This report has been developed by the National Rural Health Alliance (the Alliance), with the support of the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation (RIRDC), to inform governments and policy makers of the effect of food insecurity on health in rural and remote Australia. It aims to promote discussion among industry and government decision makers across a broad range of areas including health, agriculture, water resource management, supply chains and trade.

While not every person who is living in poverty in Australia is food insecure, food insecurity is an issue of poverty and disadvantage. The data available indicate that the groups most vulnerable to food insecurity in Australia are single parent families, people on welfare benefits, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, older Australians and people living in rural and remote communities. While not all people in these vulnerable groups live in poverty, poverty is an issue for many.

Unless the basic needs of these vulnerable populations are met, there will be growing numbers of families and children caught in and unable to escape from a cycle of poverty and poor health. For these Australians, food security will remain a significant issue.

While Australia is currently considered food secure, maintaining and enhancing our food security will require an integrated approach that brings all sectors of society together. There is a need to take a holistic approach to ‘the food system’ - food production, distribution, access, consumption and disposal. Also, there is a need to find ways to increase yield and productivity without compromising biodiversity or our ability to produce food in the future, and without risking environmental harms.

“"There is a need to take a holistic approach to ‘the food system’ - food production, distribution, access, consumption and disposal.""
Food security is an issue for all Australians. Government and industry decision makers will be interested in this report because it brings together for discussion the Commonwealth, state and territory policy settings that effect food security and the evidence on the health impacts of food insecurity. This has enabled consideration of the gaps in both the policy settings and research agenda that is needed to address this fundamental issue.

Rural and remote community leaders will be interested in this report because it outlines the adverse health impacts of food insecurity and identifies possible ways forward.

THE HEALTH IMPACT OF FOOD INSECURITY

The adverse impacts of food insecurity upon health and wellbeing are well documented and understood, however, the impacts are not the same for all.

The international literature finds pregnant women and their offspring are particularly vulnerable. Poor nutrition and food insecurity can result in greater maternal weight gain during pregnancy and a greater risk of gestational diabetes. Babies may have low birth weight, and are at greater risk of developmental health issues, which may manifest across an entire lifetime. International studies have found supplemental feeding for both pregnant women and their children delivers substantial gains in terms of health and wellbeing.

Remoteness is a significant factor correlated with food insecurity. In 2012-13 approximately 20 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians ran out of food at least once in the previous 12 months. Hospitalisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children with malnutrition remains significantly higher than in the wider community. Malnutrition affects child health and can cause growth retardation (stunting), wasting, microcephaly, higher rates of respiratory and gastrointestinal diseases, and anaemia. These conditions affect child growth and development. They can also leave a life-long deficit in terms of incomplete schooling, poor employment outcomes and poor health.

Rates of chronic disease in rural and remote Australia, particularly in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, are growing and contributing to the high burden of disease and the gap between life expectancy for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Data indicate relatively high levels of food insecurity in Indigenous households in rural and remote Australia, but there is little Australian research on the impact of these high rates of household food insecurity.

Another impact of food insecurity is poor nutrition. Extensive research from the USA shows that food insecurity is closely linked to the growth in overweight and obesity, due to the relative affordability of energy-dense, nutrient poor foods over healthy foods. The relatively poor affordability of healthy food also makes it difficult to control diet related diseases, such as type-2 diabetes.

Nutrient-poor diets and poor dietary habits predispose children to being overweight and to obesity. International research confirms that poor diet is reflected in poor school attendance and outcomes, impaired growth and poor cognitive development. Australian research indicates that young children living in rural and remote communities are presenting with high rates of dental decay.

The impact of food security also impacts older Australians. Those aged 70 to 80 years are most severely affected by poor food security, particularly when the individual is on welfare and in rented accommodation. Food insecurity also affects the way in which older people view their health, with people who are food insecure reporting poor or fair health and limited ability to undertake some aspects of independent daily living.

“Remoteness is a significant factor correlated with food insecurity.”
The key findings of this report are that:

- Australia lacks a National Food Security Strategy.
- Data describing food security in Australia is incomplete and under-sampled in remote and isolated communities.
- There is a need for a comprehensive cost benefit analysis of the impact of food insecurity for remote and rural Australian communities.
- Food insecurity is worst in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Improved food security will help to close the health gap.
- Food insecurity has adverse health and social effects across the whole of life – from infancy through to old age. The human health impact includes higher rates of chronic diseases and this is felt most significantly in rural and remote communities.
- Food insecurity results in lower levels of educational achievement and poorer health, both of which negatively influence productivity and growth in rural and remote communities.
- International research demonstrates that food insecurity in childhood can be addressed with early intervention and that adverse health impacts can be reduced.
- Some action to address food security is happening at the community level in Australia.
- Government policy needs to recognise the links between food insecurity, nutrition and obesity, including for women from vulnerable populations.
POLICY AND RESEARCH CONSIDERATIONS

The effect of food insecurity on health is significant with greatest impact upon rural and remote communities and particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. As food insecurity is an issue of poverty and disadvantage, initiatives addressing food insecurity – for example, promoting a nutritious diet – must also be affordable.

It is important that policy development and future research plans take an integrated ‘food system’ approach, encompassing food production, distribution, access, consumption and disposal.

Changing the focus of public health interventions to promoting improved food security at the community level will not only address the underlying causes of food insecurity but also support progress towards healthier lifestyles.

Policy

Findings contained in the report on Commonwealth, state and territory policy settings include:

• food security is not currently part of the national policy conversation and is not considered in the context of trade negotiations, the Intergenerational Report or in taxation debates
• some states and territories have implemented plans addressing food security
• a range of successful interventions addressing food insecurity are being delivered at the community level
• early intervention is vital when addressing the adverse health impacts of food insecurity.

Research

Research gaps were identified across all aspects of food insecurity in Australia, including:

• economic research – cost of food insecurity in Australia today and modelling the benefits of different policy interventions
• agricultural research – improving productivity and increased yields, improving pest and weed management, better use of water resources and development of crops adapted to variable climatic conditions
• social research – identifying what works and what does not work when addressing food insecurity and translation of successful models into different community settings
• longitudinal research – building a robust evidence base on the effect of food insecurity on Australian children over their lifetime.
FUTURE OPTIONS

The Food Security and Health in Rural and Remote Australia report identifies a number of options to help address the incidence and impacts of food insecurity in rural and remote Australia. This includes consideration being given to the development of a National Food Security Strategy, supported by:

- a research agenda – appropriately resourced and coordinated
- data collection – nationally coordinated and including methodologies for sampling remote and regional Australians
- policy development – cognisant of state and territory approaches and initiatives, learns from successful community-led interventions, engages with relevant departments and portfolios, and addresses the causes and effects of food security, particularly poverty, inequality and remoteness.

In developing interventions to prevent food insecurity, the most successful Australian models are based on community led actions that support improved food security.

In addition, consideration could also be given to:

- supplementary foods to support food insecure mothers and infants
- ongoing supplementation of foods for young children up to school age
- subsidisation of freight charges to support increased affordability of healthy foods in remote communities
- small, start-up grants (e.g. up to $5000) to support local community action – such as development of local community gardens and/or kitchens, establishing a local farmers’ market, and establishing a community cooperative to support the sale of locally grown produce
- a ‘healthy food levy’ applied to energy-dense foods to support the distribution of healthy foods into rural and remote communities
- not-for-profit and charitable food aid (food banks) as one but not the only approach to addressing food insecurity.

It is hoped that this report will stimulate regular discussion and communication of the range and status of research projects and emerging policy initiatives addressing food security and health in Australia.
The Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation (RIRDC) invests in research and development to support rural industries to be productive, profitable and sustainable.

RIRDC’s National Rural Issues program delivers independent, trusted and timely research to inform industry and government leaders who influence the operating environment of Australia’s rural industries.

This research:
• Informs policy development and implementation
• Identifies future opportunities and risks
• Covers multiple industries and locations

RIRDC invests approximately $1 million per annum in the National Rural Issues program and attracts other investment and partnerships to undertake research that supports cross-sectoral and national decision making.

Full report
This document provides a summary of the findings of ‘Food Security and Health in Rural and Remote Australia’. A separate full report document has been prepared with the details of the analysis undertaken in the project and is commended to the reader for further information in support of the issues outlined in this document.

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