



Nourishing Our Country

1 August
2024

INQUIRY INTO FOOD SECURITY IN VICTORIA

OzHarvest would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry. The submission discusses impacts and intervention opportunities for household food insecurity.

Introduction

OzHarvest is Australia's leading food rescue organisation, rescuing good food from going waste and delivering it to charities that support people experiencing food insecurity. We've been operating in Victoria since 2014 and we have rescued over 11 million kgs of quality nutritious food from over 1,827 businesses, delivering it to 313 agencies and providing over 32 million meals for Victorian families and individuals.

The following is a submission from OzHarvest as a standalone organisation. In addition, we have also coordinated a joint submission on behalf of a collective of agencies we deliver food to, who provide essential food relief for Victorians.

Central to our submission is the essential requirement that the Victorian Government take action to address food security at its root causes: poverty, inequality, housing, health and discrimination. While food relief will always be needed as an emergency service, and we welcome funding to support this essential work, it is not a sustainable intervention to tackle chronic food insecurity. Our recommendations for addressing food insecurity are outlined below.

Christine Crowley
Melbourne City Manager, OzHarvest





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Recommendations

Governance

Implement legislative change to embed food rights, strategies, funding and measurement

- **Legislate the right to food in Victoria**, to ensure the Government upholds a commitment to respect, protect and fulfil access to nutritious food.
- Develop, fund and deliver an ongoing Victorian Food System Strategy, and a Minister for Food.
- Implement adequate metrics to measure the issue and successes of interventions, for example:
 - Conduct surveys of household food insecurity every 3 years using the United States Department of Agriculture Household Food Security Survey Module (HFSSM) as a model.
 - Utilise the Food Stress Index model created for Victoria¹ that maps and locates early food insecurity risk across the state. Apply learnings from Western Australia's use of the tool.

Food prices

Take immediate action to reduce the cost of food in Victoria.

- **Advocate to the federal government** to immediately implement all recommendations from Senate Select Committee on Supermarket Prices (2024, including
 - Amending the Competition and Consumer Act 2010 to prohibit price gouging
 - Establishing a Commission on prices and competition (with the authority to monitor and review prices and price-setting practices, publish findings)
 - Legislative amendments to ACCC to give authority to investigate and prosecute + increase funding to ACCC.

¹ VCOSS, Monash (2022) [Victorian Food Stress Index – Monash University](#)



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- Consider options to **introduce pricing caps on essential groceries** as delivered for example in France² and Croatia³ or implementing grocery bill subsidies for low-income households as delivered in Greece.⁴
- Consider regulatory avenues through Consumer Affairs Victoria to balance relationships between retailers and primary producers.

Cost of living

The cost of living is a driving force for increased food insecurity in Victoria, 80% of food insecure households attribute their food insecurity to cost of living⁵.

Take meaningful steps to reduce the growing level of poverty and inequality in Victoria.

- Advocate to federal government to **raise the rate of social protection payments** such as JobSeeker and Youth Allowance to the same rate as pensions and apply the same indexation to all payments in like with CPI and WPI.⁶
- **Support programs that provide a pathway to meaningful employment** – especially through education and training
- Housing is the single biggest cost of living pressure right now⁷, and state governments have a role to play:
 - **Fast track commitments in the Victorian Housing Statement⁸**, especially improving supply, tenants rights and affordable housing.
 - Expand commitments in the Victorian Housing Statement: prioritising housing for marginalised communities, implementing planning and zoning to support affordable housing, and advocating for a taxation system that supports affordability.

² CNN (2023) [Link](#)

³ Associated Press (2023) [Link](#)

⁴ Athens Macedonian News Agency (2022) [Link](#)

⁵ Foodbank Hunger Report (2023)

⁶ ACOSS (2023) It's not enough: why more is needed to lift people out of poverty. [Link](#)

⁷ NCOSS (2023)

⁸ Government of Victoria (2023) Housing Statement. [Link](#)



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Food education

Invest in quality food literacy education, for example OzHarvest's programs:

- FEAST – 10-week curriculum aligned schools program teaching nutrition, cooking skills and food systems education.
- NEST – community food and nutrition education teaching cooking on a budget. This evidence-based program improves personal health, addresses food insecurity and aligns with the Australian Dietary Guidelines.

Food relief as an emergency service

In the interim, the Victorian Government needs to ensure the food relief sector is resourced to support those experiencing food insecurity and connect them to other services.

- Adequately resource the sector to
 - Meet the increased demand seen across the state
 - Co-design dignified relief models with service recipients
 - Deliver designated school support/breakfast programs
 - Connect with other social services such as employment, housing and financial literacy
- Explore and invest in regional food hubs to improve access and reduce resource demand for food relief providers
- Re-convene and resource the Food Relief Taskforce so the sector can work more closely with government to support those experiencing food insecurity across the state.

Food insecurity in Victoria

Victoria is in a food insecurity crisis

The demand for food relief in Victoria is steeply on the rise, higher than ever – with 87% of Victorian charities supported by OzHarvest seeing an increase in community demand in



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the last 6 months⁹. Food insecurity is affecting households of all kinds, with the majority of people presenting to many of our partner services being employed (54%) and housed.

Key findings from OzHarvest's most recent Community Needs Survey (2024) for Victoria:

- Agencies are feeding an average of 981 people per month, with 28% accessing food relief services for the first time
- 74% agencies report the need for more food to meet demand
- Charities have seen 31% increase in demand over last 6 months
- The main reason people are experiencing food insecurity is housing affordability and access, followed closely by food prices, also unemployment – this is in line with nation-wide findings (Bowden 2020 AIFS).

The overwhelming feedback from our charities is that this is the toughest they have ever seen it. We've heard the following from our annual Community Needs Survey and agencies:

- "We are seeing more and more hungry people every day, people who would rather not ask for help but who have no option. We are struggling to keep up with the level of need but we will keep pushing through." - Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, Melbourne

And directly from those in the community experiencing food insecurity:

- "We have to choose whether to pay the rent or eat, we can't afford both."
- "I just can't afford life."
- "I'm 23 and am partially disabled, my income is very low on a weekly basis and after all my bills I'm left with very little to spend on food."

Impacts of food insecurity

The outcomes of food insecurity are far reaching and well-studied – from psychological distress to chronic disease – which places further strain on services and compound the issues for individuals. Notably, women are 50% more likely to be food insecure than men (FB Hunger Report 2019). Decisive, systemic action on food relief is needed to address these issues holistically.

⁹ OzHarvest Community Needs Survey (n= >700) (2024)



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Diet-related ill-health and mental illness costs Australia around \$200 billion every year.¹⁰ Mental illness, alone, is estimated to directly cost the Australian economy \$70 billion annually, with a further \$150 billion associated with diminished health and reduced life expectancy from mental illness.¹¹ Mental illness is prevalent in those experiencing food insecurity, Foodbank found that 70% of food insecure people experience high levels of psychological distress, compared to 13% of the general population.¹²

Poor diet is a major risk factor of poor health in Australia, contributing at least 5.4% of the burden of disease.¹³ Currently less than 5% of the population are consuming the recommend intake of fruits and vegetables per day.¹⁴ Low socio-economic groups and those experiencing food insecurity are more likely to have poorer dietary intake and health outcomes.¹⁵

Drivers of food insecurity

80% of people experiencing food insecurity attribute the cause of their food insecurity to cost-of-living pressures. Access to affordable housing plays a key role, as does higher utility bills and the ever-increasing costs of groceries. We know food is almost always the first to go: 94% of those experiencing food insecurity state that they manage cost-of-living pressures by reducing their spending on food first (Hunger Report, 2023).

¹⁰ University of Wollongong (2023) Urgent action is needed to change the way food is produced, processed, sold and consumed. <https://www.uow.edu.au/media/2023/urgent-action-is-needed-to-change-the-way-food-is-produced-processed-sold-and-consumed.php>

¹¹ Productivity Commission (2020) Mental Health, Inquiry Report.

¹² Foodbank (2023) Hunger Report.

¹³ A Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2021). *Australian Burden of Disease Study 2018: Interactive data on risk factor burden*. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/burden-of-disease/abds-2018-interactive-data-risk-factors>

¹⁴ [Dietary behaviour, 2022 | Australian Bureau of Statistics \(abs.gov.au\)](https://www.abs.gov.au/visualisations/2022/dietary-behaviour)

¹⁵ Lewis M, Lee AJ. Dietary inequity? A systematic scoping review of dietary intake in low socio-economic groups compared with high socio-economic groups in Australia. *Public Health Nutrition*. 2021;24(3):393-411



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Food insecurity intersects with multiple vulnerabilities.

Food insecurity can be attributed, in part, to finances: income, wealth, and food affordability. But, much broader, food insecurity is both a product and a cause of vulnerabilities (Hart, 2009) and requires a range of services to address the root cause of the problem. It almost never exists in isolation, rather is a product of intersecting vulnerabilities and unmet needs, such as housing insecurity, financial stress, family and domestic violence, mental health or substance misuse issues (Booth et al., 2018). Food insecurity intersects closely with drivers of poverty and growing inequality in Australia. Moreover, certain groups, regardless of income, are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity" Butcher et al. 2017

Australians at risk of food insecurity:

- Indigenous people (24%)
- Unemployed people (23%)
- Single parent households (23%)
- Low-income earners (20%)
- Rental households (20%)
- Young people (15%)

Addressing food insecurity holistically

The complexity of food security means it requires multiple approaches to address. Key levers to increase household food security (expanded in recommendations above) are:

- Increasing people's financial capacity to afford nutritious food through (1) addressing drivers of poverty and inequality and (2) taking steps to reduce the cost of food
- Investing in community development and proven food literacy programs to improve people's capacity to prepare nutritious meals at lower cost
- Embedding food rights, strategies, funding and measurement into the Victorian Government's core business
- Adequately resourcing the food relief sector to deliver food relief, an essential service and stopgap for those experiencing food insecurity, as well as a connector to other social services



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Conclusion

Food security is a highly complex, mostly social problem (see Appendix 2.) and in almost every case is a cause of other systemic failures across vast policy areas including housing, health, education and social protections. It will require courageous action at all levels of government to address, some of which are listed in our recommendations above. We implore the Victorian Government to implement as many of these recommendations as possible to swiftly reduce the ever-climbing number of people and families made to experience food insecurity in this state.

In the meantime, many frontline services, including OzHarvest, will continue to do whatever is in our power to support those experiencing food security. But without decisive, systemic, holistic and community-driven solutions led by state and federal governments, the injustice of food insecurity will continue to grow.

Christine Crowley

Melbourne City Manager, OzHarvest

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Appendix 1. About OzHarvest

Founded in 2004, OzHarvest is one of Australia's leading food rescue and food relief organisations, collecting quality surplus food from more than 3,000 businesses, including supermarkets, restaurants, cafes, hotels and retailers reaching wide into the food supply chain. Every week over 250 tonnes of food is saved from landfill and delivered to 1,900+ charitable agencies free of charge, helping vulnerable people across Australia, whilst the financial saving to those organisations enables them to deliver a wider range of ancillary services.

OzHarvest uses agile just-in-time logistics to target end-of-the-day fresh and short life food, preventing it from going to waste. Food is distributed on the same day, directly to charities, who then pass it on to communities they're supporting. Preventing edible organic food from going to landfill also saves greenhouse gas emissions (2kg CO₂ for every 1kg saved) responsible for climate change.

In addition to immediate food support, OzHarvest is committed to ending food waste and food insecurity. Our educational programs and behaviour change campaigns are interventions to help people lead nutritious, sustainable lives.

OzHarvest's education programs in Victoria include:

- [NEST](#) – an evidence-based nutrition and health education program teaching people in need how to cook and eat healthily on a budget,
- [FEAST](#) – a curriculum-aligned program teaching primary and high school students how to fight food waste, eat healthily and become future change-makers.

OzHarvest operates in Sydney, Adelaide, Brisbane, Canberra, Gold Coast, Melbourne, Newcastle, and Perth and in regional communities. Since inception OzHarvest has delivered over 270 million meals and saved over 97,000 tonnes of food from landfill.

Last financial year in Victoria, we rescued just under 2.25 million kilos of food that would have otherwise gone to landfill and provided it to over 141 charities free of charge. This translates to more than 4.4 million meals for some of Victoria's most vulnerable people.



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Appendix 2. Two food security frameworks

The following frameworks should be considered when developing a holistic conceptualisation of food security. The first is the well-documented 6 pillars of food security, as developed by the UN.¹⁶

THE SIX DIMENSIONS OF FOOD SECURITY	
Availability	Having a quantity and quality of food sufficient to satisfy the dietary needs of individuals, free from adverse substances and acceptable within a given culture, supplied through domestic production or imports.
Access (economic, social and physical)	Having personal or household financial means to acquire food for an adequate diet at a level to ensure that satisfaction of other basic needs are not threatened or compromised; and that adequate food is accessible to everyone, including vulnerable individuals and groups.
Utilization	Having an adequate diet, clean water, sanitation and health care to reach a state of nutritional well-being where all physiological needs are met.
Stability	Having the ability to ensure food security in the event of sudden shocks (e.g. an economic, health, conflict or climatic crisis) or cyclical events (e.g. seasonal food insecurity).
Agency	Individuals or groups having the capacity to act independently to make choices about what they eat, the foods they produce, how that food is produced, processed, and distributed, and to engage in policy processes that shape food systems. The protection of agency requires socio-political systems that uphold governance structures that enable the achievement of FSN for all.
Sustainability	Food system practices that contribute to long-term regeneration of natural, social and economic systems, ensuring the food needs of the present generations are met without compromising the food needs of future generations.

Figure 1. The Six Dimensions of Food Security, HLPE

The second is the Principles for Regional Food Security, developed by Victoria's Regional Food Security Alliance¹⁷, which receives funding from the Victorian Government. These principles cover on the following:

Equity and Dignity - Our food security systems should be accessible, affordable, dignified, respectful and provide freedom of choice for high-quality food locally.

¹⁶ HLPE. 2020. Food security and nutrition: building a global narrative towards 2030. A report by the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition of the Committee on World Food Security, Rome

¹⁷ Regional Food Security Alliance (RFSA) Inc.



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Health and Wellbeing - Our food security services should provide access to healthy and nutritious food that provides long-term benefits and holistic wrap-around services to build local connection and resilience.

Empowering and Inclusive - Our food security services should be local community-owned, operated, led, culturally appropriate and safe.

Collaboration and Effectiveness - Our food security services should be local, responsive, innovative and sustainable with a collaborative, whole-of-system, justice-centred and evidence-based approach.