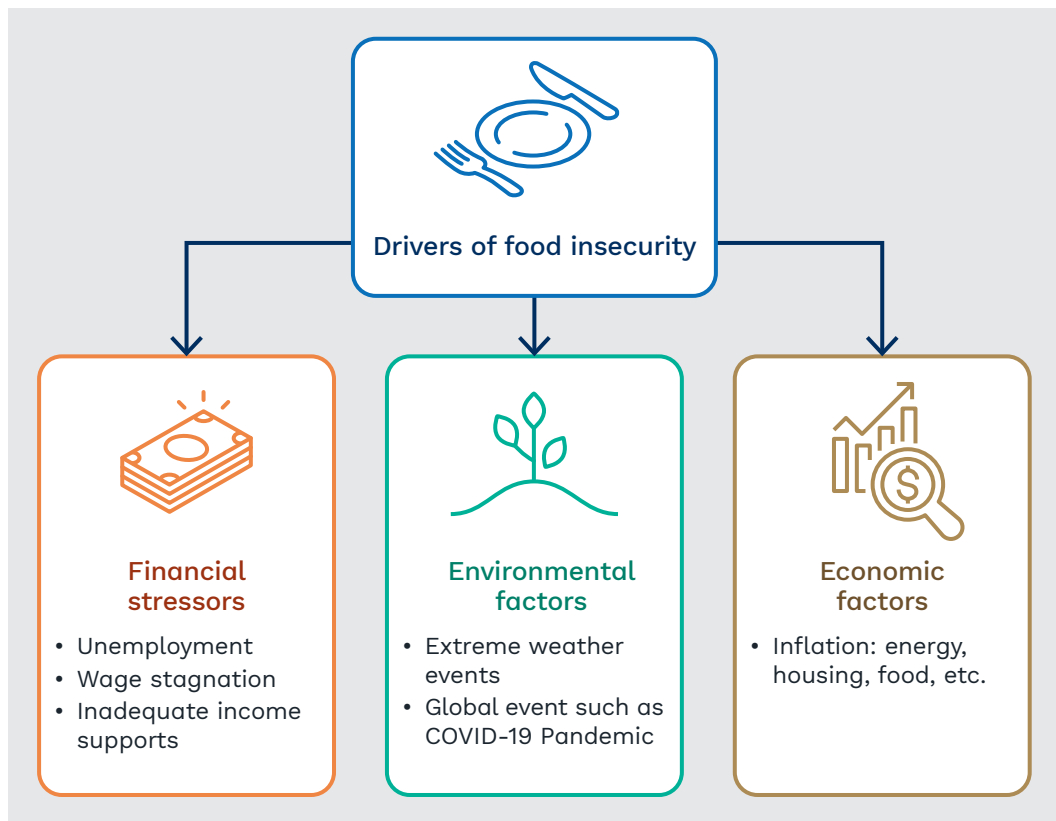
5 City of Port Phillip and City of Melbourne, *Submission 90*, p. 2.

as small-scale peri-urban farms and market gardens), supporting increased biodiversity of crops, agroforestry, and livestock and regional food hubs.⁶

Several other stakeholders also believed that a whole of government strategy is needed for long-term food security sustainability.⁷ As outlined in Chapter 2, food insecurity often exists as a symptom, and stressor, of other socioeconomic issues. Cost of living, housing unaffordability, sudden economic shocks, disruptions to the supply chain and other critical factors can all contribute to food insecurity. Moreover, food insecurity can equally exacerbate people’s experiences with these other stressors. This can lead to a vicious cycle that elongates households experiences of food insecurity, necessitating the need for an integrated and collaborative response.

Figure 6.1 below shows the root causes of food insecurity as articulated in this Report.

Figure 6.1 Root causes of food insecurity



Source: Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee.

6 Sustain: The Australian Food Network, *Submission 76*, p. 9.

7 See, for example: Healthy Food Systems Australia (HFSA), *Submission 150*; Victorian Council of Social Services, *Submission 176*.

There was general consensus about the key features of a whole-of-government approach to food security which centres a 'Victorian Food Security Strategy'. Two features emphasised by stakeholders, which the Committee supports, are ministerial accountability and ensuring cross-portfolio collaboration:

- **Ministerial accountability:** Appoint a Minister for Food responsible for the development, implementation, and oversight of the food security strategy, ensuring clear accountability within the government.⁸
- **Cross-portfolio collaboration:** Establish a Food Security Committee with representation from various government departments, First Nations, and other stakeholders to oversee the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of the strategy.⁹

Other key features highlighted by stakeholders included:

- an integrated food systems approach¹⁰
- legislative measures¹¹
- participatory policy development¹²
- data and performance monitoring
- capacity building among policymakers.¹³

Additionally, stakeholders also called on the Committee to endorse the recommendations from the Commonwealth's *Inquiry into food security in Australia*.¹⁴ This inquiry, conducted by the House of Representatives' Standing Committee on Agriculture, made similar recommendations calling for the development of a 'National Food Plan'. Box 6.1 below summarises key recommendations from the Federal Inquiry which were similar to recommendations made to this Inquiry.

⁸ See, for example: Foodprint Melbourne, *Submission 157*; Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition and Institute for Health Transformation, *Submission 136*.

⁹ See, for example: Sustain: The Australian Food Network, *Submission 76*.

¹⁰ See, for example: Foodprint Melbourne, *Submission 157*; Joint submission from Monash University academics, *Submission 108*.

¹¹ See, for example: Foodprint Melbourne, *Submission 157*.

¹² See, for example: Sustain: The Australian Food Network, *Submission 76*; Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition and Institute for Health Transformation, *Submission 136*.

¹³ See, for example: Foodprint Melbourne, *Submission 157*.

¹⁴ See, for example: Financial Counselling Victoria, *Submission 124*.

Box 6.1 Key recommendations from the House of Representatives' *Inquiry into food security in Australia*

Recommendation 1

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government, in consultation and cooperation with State and Territory Governments, relevant industries, sectors and the community, develop a comprehensive National Food Plan providing for the food security, including nutritional security, of the nation and its people. The National Food Plan must have clear objectives and measurable targets set out in regular updates and action plans, and subject to regular review.

Recommendation 2

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government appoint a Minister for Food, within the portfolio of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, with responsibility for the development and implementation of the National Food Plan, regular monitoring and updating of the plan, and accountability for achieving outcomes and targets under the plan.

Recommendation 3

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government appoint a National Food Council, made up of industry and community experts, to advise the Minister for Food on matters pertaining to the food system, and support the development, implementation, monitoring and evolution of the National Food Plan. The National Food Council is to be supported by expert committees covering sectors including but not limited to:

- production
- transport and logistics
- retail
- health and nutrition
- defence
- education
- access to food
- environmental sustainability
- waste management
- Indigenous communities.

Source: Parliament of Australia, House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture, *Inquiry into food security in Australia*, 2023, <https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Agriculture/FoodsecurityinAustralia/Report/List_of_recommendations> accessed 30 September 2024.

Committee comment

The Committee supports the call for a comprehensive, whole-of-government Victorian Food Security Strategy to transition the State's approach from emergency relief to long-term resilience. Such a strategy should integrate cross-portfolio collaboration, embed a food systems-based approach, and have clear ministerial accountability to address the underlying causes of food insecurity effectively.

By diversifying food choices and ensuring consistent support for the food relief sector, the strategy would strengthen Victoria's capacity to meet both immediate and long-term food security needs. The Committee also endorses alignment with national efforts, urging the Victorian Government to advocate for the implementation of recommendations from the Federal inquiry into food security, and to develop state-based strategies that complement a broader National Food Plan. This coordinated and sustainable approach is essential for ensuring safe, nutritious, and accessible food for all Victorians.

The Committee notes that food security resilience is yet to be clearly defined, something that would need to be done before making the concept part of a future strategy. Based on the evidence it received, the Committee believes that one possible action for policy makers tasked with defining resilience would be monitoring declines in long-term food insecurity, thereby tracking a path to resilience. Another potential option would involve identifying improvements across the key dimensions of food security, such as availability, accessibility, and stability of food supplies.

The Committee acknowledges that achieving resilience is both complex and ambitious. It also acknowledges that it cannot be achieved by the Victorian Government alone. Many of the key drivers of food security, including income support, fall under Federal responsibility. Consequently, the Victorian Government should work in close partnership with the Commonwealth to develop a coordinated approach to developing food security resilience.

The first step, though, in establishing an effective food security strategy is to understand the true extent of food insecurity across Victoria. As outlined in Section 1.3, there are several problems with the way Victoria currently captures food security data. As such, the Committee supports expanding the Victorian Population Health Survey to more effectively measure food insecurity.

RECOMMENDATION 14: That the Victorian Government expand the Victorian Population Health Survey to more precisely monitor food insecurity across the food security continuum, using validated tools such as the Household Food Security Survey Module.

RECOMMENDATION 15: That the Victorian Government develop a Victorian Food Security Strategy focused on:

- transitioning the food security response from relief to resilience
- supporting a place-based, community-led response to food security
- establishing a food relief sector which can be scaled to deal with sudden shocks and crises.

RECOMMENDATION 16: To support the development of a Victorian Food Security Strategy, that the Victorian Government appoint a Minister for Food and establish a Victorian Food Security Committee. The first action of the Minister and Committee would be to define resilience.

RECOMMENDATION 17: That the Victorian Government advocate to the Commonwealth Government for the development and implementation of a National Food Plan to ensure coordinated and sustainable food security efforts across all levels of government.

The following Sections examine the recommended focuses of a Victorian food security strategy: increasing resilience, supporting the food relief sector and adopting a place-based approach.

6.2.1 Alleviating poverty

Poverty is the primary driver of food insecurity

Victorian Council of Social Services, *Submission 177*, p. 5.

The elimination of poverty is a means to reduce rates of food insecurity, hunger and malnutrition here in Victoria and around the world.

VicHealth, *Submission 177*, p. 9.

The fundamental role that poverty plays as a driver of food insecurity was clear in evidence presented to the Committee. VicHealth's submission stated that 'poverty and inequality are underlying drivers of food insecurity', and that 'in 2020, one in four Victorian adults (25.6 per cent) were 'definitely' worried or 'sometimes' worried about running out of money to buy food'.¹⁵

¹⁵ VicHealth, *Submission 177*, p. 8.

Evidence from Financial Counselling Victoria was that ensuring individuals and families had a sufficient income – through either wages or social security – was ‘the best way to go about’ alleviating food insecurity:

Ryan BATCHELOR: ... do you think that a more effective and faster approach would be to increase household inputs – make sure that individuals and families had a sufficient income, whether that be through social security or wages to make sure they could meet their daily cost of living?

Zyl HOVENGA-WAUCHOPE: I think absolutely that is probably the best way to go about it.¹⁶

Australia’s first measure of poverty was developed in 1975 in the Commission of Inquiry into Poverty’s, first major report, *Poverty in Australia*, chaired by Professor Ronald Henderson.

In his report, Henderson sought to identify the extent of poverty in Australia in terms of inadequate income relative to need. Any family with an income below what was considered to be representative of an ‘austere’ standard of living – a poverty line – was considered to be living in poverty.¹⁷

While the Henderson Poverty Line, a measure of income poverty, is a commonly accepted definition of poverty in Australia, international research suggests that a more comprehensive approach to the measurement of poverty is appropriate in the current socioeconomic context.

A Multidimensional Poverty Index was developed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and Oxford University as a more comprehensive approach that takes account of poverty in three dimensions: monetary poverty, education and basic infrastructure services. According to the World Bank ‘under this broader definition of poverty, many more people come into view as poor’.¹⁸

At the 2024 Sambell Oration hosted by the Brotherhood of St Laurence in Melbourne, University of Oxford Professor Sabina Alkire said that ‘poverty is about different challenges that strike at the same time, and so work on poverty and its measurement must take this perspective’.¹⁹

In understanding ways to alleviate poverty in Australia, adopting a multidimensional approach could give policymakers a broader range of means of addressing poverty, and therefore food insecurity.

¹⁶ Zyl Hovenga-Wauchope, Executive Officer, Financial Counselling Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 21.

¹⁷ Melbourne Institute: Applied Economic and Social Research, *Henderson Poverty Line*, <<https://melbourneinstitute.unimelb.edu.au/research/labour/henderson-poverty-line>> accessed 1 November 2024.

¹⁸ World Bank Group, *Multidimensional Poverty Measure*, 2024, <<https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/brief/multidimensional-poverty-measure>> accessed 1 November 2024.

¹⁹ Brotherhood of St Laurence, *2024 Sambell Oration with Prof. Sabina Alkire*, video, 30 August 2024, 7:45, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oRD1qXMvY8Q>> accessed 1 November 2024.

Evidence from food relief organisations shows that many clients are also recipients of Commonwealth income support payments, suggesting that these payments are not meeting the basic needs of Victorians. According to Uniting:

The vast majority of people presenting at Uniting’s ER and Meals Program services have government payments, pensions or allowances as their main source of income.²⁰

Income support, social security and family payments are a Commonwealth responsibility, including payments such as Jobseeker, the Age Pension, carer payments and family assistance. Past Commonwealth action has shown that increases to income support payments help alleviate poverty among recipients of these payments. Research has shown that changes to the Age Pension in 2009, including a \$30 a week increase to the maximum single rate, led to ‘a large drop in poverty rates’.²¹

RECOMMENDATION 18: That the Victorian Government advocate to the Commonwealth Government to increase income support payments to alleviate poverty and food insecurity.

RECOMMENDATION 19: That the Victorian Government advocate to the Commonwealth Government for a national definition of multidimensional poverty, so that clear and tangible benchmarks may be set towards its elimination.

6.2.2 Relief to resilience

Food relief, we know, is not a solution, but it is necessary right now.

Christine Crowley, Melbourne City Manager, OzHarvest, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 7.

Food relief, while essential in addressing immediate needs during times of crisis, is widely acknowledged as a temporary safety net rather than a long-term solution to food insecurity. It is designed to provide short-term assistance in managing sudden shocks, such as natural disasters, economic downturns, or global events like the COVID-19 pandemic, but it does not address the root causes of food insecurity. Transitioning Victoria’s food system from a relief-based model to one rooted in resilience is essential to ensure long-term food security for Victoria.

The transition from crisis to resilience is key to ensuring that food relief remains an emergency response tool rather than an ongoing dependency. Central to this transition is integrating local food production and promoting sustainable practices.

²⁰ Uniting Victoria and Tasmania, *Submission 151*, p. 4.

²¹ Department of Treasury, Australian Government, *Retirement Income Review: Final Report*, 2020, p. 142.

The Regional Food Security Alliance called for Victoria's food security approach to prioritise local supply:

We need to reenvision the whole food system so that healthy, seasonal and culturally appropriate foods are available for all through local values driven supply chains. This needs to be done in a way that is sustainable from an environmental perspective and that provides benefit to everyone involved whether they be farmers, producers, retailers or consumers.²²

Foodprint Melbourne recommended a 'whole of government approach to planning resilient food systems', emphasising the need for strengthening the long-term resilience of food supplies.²³ Similarly, Sustain advocated for decentralising food production, diversifying food systems, and supporting community-based urban agriculture. This could include initiatives like community gardens and small-scale peri-urban farms, to reduce dependence on external food sources and increase local resilience.²⁴

VicHealth also highlighted the need to empower local councils to develop community food system strategies, thereby promoting a localised and resilient approach to food security.²⁵

Proponents of a Victorian food security strategy argued that food security should be integrated into broader socio-economic and health response, noting the link between food insecurity and other forms of disadvantage. It was suggested that a dedicated strategy for food security could ensure cross-sectoral collaboration to address the underlying drivers of food insecurity, including poverty, inadequate income support, and rising living costs.²⁶

A joint submission from Monash University academics stated:

the Strategy must go beyond food relief and food-based solutions as the solution to food insecurity. Tackling the socio-economic drivers of household food insecurity necessitates cross-departmental policy action and sustained resourcing of programs across government portfolios including health, housing, social services, education, transport and environment.²⁷

Similarly, Foodprint Melbourne contended that Victoria is likely to experience future economic and social shocks which could drive food insecurity rates up, making an 'integrated policy approach' vital.²⁸

FINDING 30: Transitioning from a reliance on emergency food relief to a resilient, sustainable food system is essential to ensure all Victorians have consistent access to nutritious food, while reducing dependency on short-term food aid.

²² Regional Food Security Alliance, *Submission 58*, p. 6.

²³ Foodprint Melbourne, *Submission 157*, p. 9.

²⁴ Sustain: The Australian Food Network, *Submission 76*.

²⁵ VicHealth, *Submission 177*, p. 6.

²⁶ Victorian Council of Social Services, *Submission 176*; OzHarvest, *Submission 143*.

²⁷ Joint submission from Monash University academics, *Submission 108*, p. 6.

²⁸ Foodprint Melbourne, *Submission 157*, p. 8.

Supporting the food relief sector

Food relief will always be needed as an emergency service.

OzHarvest, *Submission 143*, p. 1.

Although food relief providers emphasised that the goal must be to move beyond a reactive model, it is vital that governments maintain their support for the food relief sector. Sudden shocks or crises, whether they be personal or more systemic, can occur any time. Therefore, it is essential that the food relief sector can assist and is ready to manage increases in demand when they occur.

Zakaria Wahid, General Manager of the Islamic Council of Victoria, highlighted the importance of consistent government funding to food relief services to support vulnerable communities. He acknowledged that while the recent grants from the Victorian Government, which include a focus on culturally appropriate food, are a positive development, there remains a critical need for ongoing funding.²⁹ Wahid noted:

We have had situations where we do have this kind of surge in funding but then it drops off. We had the PRMC priority response rounds during COVID; there were five rounds of that. Then since 2022 we have not really had any of those rounds, and we need this continued funding to make sure the community is actually supported.³⁰

This inconsistency in funding makes it challenging for community organisations to maintain long-term support for those in need. Christine Crowley from OzHarvest echoed this sentiment:

We got funding during COVID because there was higher need during COVID. Individuals and our sector got additional funding, so we were able to meet that need. Whereas now that funding has finished up, but every day people are still faced with emergencies. Just because there is not a pandemic or a flood does not mean that emergencies still are not happening for people, so food is very much a right every single day.³¹

Other social service providers, including food relief services, also noted the financial and resource constraints they are currently facing.

Regional Food Security Alliance Board Chair Cathie Steele told the Committee:

This year for the first time we have got \$1.5 million. We need about \$4.9 million to operate the six centres. We have got \$1.5 million this year from the state government, and we have been working with the state government to try and get that to become recurrent because we can value-add to it so much. But you particularly need it not to be annual, because then you cannot employ your accountant, your manager et cetera.

²⁹ Zakaria Wahid, General Manager, Islamic Council of Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 56.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Christine Crowley, Melbourne City Manager, OzHarvest, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 7.

You need them to have ongoing jobs. Otherwise – you are probably aware of this – particularly with government funding, they tell you in June you will get it, but you do not get it as cash flow until September. If you have not got anything recurrent, you cannot cover that, so there is a cash flow issue.³²

At a public hearing, Argiri Alisandratos, Deputy Secretary of Disability, Fairness and Emergency Management (Department of Families, Fairness and Housing), reflected on the Government’s role in supporting the food relief sector:

Our food relief investments on behalf of the State are a critical source of support. Our funding of community infrastructure – be it neighbourhood houses or volunteer-based organisations, who on the ground are supporting those communities and providing food relief and assistance to those communities – is a significantly important investment and support that the state is providing to those communities. We have a range of large-, medium- and small-sized food relief organisations that are providing this level of support – funded by government and coordinated through a range of mechanisms, including our role in that – and these investments, these initiatives, are fundamentally important to how we reach and provide that food relief to our communities in need and members of our community that are in need.³³

The Committee acknowledges the budget commitments outlined by the Victorian Government in its submission to this Inquiry. To support the food relief sector, the Government summarised its investments since 2020, encompassing a \$56 million budget allocation delivered by the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing to ‘strengthen the food relief system and deliver more food to Victorians in need’.³⁴ This investment included:

- \$24 million in crisis funding
- \$16 million to ‘strengthen food relief infrastructure, organisational capacity, and system leadership and collaboration across Victoria’s food relief sector’, including the initial funding for regional foodshares
 - \$6 million to extend support for regional foodshares
- \$8 million in grants through the COVID-19 Priority Response to Multicultural Communities program
- \$2.2 million to support a FareShare facilities upgrade
- \$1.25 million for pop-up food relief markets delivered by 28 community organisations.³⁵

³² Cathie Steele, Board Chair, Regional Food Security Alliance, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 24–25.

³³ Argiri Alisandratos, Deputy Secretary, Disability, Fairness and Emergency Management, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 52.

³⁴ Victorian Government, *Submission 167*, p. 18.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

Additionally, the Victorian Government provided Foodbank Victoria \$10 million to ‘establish new community food centres in Ballarat and Morwell to distribute food to charity partners, as well as \$3.3 million in annual operational funding’.³⁶

The Government’s submission also outlined 2024/25 Budget commitments related to food insecurity. These commitments are summarised in Box 6.2 below.

Box 6.2 2024/25 State Budget investments in food security

The 2024/25 Victorian State Budget allocated additional funding to support food security initiatives across the state.

A total of \$6 million was provided through the Carers and Volunteers portfolio, to be delivered by the Department of Families and Fairness and Housing:

- \$1.5 million was allocated to continue support for Regional Foodshares and the Regional Food Security Alliance, to enhance regional food relief capacity, infrastructure, and collaboration.
- An additional \$4.5 million was allocated to deliver the Community Food Relief grants program, comprising local grants to support community organisations and coordination grants for regional and statewide food relief providers to improve efficiency and distribution.
- A further \$1.1 million was invested through the Housing portfolio to provide food relief for social housing tenants.
- The Victorian Government contended that these investments aim to enhance the sustainability, capacity, and coordination of food relief across Victoria.

Source: Victorian Government, *Submission 167*, p. 22.

The Committee notes that the investment commitments outlined by the Government are not recurrent.

Committee comment

The Committee recognises the critical role of the food relief sector in responding to sudden crises and supporting vulnerable communities across Victoria. While the recent investments by the Victorian Government are appreciated, including targeted funding to strengthen infrastructure and regional food relief initiatives, it is evident that non-recurrent funding creates challenges for the food relief sector to maintain continuity of services and adequately plan for the future.

³⁶ Ibid.

While transitioning from relief to resilience, it is imperative that ongoing and sustainable funding is secured, enabling food relief providers to effectively meet immediate needs while contributing to longer-term food security goals. The Committee urges the Victorian Government to consider recurrent funding mechanisms to ensure that the sector remains well-resourced and capable of addressing both current demands and future challenges.

FINDING 31: While food relief services are an indispensable safety net during times of crisis, they cannot be a long-term solution to food insecurity.

FINDING 32: The food relief sector faces significant funding challenges, particularly due to the lack of recurrent funding. This hampers its ability to maintain continuity of services and effectively meet demand.

RECOMMENDATION 20: That the Victorian Government conduct a comprehensive audit of food relief services across Victoria to identify service gaps. Following the initial audit, a Food Relief Services map should be made publicly available which provides real-time information to the public on available food relief resources. This map should be regularly updated to ensure it remains a reliable tool for both service providers and people in need.

RECOMMENDATION 21: That the Victorian Government provide the food relief sector with recurrent funding to ensure it can address both current demand and future challenges.

RECOMMENDATION 22: That the Victorian Government re-establish and resource the Victorian Food Relief Taskforce with an expanded membership to include First Nations people, persons with lived experience of food insecurity and frontline agencies.

6.2.3 Place-based strategy: empowering local communities

A key aspect of the recommended Victorian food security strategy is supporting place-based initiatives. Many stakeholders emphasise the importance of empowering local governments and communities to lead tailored food security efforts. The whole-of-government response to food security should be focused on building the resilience of communities to build and manage local food supplies, with food relief offering emergency and surge support. A Victorian food security strategy should not just be about food relief but also focused on 'connecting the supply and access to food with agriculture and with regional prosperity and making those links strategically

at a high level'.³⁷ Chapter 4 considered the need for place-based food literacy. This Section expands on this by examining a place-based approach to the provision of food.

Sustain's submission supported 'empower[ing] local governments to lead the participatory development of community food systems and food security strategies via provision of financial and supporting resources', recognising that community-driven approaches can directly address the specific needs and challenges of different regions.³⁸

Similarly, VicHealth advocated for prioritising 'healthy local food systems' and suggested that state policy should explicitly promote health and wellbeing objectives within municipal planning schemes.³⁹ This place-based approach not only encourages community involvement but also helps adapt food security solutions to the unique challenges of various areas, increasing their effectiveness and resilience.

Therese Watson, Advocacy Officer for Strategic Growth and Advocacy at Greater Dandenong City Council, explained how solutions to food insecurity require a mix of State coordination and locally led initiatives:

Solutions require place-based community development at a local level and regional and state strategies alongside initiatives already being funded through State and Federal Governments.⁴⁰

The Committee was also informed that a place-based approach could ensure the diverse needs of Victorian communities are met by involving First Nations, multicultural, and other community groups in the development of local food security responses. By engaging directly with communities, policies and initiatives can be tailored to address specific cultural, geographic, and socioeconomic needs, ensuring that food access solutions are inclusive and culturally appropriate.

Abe Ropitini, Executive Director of Population Health at the Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, told the Committee:

There is not an Aboriginal community controlled organisation in the state that you can go to at the moment that does not have a food program. It is embedded within what we do, and it is unique in the way that we deliver it; it is not a standalone thing that we provide.⁴¹

A place-based food security strategy still needs government support, ensuring that efforts to address food insecurity are cohesive and not fragmented across various departments and services. By providing a centralised framework, the Victorian

³⁷ Sharon Laurence, Manager, Food Systems, VicHealth, public hearing, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 65–66.

³⁸ Sustain: The Australian Food Network, *Submission 76*, p. 6.

³⁹ VicHealth, *Submission 177*, p. 14.

⁴⁰ Therese Watson, Advocacy Officer, Strategic Growth and Advocacy, Greater Dandenong City Council, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

⁴¹ Abe Ropitini, Executive Director, Population Health, Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 83.

Government can align resources, monitor progress, and reduce the risk of siloed responses that often fail to address the root causes of food insecurity. Simultaneously, this approach empowers local communities to take an active role in shaping solutions that meet their unique needs. Local stakeholders, who best understand the specific challenges and opportunities in their areas, can develop tailored responses, fostering a sense of ownership and ensuring that interventions are both relevant and sustainable.

The Geelong Food Relief Centre's submission stated that:

With a government food systems approach coordination between metropolitan and regional hubs would bring economies of scale and efficiencies and logistical strengths but also recognise localised place-based food service requirements.⁴²

This ability to foster community capacity allows local communities to address food insecurity in a way that is tailored to their specific needs, rather than relying solely on centralised food systems that may not meet the unique demands of rural or regional populations.

Furthermore, a place-based strategy can improve the dignity and autonomy of those accessing food relief. Stakeholders emphasised that many food-insecure individuals face perceived stigma and shame in relying on food relief or charity, preventing many from accessing support.⁴³ A place-based strategy that fosters community engagement and local ownership of food resources can help mitigate this by shifting the focus away from emergency relief and toward local, long-term solutions.

Throughout submissions and public hearings, the Committee was made aware of a plethora of programs and initiatives adopting a place-based approach to food security. Local councils, charities and other social service organisations are undertaking community-led work to assist people experiencing food insecurity. However, there were concerns that in the absence of a Victorian food security strategy, this work was too ad-hoc, complex and potentially unsustainable.

RECOMMENDATION 23: That the Victorian Government accept Sustain's proposal that local governments be empowered to lead the participatory development of community food systems and food security strategies via the provision of financial and supporting resources. As such, food security should be reinstated as a priority area within the next Victorian Health and Wellbeing Plan, embedding food security within strategic health planning for all local governments in Victoria.

RECOMMENDATION 24: That the Victorian Government revise the Victorian planning provisions (*Planning and Environment Act 1987*) to include health and food security as an objective when local governments and other planning authorities are making planning decisions.

⁴² Geelong Food Relief Centre, *Submission 158*, p. 6.

⁴³ See, for example: Rachel Carey, Melbourne University, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 August 2024; Madelaine Griffith, *Transcript of evidence*.

Expanding the role of food hubs

The Victorian Government already supports some place-based initiatives to increase food security: regional foodshares and VicHealth's Future Healthy food hubs. However, stakeholders argued this support could be improved.

Commencing in 2020, regional foodshares were established to 'increase demand for food relief in regional areas and increase the capacity of the network of food distribution hubs in regional areas during the pandemic'.⁴⁴ Regional foodshares are found in:

- Albury Wodonga
- Bendigo
- Geelong
- Mildura
- Shepparton.
- Warrnambool.⁴⁵

In its submission, the Victorian Government explained that regional foodshares:

receive, store, and distribute food to partnering agencies and work within their wider communities, including primary producers and charity and not-for profit partners, to improve coordination and efficiency in the procurement and distribution of food relief.⁴⁶

The Victorian Government also provided an overview of the impact of regional foodshares on addressing food insecurity. It summarised the outcome of a year-long study conducted in 2021 on four of the foodshares (Albury Wodonga, Bendigo, Shepparton and Warrnambool), which found:

- the four foodshares distributed over 2,500,000 kg of food to approximately 91,000 adults and children in 2020
- the regions served by these foodshares cover 42% of Victoria's regional population
- these foodshares generated \$96.55 million in social, economic, and environmental value
- for every dollar of input value invested, \$4.17 of value was created; for every dollar of financial investment, \$66.44 of value was generated.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Victorian Government, *Submission 167*, p. 21.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

Between August 2022 and June 2023, the regional foodshares:

collectively sourced 2,831 tonnes of food, primarily through local donations, and distributed 2,214 tonnes of food. They did this through investing in infrastructure, logistics and staffing resources which has allowed for greater collaboration and coordination across regional Victoria.

For example, the provision of food relief to communities in need following the 2022 Central Victorian floods was more effective due to the increased capacity of Regional Foodshares in affected areas, and through improved coordination and collaboration between statewide organisations.⁴⁸

Bendigo Foodshare highlighted some of the work undertaken by foodshares, emphasising their capacity to assist with issues such as food waste:

Regional Food Hubs can provide highly effective models of operation for rescuing and repurposing food waste due to largely volunteer workforces. These Hubs can accept and distribute surplus food from local manufacturers for food relief across the State in a timely way, reducing food miles by avoiding the need to transport food back and forth from Melbourne.⁴⁹

At a public hearing, Gerry Goswell from the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, outlined the Regional Food Security Alliance helps the hubs function efficiently:

the Regional Food Security Alliance, which is an alliance of food hubs across the state, and also working in partnership with some of the big providers, the big food providers. What that alliance can do is actually help hook up different hubs and different communities where there might be excess food available and assist with exactly that – dealing with any bottlenecks, for example, or any logistical challenges between locations.⁵⁰

The Government's submission explained that in the 2024/25 State Budget it has committed '\$1.5 million to continue support for the Regional Foodshares and the Regional Food Security Alliance, and \$4.5 million to deliver the Community Food Relief grants program, including funding for neighbourhood houses'.⁵¹

Another place-based approach to food relief is the VicHealth Future Healthy Food Hubs. VicHealth has invested \$4.4 million over three years in seven Future Healthy Food Hubs to support community-led organisations in regional Victoria and outer metropolitan growth corridors.⁵² These hubs aim to increase access to affordable, locally sourced, healthy, and culturally appropriate food, particularly for those facing barriers such as First Nations and multicultural communities. The initiative also seeks

48 Ibid.

49 Bendigo FoodShare Inc, *Submission 116*, p. 4.

50 Gerry Goswell, Executive Director, Community Inclusion, Veterans and Youth, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 August 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 54.

51 Victorian Government, *Submission 167*, p. 22.

52 Ibid., p. 28.

to engage young people in advocating for better local food systems while offering training and employment opportunities in the sector. Additionally, it supports local food producers, celebrates food cultures, and fosters intergenerational knowledge sharing.⁵³ Figure 6.2 below shows the location of the hubs.

Figure 6.2 VicHealth Future Healthy Food Hub locations



6

Source: Victorian Government, *Submission 167*, p. 29.

Most of the Future Healthy Food Hubs are led by existing food relief providers, such as Bendigo Foodshare and Whittlesea Community Connections, who are expanding their focus to create more sustainable, community-driven approaches to food access.⁵⁴ In partnership with Deakin University, VicHealth is evaluating the Food Hubs based on five key outcomes:

- economic development
- ecological sustainability
- access to healthy local food
- personal and community wellbeing
- local empowerment.⁵⁵

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 29.

The expansion of regional food hubs could provide an ideal opportunity for ensuring a place-based community food systems and addressing food security challenges across Victoria. Common Ground Project called for recurrent funding of existing hubs, as well as supporting the development of emerging ones.⁵⁶ The organisation contended that these hubs are ‘preventative models of place-based community food systems solutions including decentralising current food production, storage, and retail options’.⁵⁷

Uniting Victoria and Tasmania similarly emphasised the need for government investment to ‘to develop, implement, and maintain place-based programs and offerings’.⁵⁸ Further, the roles of existing hubs could be expanded as part of the shift to food resilience. This would facilitate a shift from relief to resilience under a statewide food security strategy.

Committee comment

The Committee acknowledges the significant potential of a place-based food security strategy in addressing the unique challenges faced by communities across Victoria. By supporting and expanding regional food hubs, the Victorian Government can foster community-led, sustainable solutions that enhance food literacy, promote local production, and ensure equitable access to healthy, culturally appropriate food.

The evidence presented highlights the value of investing in local capacity, infrastructure, and coordination to build food resilience and reduce reliance on emergency relief. The Committee strongly recommends that the Government continue to prioritise place-based approaches, ensuring that future strategies not only address immediate food insecurity but also empower local communities to drive long-term, sustainable change.

FINDING 33: A food security strategy prioritising a place-based approach builds community resilience. Evidence suggests it achieves this through promoting local production and distribution, enhancing community capacity and food literacy, and preserving the dignity of food relief recipients.

RECOMMENDATION 25: That the Victorian Government expand regional food hubs, including providing recurrent funding, as part of the shift to food resilience.

6.3 A roadmap to Victoria’s improved food security

The Committee has carefully considered the extensive evidence provided by stakeholders regarding the urgent need for a comprehensive, whole-of-government Victorian Food Security Strategy. The submissions have highlighted that food security

⁵⁶ Common Ground Project, *Submission 147*, p. 2.

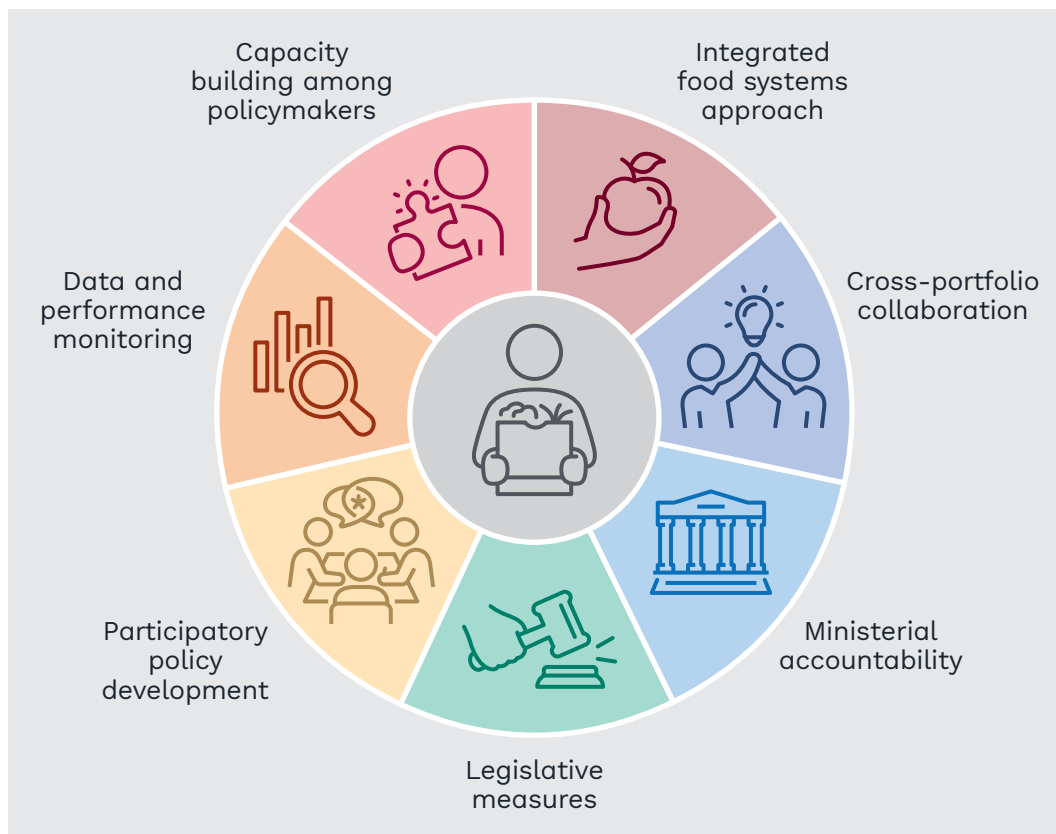
⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Uniting Victoria and Tasmania, *Submission 151*, p. 3.

is a complex issue requiring an integrated, systems-based approach that addresses not only the immediate need for food relief but also the underlying socioeconomic and structural factors contributing to food insecurity.

Moving away from fragmented efforts across multiple government portfolios towards a cohesive strategy would ensure a more effective and resilient food system. Figure 6.3 shows some of the key features of a Victorian Food Security Strategy as advocated by stakeholders. The Committee strongly encourages the Victorian Government to consider these features should it decide to build a food security strategy.

Figure 6.3 Key features of a Victorian Food Security Strategy



Source: Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee.

A central theme raised by stakeholders is the need to transition from a reliance on emergency food relief to a more sustainable, resilience-based model. Emergency food relief remains essential in times of crisis, but its role must be that of a temporary safety net rather than a long-term solution. The proposed Victorian Food Security Strategy would take a systemic approach, integrating health, agriculture, trade, education, climate, and community development to build a more resilient food security system. This would involve not only diversifying food production and improving access to nutritious, culturally appropriate foods but also empowering communities to take an active role in shaping local food systems.

The evidence presented also underscores the value of a place-based approach to food security, empowering local communities to lead tailored initiatives that address specific regional challenges. Expanding regional food hubs, supporting local food production, and investing in community-led programs are vital components of this approach, fostering resilience, improving food literacy, and preserving the dignity of those receiving support. A place-based model would ensure that food security solutions are adaptable and context-specific, allowing for more effective interventions that directly respond to local circumstances.

In addition, the Committee recognises the need for consistent and sustainable funding for the food relief sector to meet both immediate needs and contribute to long-term resilience. The current reliance on non-recurrent funding creates uncertainty and hampers the ability of food relief providers to plan and maintain essential services. While transitioning from relief to resilience, ongoing investment is required to build capacity within the food relief sector and ensure it can respond effectively to sudden increases in demand.

The Committee also notes the alignment between the proposed Victorian Food Security Strategy and national efforts to address food insecurity. A coordinated approach at both state and federal levels would maximise the impact of policy interventions, and the Committee urges the Victorian Government to advocate for the implementation of federal recommendations, including the development of a National Food Plan.

In conclusion, the Committee strongly supports the development of a comprehensive, whole-of-government Victorian Food Security Strategy to transition the State's approach from emergency relief to resilience. Such a strategy should be rooted in collaboration, ministerial accountability, and an integrated food systems approach to effectively address the root causes of food insecurity. By diversifying food systems, supporting local communities, and ensuring sustained investment in food security, the Victorian Government can strengthen the state's capacity to meet both immediate and long-term food security needs. The Committee recommends that the Victorian Government take steps towards implementing these measures, ensuring that all Victorians have access to safe, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food, and working towards a more equitable food security system.

**Adopted by the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee
Parliament of Victoria, East Melbourne
1 November 2024**

Appendix A

About the Inquiry

A.1 List of submissions

1	Meals with Impact	31	Name withheld
2	WaterUps	32	Name withheld
3	Linda George	33	Ms Jill Mcgranaghan
4	Mrs Janelle Evans	34	Ms Wendy Radford
5	Mr Jonathan Powell	35	Name withheld
6	Name withheld	36	Mr Bernard Parsons
7	Miss Sarah Rands	37	Name withheld
8	Name withheld	38	Name withheld
9	Name withheld	39	Name withheld
10	Name withheld	40	Name withheld
11	Ms Gemma Carr	41	Mr Ian Warway
12	Ms Belinda Knott	42	Mr Graeme Scott
13	Ms Ella Reed	43	Mr Nick Handley
14	Name withheld	44	Mr Saul Minshall
15	Name withheld	45	Name withheld
16	Name withheld	46	Dr Richard Whitfield
17	Mr Tarn Johnson	47	Mrs Amber Mohacsy
18	Name withheld	48	Name withheld
19	Ms Aisling Wheeler	49	Miss Katt Murray
20	Name withheld	50	Mr Wayne Jury
21	Ms Mieka Torrens	51	Mr Andrew Hezel
22	Name withheld	52	Name withheld
23	Name withheld	53	Ms Serena Assetta
24	Name withheld	54	Murtaza Rehmtulla
25	Name withheld	55	Ms Natasha Charing
26	Name withheld	56	Confidential
27	Name withheld	57	Name withheld
28	Name withheld	58	Regional Food Security Alliance
29	Name withheld	59	Darren Hannah
30	Name withheld	60	Miss Katrina Bulman

61	Aj Walsh	97	The One Box Group Limited (TOB)
62	Mr Joshua Jennings	98	Yarrowonga Health
63	Name withheld	99	City of Ballarat
64	Name withheld	100	South East Community Links (SECL)
65	Name withheld	101	Professor Jane Dyson
66	Mr Shlomo Nathanson	102	AMES Australia
67	Hobsons Bay City Council	103	The Salvation Army Australia
68	Name withheld	104	Healthy Loddon Campaspe
69	Woolworths Group	105	Confidential
70	Queensland Consumers Association	106	Dunolly Community Garden
71	Karlijn Sas	107	Hope City Mission
72	City of Greater Bendigo	108	Monash University
73	The Community Grocer	109	Name withheld
74	Melton City Council	110	The Community Hubs of Hume and Greater Shepparton
75	Empower Australia	111	Eat Up Australia
76	Sustain: The Australian Food Network	112	Greater Shepparton City Council
77	Dunnolly and District Neighbourhood Centre	113	Greater Dandenong City Council
78	City of Melbourne	114	Ballarat Community Health and Ballarat Food Access Network
79	Knox City Council	115	Islamic Council of Victoria (ICV)
80	Duke Street Community House	116	Bendigo Foodshare Inc
81	South Gippsland Shire Council	117	The George Institute for Global Health
82	Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation	118	Merri-bek City Council
83	City of Greater Geelong	119	Mount Alexander Shire Council (MASC)
84	Golden Plains Shire Council	120	Yarra Ranges Emergency Relief Network (YRERN)
85	Maribyrnong City Council	121	Dietitians Australia
86	Yarra Ranges Council	122	Women's Health Goulburn North East (WHGNE)
87	Maroondah City Council	123	Manningham Council
88	Swan Hill Rural City Council	124	Financial Counselling Victoria (FCVic)
89	Just Food Collective	125	Better Health Network
90	City of Port Phillip	126	Professor Ralph Kober
91	Confidential	127	Community Information & Support Victoria (CISVic)
92	Cancer Council Victoria	128	Name withheld
93	Name withheld	129	Nillumbik Shire Council
94	Ms Alexandra Taylor	130	Victorian Food Relief Service Providers
95	Give Where you Live Foundation	131	Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA)
96	The University of Melbourne Graduate Student Association (GSA)		

132	Wingate Avenue Community Centre	155	National Nutrition Network - Early Childhood Education and Care
133	Mr Byron Ko	156	Central Goldfields Shire Council
134	Darebin Information, Volunteer & Resource Service (DIVRS)	157	Foodprint Melbourne, The University of Melbourne
135	National Heart Foundation of Australia	158	Geelong Food Relief Centre (GFRC)
136	Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition (IPAN) and Institute for Health Transformation, Deakin University	159	Southern Peninsula Community Support (SPCS)
137	Foodbank Victoria	160	Coles Group
138	The Community Plate	161	Ms Yuen Yan Li
139	Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance	162	University of Melbourne Student Union (UMSU)
140	Hume City Council	163	Name withheld
141	Warrnambool City Council	164	Ms Robyn Erwin
142	CropLife Australia	165	Uniting Church in Australia
143	OzHarvest	166	Victorian Farmers Federation (VFF)
144	Gateway Health	167	Victorian Government
145	Neighbourhood Houses Victoria	168	Mitchell Shire Council
146	Whittlesea Community Connections	169	Mark Morante
147	Common Ground Project	170	Asylum Seeker Resource Centre
148	Open Food Network	171	SecondBite FareShare
149	Geelong Food Assistance Network	172	Metcash Trading Limited
150	Healthy Food Systems Australia (HFSA)	173	Brimbank City Council
151	Uniting Victoria and Tasmania	174	Laverton Community Integrated Services Inc.
152	Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO)	175	Yarraville Community Centre
153	Bellarine Community Health	176	Victorian Council of Social Service
154	Wyndham Park Community Centre (WPCC)	177	VicHealth

A.2 Public hearings

21 August 2024

Davui Room, G1 & G2, East Melbourne, VIC

Witness	Position and Organisation
Therese Watson	Advocacy Officer, Strategic Growth & Advocacy, Greater Dandenong City Council
Kass Halastanis	Social Policy Officer, Knox City Council
Marshall Benson	Senior Social Policy Officer, Maribyrnong City Council
Georgia White	Policy and Advocacy Advisor, The George Institute for Global Health
Alicia Dunning	Research Associate, Guunu-maana (Heal) Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Health and Yuwaya Ngarra-li partnership, The George Institute for Global Health
Kristy Law	Research Associate and PhD Candidate, Food Policy, The George Institute for Global Health
Loretta Weatherall	Project Officer, Food and Water for Life Project, Yuwaya Ngarra-li partnership, Dharriwaa Elders Group, Walgett, The George Institute for Global Health
Zyl Hovenga-Wauchope	Executive Officer, Financial Counselling Victoria (FCVic)
Amanda Chan	Advocacy Coordinator, Financial Counselling Victoria (FCVic)
Rachna Madaan Bowman	Financial Counsellor, South-East Community Links, Financial Counselling Victoria (FCVic)
Dr Nick Rose	Executive Director, Sustain: The Australian Food Network
Dr Kelly Donati	Co-Founder and Acting Chair, Sustain: The Australian Food Network
Paul Harker	Chief Commercial Officer, Woolworths Group
Adam Fitzgibbons	Head of Public Affairs, Coles Group
Argiri Alisandratos	Deputy Secretary, Disability, Fairness and Emergency Management, Department of Families, Fairness & Housing (DFFH)
Gerry Goswell	Executive Director, Community Inclusion, Veterans and Youth, Department of Families, Fairness & Housing (DFFH)
Julia Schindlmayr	Acting Advocacy and Policy Manager, Dietitians Australia
Ellyn Bicknell	APD, BMedSci GCertHumNutr MNutrDiet, Dietitians Australia
Briony Blake	APD, BbioMed, MDietPra, Dietitians Australia

20 August 2024

Davui Room, G1 & G2, East Melbourne, VIC

Witness	Position and Organisation
Madelaine Griffith	Manager, Research and Design, Foodbank Victoria
Christine Crowley	Melbourne City Manager, OzHarvest
Hiruni Walimunige	Co-Manager, Policy and Advocacy, The University of Melbourne Graduate Student Association (GSA)
Jaime Morrison	Policy and Advocacy Officer, The University of Melbourne Graduate Student Association (GSA)
Joshua Stagg	Welfare Officer Bearer and Co-Author, Cost of Living Report, University of Melbourne Student Union (UMSU)
Sara Guest	Co-Author, Cost of Living Report and PhD Candidate, University of Melbourne Student Union (UMSU)
Cathie Steele	Board Chair, Regional Food Security Alliance
Andrew Schauble	Deputy Chair, RFSA and CEO, Geelong Food Relief Centre, Regional Food Security Alliance
Dr Sue Kleve	Monash University
Dr Rachel Carey	Melbourne University
Jerry Ham	Group Manager, Homelessness and Community Support, Uniting Victoria and Tasmania
Warren Elliot	External Communications Manager, Victoria, The Salvation Army Australia
Matthew Daniels	Maggie Nest Cafe Supervisor, The Salvation Army Australia
Adam Thomson	Maggie Nest Cafe Chef, The Salvation Army Australia
Zakaria Wahid	General Manager, Islamic Council of Victoria (ICV)
Abdel-Rahman Radwan	Executive Assistant, Islamic Council of Victoria (ICV)
Rebecca Eckard	Director, Policy and Research, Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA)
Sharon Laurence	Manager, Food Systems, VicHealth
Lisa Ohlmus	Manager, Policy and Government Relations, VicHealth
Elise Cook	Co-Chief Executive Officer, Eat Up Australia
Lyndon Galea	Founder, Eat Up Australia
Rachael Terry	Grants Program Officer, SecondBite FareShare
Solly Fahiz	Director, Advocacy, Strategy & Impact, SecondBite FareShare
Abe Ropitini	Executive Director, Population Health, Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO)

Extracts of proceedings

Legislative Council Standing Order 23.20(5) requires the Committee to include in its report all divisions on questions relating to the adoption of the draft report. All Members have a deliberative vote. In the event of an equality of votes, the Chair also has a casting vote.

The Committee divided on the following questions during consideration of this report. Questions agreed to without division are not recorded in these extracts.

Committee Meeting — 1 November 2024

Chapter 4: The importance of nutritious and culturally appropriate food

Aiv Puglielli moved that in Chapter 4, insert the following new Recommendation:

‘That the Victorian Government supports First Nations communities with policies and resources to advance their goals and aspirations for food sovereignty. This should begin with implementing the recommendations outlined in the VACCHO FoodPath Report.’

The question was put.

The Committee divided.

Ayes 5	Noes 3
Ryan Batchelor	Trung Luu
Michael Galea	Renee Heath
Rachel Payne	Joe McCracken
Aiv Puglielli	
Lee Tarlamis	

Question agreed.

Aiv Puglielli moved that in Chapter 4, insert the following new Recommendation:

‘Following a review of the outcome of the trial, that the Victorian Government investigate the delivery of a school meal program to all schools in need.’

The question was put.

The Committee divided.

Ayes 5	Noes 3
Ryan Batchelor	Trung Luu
Michael Galea	Renee Heath
Rachel Payne	Joe McCracken
Aiv Puglielli	
Lee Tarlamis	

Question agreed.

Chapter 5: Improving access to food: short-term solutions

Aiv Puglielli moved that in Chapter 5, replace:

‘Whilst some recommendations, such as subsidies, grants or vouchers, are within the remit of the Victorian Government, many recommendations are the responsibility of the Commonwealth.’

with:

‘This included pricing caps on essential groceries.

Gough Whitlam once said, ‘Controls over prices are not a cure-all for inflation, but they can be used responsibly and selectively as one of the elements in an anti-inflationary strategy.’

This was during the 1970s when the Federal Government had sought to have price control powers brought from state to federal jurisdiction via a referendum which failed on 8 December 1973. This followed a previous referendum in 1948 which unsuccessfully proposed to alter the Australia Constitution to give the Commonwealth Government the powers make laws with respect to prices.’

The question was put.

The Committee divided.

Ayes 1	Noes 6
Aiv Puglielli	Trung Luu
	Ryan Batchelor
	Michael Galea
	Renee Heath
	Joe McCracken
	Lee Tarlamis

Question negated.

Aiv Puglielli moved that in Chapter 5, omit:

‘Lowering the cost of food at the retail level is primarily the responsibility of the federal government, given its jurisdiction over national consumer laws, pricing practices, and the regulation of market competition. The Victorian Government, however, has a critical role to play in advocating for urgent and necessary changes at the federal level to address the pressures caused by rising food costs. These changes should aim to alleviate the financial strain on households, especially those most vulnerable to food insecurity.

In addition to advocating for federal reforms, the Victorian Government should also explore options within its own scope to provide immediate relief to those facing food insecurity. One such option is the introduction or expansion of food voucher systems, either through direct government funding or by supporting third-party organisations with grant funding to offer these services. Food vouchers not only give people in need the dignity of choice, allowing them to select foods that meet their cultural or dietary preferences, but also help ensure more equitable access to food.’

And insert:

‘The state government has powers to lower the cost of food at the retail level.

State Government is the only level of government in Australia with the powers to control prices. Victoria has used these powers to regulate grocery prices between 1948–1954 under the Prices Regulation Act 1948 and 1987 under the Grocery Prices Act (1987).

During this period, the Victorian Government had both a Minister for Prices, a Prices Commissioner, and a Prices Branch within government.

The sole power of state governments to control prices was re-affirmed in 2 defeated referendums in 1948 and 1973 where the federal government unsuccessfully sought the power to also control prices.

Price regulation in Victorian is currently undertaken by the Essential Services Commission for a range of essential services like energy and water.

The Victorian government should use its powers to regulate supermarket prices and prevent price gouging.’

The question was put.

The Committee divided.

Ayes 1	Noes 7
Aiv Puglielli	Trung Luu
	Ryan Batchelor
	Michael Galea
	Renee Heath
	Joe McCracken
	Rachel Payne
	Lee Tarlamis

Question negatived.

Aiv Puglielli moved that in Chapter 5, omit the following Finding:

‘State Governments are limited in what they can do to lower the cost of food, as the primary responsibility rests with the Commonwealth.’

And insert new Finding:

‘It should be the priority of every level of government to ensure that people have access to sufficient healthy and affordable food. There are many mechanisms that both the State and Federal Governments could use to lower the cost of food.’

The question was put.

The Committee divided.

Ayes 2	Noes 6
Aiv Puglielli	Trung Luu
Rachel Payne	Ryan Batchelor
	Michael Galea
	Renee Heath
	Joe McCracken
	Lee Tarlamis

Question negatived.

Aiv Puglielli moved that in Chapter 5, insert the following new Recommendation:

‘That the Victorian Government designate food and groceries as essential services and enable the Essential Services Commission to:

- monitor and report on the retail sale prices offered by supermarkets for essential grocery items, in particular fresh fruit and vegetable

- to investigate and report on profit margins for supermarkets in relation to essential grocery items.’

The question was put.

The Committee divided.

Ayes 1	Noes 7
Aiv Puglielli	Trung Luu
	Ryan Batchelor
	Michael Galea
	Renee Heath
	Joe McCracken
	Rachel Payne
	Lee Tarlamis

Question negatived.

Aiv Puglielli moved that in Chapter 5, replace ‘continue to support’ with ‘increase support to’ in the following recommendation:

‘That the Victorian Government continue to support social enterprises tackling food insecurity.’

The Committee divided.

Ayes 3	Noes 5
Trung Luu	Ryan Batchelor
Rachel Payne	Michael Galea
Aiv Puglielli	Renee Heath
	Joe McCracken
	Lee Tarlamis

Question negatived.

Aiv Puglielli moved that in Chapter 5, insert the following new Recommendation:

‘That the Victorian Government explore potential penalties for food waste occurring along the supply chain to prevent the wastage of food that could be otherwise consumed.’

The question was put.

The Committee divided.

Ayes 5	Noes 3
Ryan Batchelor	Trung Luu
Michael Galea	Renee Heath
Rachel Payne	Joe McCracken
Aiv Puglielli	
Lee Tarlamis	

Question agreed.

Chapter 6: Improving access to food: a long-term food security strategy for Victoria

Aiv Puglielli moved that in Chapter 6, insert the following new Recommendation:

‘That the Victorian Government re-establishes and resources the Victorian Food Relief Taskforce with an expanded membership to include First Nations people, persons with lived experience of food insecurity and front-line agencies.’

The question was put.

The Committee divided.

Ayes 5	Noes 3
Ryan Batchelor	Trung Luu
Michael Galea	Renee Heath
Rachel Payne	Joe McCracken
Aiv Puglielli	
Lee Tarlamis	

Question agreed.

Aiv Puglielli moved that in Chapter 6, insert the following new Recommendation:

‘That the Victorian Government accept Sustain’s proposal that local governments be empowered to lead the participatory development of community food systems and food security strategies via the provision of financial and supporting resources. As such, food security should be reinstated as a priority area within the next Victorian Health and Wellbeing Plan, embedding food security within strategic health planning for all local governments in Victoria.’

The question was put.

The Committee divided.

Ayes 5	Noes 3
Ryan Batchelor	Trung Luu
Michael Galea	Renee Heath
Rachel Payne	Joe McCracken
Aiv Puglielli	
Lee Tarlamis	

Question agreed.

Aiv Puglielli moved that in Chapter 6, insert the following new Recommendation:

‘That the Victorian Government revises the Victorian planning provisions (*Planning and Environment Act 1987*) to include health and food security as an objective when local governments and other planning authorities are making planning decisions.’

The question was put.

The Committee divided.

Ayes 5	Noes 3
Ryan Batchelor	Trung Luu
Michael Galea	Renee Heath
Rachel Payne	Joe McCracken
Aiv Puglielli	
Lee Tarlamis	

Question agreed.

Minority report

VICTORIAN GREENS' MINORITY REPORT

Legislative Council

Legal and Social Issues Committee

Inquiry into Food Security in Victoria

Authored by Aiv Puglielli MLC

1. Introduction

In writing this report we acknowledge the ongoing thriving cultures and traditions of First Peoples on this continent, and the impact that colonisation has had on First Nations communities which is still being felt today. We acknowledge the connection First Nations communities have with these lands. First Nations people have cared for Country for countless generations.

We pay respect to First Nations Elders past and present, and join their calls for Truth, Treaty and Justice. Sovereignty was never ceded.

Always was, always will be, Aboriginal land.

"... the relationship that First Peoples have with this Country provides an obligation through a Treaty relationship and partnership for everybody who lives here to care for their Country. And who better to provide that obligation to us than the original owners of this land?"

- **Abe Ropitini, Executive Director, Population Health, Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation - Public hearing 20 August 2024**

Since colonisation and the Western industrialisation of agricultural practices, our lands have been put under ever increasing pressure to maximise yield to maximise profit, rather than ensuring continued care for Country. This then feeds into a food supply chain that is increasingly unsustainable.

The reality for most Victorians is that to access food, they will go to their local supermarket. In this sense, supermarkets play an essential role in the lives of Victorians. They act as the primary access point for food and household necessities for the majority of Victorians, and the major players in this sector, Coles and Woolworths, can be found in hundreds of suburbs across the state.

This duopoly dominates the supermarket sector, with an estimated combined market share of 82%¹. This has led to artificially inflated prices, lowered competition in the supermarket sector and outrageous profits for the supermarket duopoly. There are concerns that supermarkets prioritise profits over people, engaging in practices like price gouging and land banking. These actions have contributed to food insecurity, with experts stating that the level of food insecurity in Victoria is quickly becoming a human rights issue².

The cost of living continues to rise. Many people are having to choose between paying for groceries or paying for their housing or other basic necessities.

The evidence presented throughout this inquiry leaves no doubt about the urgent need for government intervention to address the root causes of food insecurity.

¹ [Senate Select Committee on Supermarket Prices - Submission 138](#)

² [Financial Counselling Victoria - hearing](#)

2. Taking care of the land

We will never be able to feed our communities and future generations if we do not care for our lands, waters and skies. These things are all interconnected and none can exist without the other.

First Nations regeneration of land and agricultural practices

“Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are very connected to Country, including food and water systems, and this contributes to social, emotional, cultural, spiritual and physical health and wellbeing. Our view of health is not just about the individual. Our view of health is holistic. It is about ourselves, Country, our community, and when the rivers are dying our people are dying as well, because the river is life.”

- **Alicia Dunning, Research Associate, Guunu-maana (Heal) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health, and Yuwaya Ngarra-li - 21 August 2024**

The colonisation of Australia was enabled through the violent acquisition of land, thus dispossessing First Nations communities from Country and thereby from cultural practices, including food practices.

“To separate food from a people is also to separate their culture, and what we saw through the deliberate removal of culture is the removal of food practices and food connection as well.”

- **Abe Ropitini, Executive Director, Population Health, Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation - Public hearing 20 August 2024**

Compounding this dispossession has been the introduction of intensive Western methods of food production that have significantly damaged the entire food ecology, including soil, vegetation, biodiversity and water.

The implications on food security for First Nations communities are significant, and the socio-economic impacts of this are detailed further in this report. However, as we heard in the hearings, food security is not only about whether one has ‘enough’ nutritious food, but also the security that comes from being connected with food as a means to celebrate culture.³

First Nations communities across Victoria, including Traditional Owner Groups and Aboriginal Controlled Community Organisations, are actively engaged in caring for Country,

³ Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation - Public hearing 20 August 2024

people and culture, and are asking governments for meaningful steps towards recognition of this work and ongoing autonomy over this work.

Food sovereignty requires Country to be healthy and this is broad recognition of the vital role of water in providing life for the environment to flourish.

"...food and water securities are absolutely connected and that water security, including the health of rivers, must be prioritised in government policies and interventions related to food securities."

- **Loretta Weatherall, Project Officer, Food and Water for Life, Yuwaya Ngarra-li and Dharriwaa Elders Group**

Firstly it should be noted that the Victorian government needs to full implement the commitments made in the Water is Life Roadmap⁴. Additionally, urgent action must be taken to tangibly recognise that Victoria exists within a framework of stolen water (known as Aqua Nullius) and commit to specific targets regarding First Nations water ownership that begin to rectify this.

In 2022 First Peoples owned only 0.2% percent of Victoria's water entitlements.⁵ At present, most 'cultural water' entitlements are acquired by Traditional Owners through the transfer of unallocated entitlements, usually from water corporations.⁶ First Nations communities are constrained in their acquisition of water by; the limited availability of entitlements, the financial burden of purchasing water shares through the current system, and the feeling that Traditional Owners should not be required to purchase water that has never been ceded.⁷

Without untied government funding for the direct purchase of water entitlements, voluntary water purchases from willing sellers (known as buybacks) are a key tool that governments must engage. Water acquired by the government through this process should then be freely transferred to Traditional Owners for their self-determined purposes. Any First Nations water ownership scheme that works through the buyback system must remain untied to any performance measures or outcomes, thus enabling complete water sovereignty for First Peoples.

⁴ Victoria. Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, issuing body. Water is life : Traditional Owner access to water roadmap

<https://www.water.vic.gov.au/our-programs/aboriginal-water-program/water-is-life-roadmap>

⁵

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-10-12/traditional-owners-given-more-water-in-landmark-announcement/102963860>

⁶ 'Donnell, E., Godden, L. C., & O'Bryan, K. (2021). Cultural Water for Cultural Economies: Final Report of the Accessing Water to Meet Aboriginal Economic Development Needs. (1st ed.) University of Melbourne.

https://www.pc.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0010/274969/subdr185-water-reform-2020-attachmentb.pdf

⁷ Ibid

It is imperative that Traditional Owners are supported to realise their sovereign water rights, and that their expert knowledge is fully integrated into water management systems in our state.

"The rivers at Walgett are dying, and this is one of the reasons why the community is food-insecure. It is also why the community is forced to source drinking water from the high-sodium Great Artesian Basin.".....

"show a strong relationship between experienced food and water insecurity, reflecting the knowledge of interconnection between food and water of Aboriginal people in our river community and the collapse of the river food system."

- **Loretta Weatherall, Project Officer, Food and Water for Life, Yuwaya Ngarra-li and Dharriwaa Elders Group - Public hearing 21 August 2024**

"...the interplay between when there is connection to Country and the importance of the natural environment and how when that degrades that impacts the natural food supply as part of traditional culture, and then you have the competing interests of business or external commercial interests... and then you have to question if there is a power imbalance there."

- **Kristy Law, PhD Candidate, Food Policy, George Institute for Global Health - Public hearing 21 August 2024**

NEW RECOMMENDATION: That the Victorian Government urgently works with First Nations communities to implement a mechanism through which Traditional Owners can acquire water entitlements, over which they have complete sovereignty.

NEW RECOMMENDATION: That the Victorian Government supports First Nations communities with long term funding and resources to advance their goals and aspirations for food and water sovereignty.

Preparing for climate shocks to our food system

One of the key drivers of food insecurity and increased food costs at a macro level is the impact of climate change and pressure that extreme weather events and other climate disasters are having on our ecosystems.

"We can expect food prices to be more volatile in future due to these more frequent and more severe climate shocks particularly but also due to other underlying environmental stressors"

- **Dr Rachel Carey, School of Agriculture, Food and Ecosystem Sciences, Melbourne University - Public hearing 20 August 2024**

We cannot ignore climate change. It is imperative that we consider the ramifications of a changing climate and prepare our food systems appropriately. Climate change can lead to increased fresh food prices due to changes in growing seasons, or extreme weather events; from crop damage to lower yields. And unfortunately the results of climate related food shocks within the food systems will disproportionately impact on people who are already struggling to access affordable and nutritious food.⁸

It is crucial that we do all we can to plan and future proof our food systems including by modelling these shocks and their impacts on food supply chains and other elements of the system to better understand the impact that future challenges may have.

NEW RECOMMENDATION: That the Victorian Government urgently model current & potential 'shocks' to the food system as a result of a rapidly changing climate and integrate this modelling into any actions undertaken through the Victorian Food Security Strategy.

Local & diverse food systems

Supporting local Victorian agriculture can be part of the solution to the ecological crisis we are facing, while also providing significant immediate and long standing food security for local communities.

We must support local farmers to make the shift to regenerative and agroecological practices to strength local and regional food production and reduce our reliance on imported

⁸ [Sustain submission](#)

product This can be done in many ways including by encouraging new farmers and offering incentives such as biodiversity credits, government subsidised or funded internships and apprenticeships programs for these farms, as well as grants and subsidies for pesticide reduction.

We must support local farms and particularly those who are actively working to reduce their agricultural emissions. We should also be decentralising and diversifying food production, storage, and retail by encouraging the expansion of local markets and urban agriculture initiatives such as community gardens and small-scale peri-urban farms and market gardens.

NEW RECOMMENDATION: That the Victorian Government Food Security Strategy focus on increasing local food production and diversifying production to reduce risks from disruption related to climate change and supply chain issues.

NEW RECOMMENDATION: That the Victorian Government create a Victorian Centre for Regenerative Agriculture to research and promote regenerative agriculture as a way to support farmers to reduce emissions, restore land and improve yield

3. Taking care of people

The FoodPATH Report

The committee report recommends the adoption of the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation Food Policies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health (FoodPATH) Report which is very welcome.

“Six Aboriginal communities across Victoria participated in workshops with us to map out their community food systems and to share with us all of the influences that lead to decision-making, all of the constraints around access, cost, all of the factors that are often interrelated. It was very powerful that there was concern coming through in every single one of those workshops around the conduct of corporates. The report is called the FoodPATH Community Report.”

- **Abe Ropitini, Executive Director, Population Health, Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, Public hearing 20 August**

This is a report that was delivered in partnership with Deakin University’s Murnong Health Research Mob, as well as multiple Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, their staff and Community members: Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative; Njernda Aboriginal Co-operative; Bendigo & District Aboriginal Co-operative; Moogji Aboriginal Council; and Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative.⁹

This is a significant recommendation.

The report calls for 10 actions; 5 of which are to be community-led, and 5 to be implemented by governments.

These include:

Government actions

1. **Ban junk food marketing** (in all its forms), including **unhealthy sport sponsorship**.
2. **Mandate nutrition and cooking education** in schools.
3. Make the **Health Star Rating food labelling system mandatory** across all packaged food.
4. **Set limits** on the amount of **sugar, salt** and **saturated fat** allowed in packaged food.
5. **Keep the GST off fresh food**.

⁹

<https://www.vaccho.org.au/2024/02/19/new-report-community-empowerment-the-key-to-food-security/>

Community actions

1. **ACCO-led self-determined Community nutrition programs** (these could include anything from nutrition education, meal preparation, cooking, youth programs).
2. **Community gardens** to grow and share food among Community members; these could be linked to food packages or cooking programs.
3. **Workshops/Yarning circles with Elders** to educate Community about traditional foods.
4. **Community based parenting programs**, incorporating nutrition and cooking healthy meals.
5. **ACCO early years programs around healthy eating** in pregnancy and early childhood nutrition.

These reforms will have significant impact on the broader community, and must be implemented and well resourced as a demonstration of the State Government's commitment to the principle of self-determination for First Peoples.

"Culture, food and health we also know are inseparable. When we talk about food security and whether you have got enough food, we are also talking about whether you are connected to a celebration of your culture"

- **Abe Ropitini, Executive Director, Population Health, Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, Public hearing 20 August**

Addressing the broader cost of living crisis

Beyond the specific issues of affordable and accessible food there are a number of factors which also impact on people's health and well being. With the current cost of living crisis hitting so many people in our community, there are many who are struggling to afford not just food but housing and transport and other basic needs.

There are actions that the Victorian Government could take to ease the pressures of housing costs which are impacting so many.

So long as rents continue to skyrocket and rise without limit, people will continue to be put in the position of having to decide between keeping a roof over their head or putting food on the table.

The lack of access to public housing in Victoria also puts people at risk of homelessness and forces them to make impossible choices between essential needs, often forgoing feeding themselves to ensure that rising housing costs can be met.

NEW RECOMMENDATION: That the Victorian Government implement a two year freeze on rent increases backdated to January 2023 prices, followed by a permanent cap on rent increases.

NEW RECOMMENDATION: That the Victorian Government urgently build 100 000 new public homes through the establishment of a publicly-owned builder.

4. Taking on the supermarkets

We have a supermarket duopoly in this country.

The concentration and market dominance of the major supermarkets has enabled a price setting practice (referred to by many as 'price gouging') which puts many foods out of the affordable reach of everyday Victorians.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: With respect to the major supermarkets, do you think that there should be an obligation that the food that they are providing to Victorians is affordable, and do we think that the supermarkets are fulfilling that obligation?

Kass HALASTANIS: There certainly ought to be an obligation, but are they fulfilling that obligation?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: At least from what you have heard from your residents, do you think that is the case?

Kass HALASTANIS: Absolutely not. They are not fulfilling that obligation, and that is an obligation they ought to be fulfilling.

- **Kass Halastanis, Social Policy and Projects Officer, Knox City Council - Public hearing 21 August 2024**

Throughout the inquiry it became very clear that the Labor and Liberal members were unwilling to acknowledge the detrimental effects that supermarket price gouging was having on everyday Victorians.

They instead sided with these major corporations and refused to accept that the current cost of living crisis is being exacerbated by the major supermarkets who continue to make billions of dollars in profits, while many people cannot afford to eat.

It should be the priority of every level of government to ensure that people have access to sufficient healthy and affordable food. There are many mechanisms that both the State and Federal Governments could use to lower the cost of food.

Supermarkets Provide an Essential Service

It was repeatedly made clear that the public views supermarkets as an essential service. This sentiment was echoed by key stakeholders, including public health organisations, local councils, community service providers, and individuals living in vulnerable or isolated circumstances.

Evidence from various groups emphasised that food is a basic need and as such, the provision of food should be considered an essential service. This perspective was strongly supported by organisations including the Islamic Council of Victoria¹⁰, Sustain¹¹, Uniting Victoria and Tasmania¹², the Salvation Army¹³, Foodbank¹⁴, and OzHarvest¹⁵, all of which agreed that regulating supermarkets as essential services would improve food access. The duopoly of Woolworths and Coles was also identified by Financial Counselling Victoria¹⁶ as a significant limiting factor on consumers' ability to make conscious choices about food, given the lack of real competition in the market.

By regulating supermarkets under the Essential Services Commission (ESC), the government could ensure greater transparency, accountability, and fairness in the pricing of essential goods, improving food security across the state.

NEW RECOMMENDATION: That the Victorian Government designate food and groceries as an essential service and enable regulation of this service through the Essential Services Commission

Profit Margins on Essential Items Must be Regulated to Combat Price-Gouging

The State Government is the only level of government in Australia with the powers to control prices. Victoria has used these powers to regulate grocery prices between 1948-1954 under the Prices Regulation Act 1948 and 1987 under the Grocery Prices Act (1987).

During this period, the Victorian Government had both a Minister for Prices, a Prices Commissioner, and a Prices Branch within government

Price regulation in Victoria is currently undertaken by the Essential Services Commission for a range of essential services like energy and water.

The Victorian government should use its powers to regulate supermarket prices and prevent price gouging.

"Profits increase, and I know large companies have to bow to their investors and make profits, but how much profit does one company actually really need?"

- **Therese Watson, Advocacy Officer, Strategic Growth and Advocacy, Greater Dandenong City Council; Wednesday 21 August Public Hearing**

¹⁰ [ICV & RCOA panel - hearing](#)

¹¹ [Sustain - submission](#)

¹² [Uniting Victoria and Tasmania & Salvation Army panel - hearing](#)

¹³ [ibid](#)

¹⁴ [Foodbank & Ozharvest panel - hearing](#)

¹⁵ [Ozharvest - submission](#)

¹⁶ [Financial Counselling Victoria - hearing](#)

Evidence gathered during this inquiry, along with supermarkets' own financial reporting, clearly shows that supermarkets have been profiting significantly from price increases on essential items^{17,18}, with prices being raised above the rate of inflation¹⁹. Price gouging has worsened the cost-of-living crisis and has "added significantly to inflation"²⁰. Australian supermarkets have some of the highest profit margins in the world, making government intervention necessary to protect consumers. Regulating retail profit margins, a power that the ESC already holds, offers a solution to lower the financial burden placed on consumers by supermarkets and increase competition in the grocery sector.

Evidence from organisations, including the Islamic Council Victoria and Sustain, advocated for proactive measures like legislation to prevent price gouging and excessive rent increases²¹. The ICV stressed that supermarkets must be "reined in"²² and stated that government intervention is necessary as "self-regulation doesn't work"²³. Sustain was more critical, stating that the "lax fiscal and regulatory framework in Victoria and Australia"²⁴ has allowed supermarkets to rake in large profits and that government inaction amounts to "structural violence"²⁵ against vulnerable people. This sentiment was echoed by other witnesses, including the Regional Food Security Alliance (RFSA), which observed that while prices and the demand for food relief services spiked during the pandemic, neither have decreased in the post-COVID era²⁶. The RFSA also revealed the exploitative nature of supermarket vouchers, which offer far less value than those provided by not-for-profit community-run organisations, deepening vulnerable people's dependency on the supermarket duopoly²⁷.

Consumer protection reports²⁸ and social service organisations such as Uniting Victoria and Tasmania and the Salvation Army²⁹ further emphasised the lack of competition within the supermarket sector and the impact this has on supermarket retail prices. They noted that price gouging was enabled by the dominance of the Coles and Woolworths duopoly, which restricts consumer choice and stifles competition³⁰. Government intervention to criminalise price gouging and to regulate profit margins is seen as essential to preventing further consumer exploitation.

There was widespread support for ESC regulation as an effective method to ensure fair pricing of essential goods. Organisations such as the Salvation Army, Uniting Victoria and Tasmania, Foodbank, OzHarvest, and Dietitians Australia expressed their support, alongside

¹⁷ [Coles 2024 Annual Report](#)

¹⁸ [Woolworths 2024 Annual Report](#)

¹⁹ [Inquiry Into Price Gouging And Unfair Pricing Practices](#)

²⁰ *ibid*

²¹ [ICV & RCOA panel - hearing](#)

²² *ibid*

²³ *ibid*

²⁴ [Sustain - hearing](#)

²⁵ *ibid*

²⁶ [RFSA - hearing](#)

²⁷ *ibid*

²⁸ [An Evaluation of Planning Systems - Barriers to Entry for Grocery Retailing](#)

²⁹ [Uniting & Salvation Army panel - hearing](#)

³⁰ *ibid*

several local councils, including Dandenong, Knox, and Maribyrnong. All of these councils advocated for the Supermarket Industry Bill 2024 as well as recommended that the government support the passage of the Bill³¹³²³³. The University of Melbourne Graduate Student Association and University of Melbourne Student Union also supported government regulation of supermarket profit margins, seeing the lowering of retail prices on essential grocery items as a way to improve food security, particularly for vulnerable students³⁴.

Supporting the passage of the Supermarket Industry Bill and empowering the ESC to regulate the retail profit margins on essential grocery items would protect consumers from unregulated price gouging at the hands of supermarkets and promote greater market competition. These issues were two of the most widely raised recommendations and critical issues that the government needed to address. Throughout the inquiry, evidence was provided in support of this by a multitude of organisations, councils, and individuals who advocated their support for government intervention to address price gouging and high supermarket prices. The government is being urged to take action to ensure that food remains affordable and accessible for all.

NEW RECOMMENDATION: That the Victorian Government introduce food and grocery price controls to ensure every Victorian has access to affordable food

The Government Must Combat Supermarket Land-Banking

Land banking is one of the most prominent anti-competitive “strategic behaviours”³⁵ utilised by the major supermarkets to maintain and grow their market dominance³⁶. By purchasing land without developing it or restricting the availability of desirable retail locations, the major supermarkets effectively block competition, preventing smaller or independent retailers from entering the market. This practice artificially inflates prices and restricts consumer choice, as communities have fewer alternatives and greater reliance on Coles and Woolworths. The Australian Department of the Treasury reported that Coles’ and Woolworths’ prices were lower when an Aldi store existed within 5km³⁷, demonstrating why the major supermarkets are incentivised to land bank to ensure competitors cannot access the local market.

In both their submission and appearance at the inquiry, Sustain raised concerns about this practice, suggesting that supermarkets have benefited from lax land tax regulations, which enable them to acquire and hold onto undeveloped land without significant financial penalties³⁸. Sustain argued that these tactics “stitch up” supermarket competition and

³¹ [Dandenong Council - submission](#)

³² [Knox Council - submission](#)

³³ [Maribyrnong Council - submission](#)

³⁴ [UMGSA & UMSU panel - hearing](#)

³⁵ [ACCC Supermarkets Inquiry](#)

³⁶ [ibid](#)

³⁷ [An Evaluation of Planning Systems - Barriers to Entry for Grocery Retailing](#)

³⁸ [Sustain - hearing](#)

reinforce the duopoly held by the major supermarkets, Coles and Woolworths³⁹. The lack of competition allows these supermarkets to control local markets, reducing the availability of more affordable alternatives for consumers.

Sustain recommends the implementation of a universal land tax to limit the effectiveness of supermarket land banking. This change would address the issue of supermarket land banking and assist in funding additional recommendations⁴⁰.

NEW RECOMMENDATION: That the Victorian Government investigate the practice of 'land-banking' used by the major supermarkets and consider amendments to planning regulations to limit its occurrence.

Signed:



Mr Aiv Puglielli MLC

Date: 6 November 2024

³⁹ *ibid*

⁴⁰ [Sustain - submission](#)

