



Food Insecurity in Corangamite 2023

SouthWest
Healthcare
Regional Health Promotion

Food Insecurity Investigation Snapshot

Eating a nutritious diet has far-reaching impacts on health and wellbeing and is a vital protective measure against many chronic diseases. However, local data indicates that residents in the Corangamite Shire are not consuming the recommended serves of fruit and vegetables, signifying the need for localised support and greater understanding of the barriers to healthy eating.

- In 2017, the Victorian Population Health Survey found that only 2% of adults in Corangamite Shire were meeting the vegetable consumption guidelines and 37% were meeting the fruit consumption guidelines.

- The Great South Coast Health Behaviours study showed that in 2019, only 21% of participating year 4 and year 6 students in Corangamite Shire were meeting the vegetable consumption guidelines and 68% were meeting the fruit consumption guidelines (Deakin, 2019).

With the cost of living rising in Australia, the daily challenge of consuming a well-balanced and nutritious diet is getting harder. For many, the increased cost for essentials such as rent, mortgage, energy bills and petrol, can result in food becoming a discretionary expense. This means that many people may not have enough money to be able to afford adequate and nutritious food, resulting in food insecurity.

In 2023, the SWH Health Promotion team undertook a scoping investigation project to gain an understanding of the local context of food affordability, food accessibility and food insecurity in Corangamite Shire.

What we did?



- ✓ Completed an environmental scan of current context of food insecurity in Corangamite Shire
- ✓ Completed mapping and analysis of the availability of food in Corangamite Shire, including food relief
- ✓ Assessed the affordability of food in Corangamite using the ASAP Protocol
- ✓ Completed interviews with 12 service providers (21 professionals in total)
- ✓ Completed interviews with 6 community members
- ✓ Distributed a community survey, with 86 responses analysed

Key findings

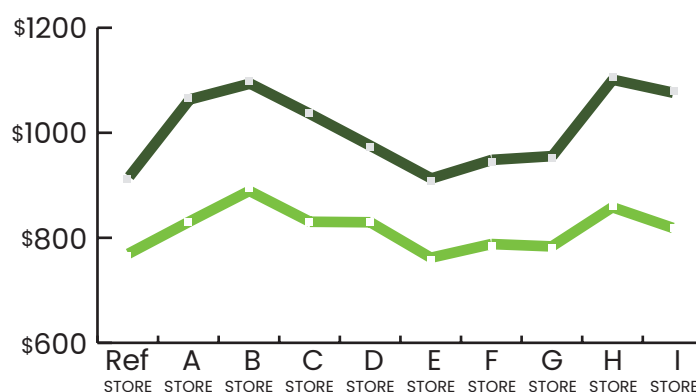
Having access to affordable and nutritious food should NOT depend on your postcode

Access to affordable and nutritious food is a human right, however not everyone is currently afforded this right, with the price and availability of food varying wildly across Australia, and in Corangamite. As part of the food investigation, the [Healthy Diets Australian Standardised Affordability and Pricing \(ASAP\) protocol](#) was utilised to measure the cost of food in the Corangamite Shire. The findings from the ASAP protocol demonstrate the significant variation in the cost of a recommended diet (diet aligns that with the Australian dietary guidelines) and the current Australian diet (diet mirroring reported intake from national health survey data) for a family of four per fortnight.

The cost of the recommended diet for a family of four ranged from \$757.52 to \$894.12, a difference in cost of \$136.60 from the least expensive to most expensive supermarket. The cost of the current diet for a family of four ranged from \$907.94 to \$1105.37, a difference in cost of \$197.43 from the least expensive to most expensive supermarket. For comparison, the recommended diet in Warrnambool would cost a family of four an average of \$697.75, which is 14% more affordable than the average cost of \$815.45 in Corangamite.



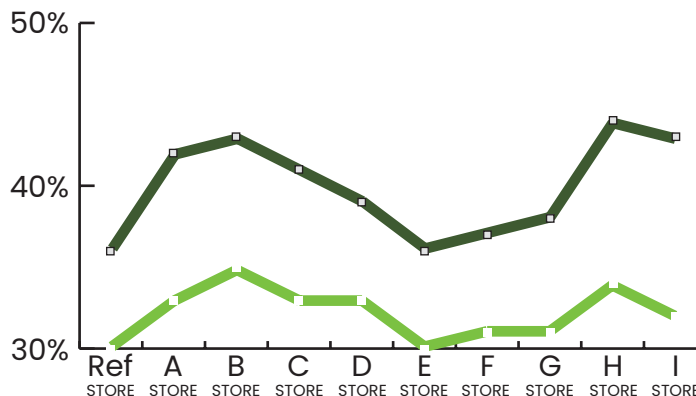
Graph A: Cost of fortnightly groceries for a family of four (\$)



Prices were found to be 8% higher in the North Ward compared to Central Ward. The highest levels of disadvantage, along with lower density of essential food stores are also found in the North Ward. Many of the smaller stores were found to have limited availability of fresh produce and healthier food choices, particularly low-fat dairy items such as cheese and yogurt, fresh fruit and vegetables and meat products.

Graph B shows the cost of fortnightly groceries for a family of four as a percentage of their income. The graph shows that the current diet would cost a family of four 36% to 44% of household income (based upon median household income in Corangamite) and a recommended diet would cost a family of four 30%-35% of their household income (also median household income). Research literature has suggested that food stress occurs when food costs account for 25% or more of household income and becomes unaffordable when food costs account for 30% or more of income (Ward et al, 2013; Lee et al, 2018).

Graph B: Cost of fortnightly groceries for a family of four (% of income).

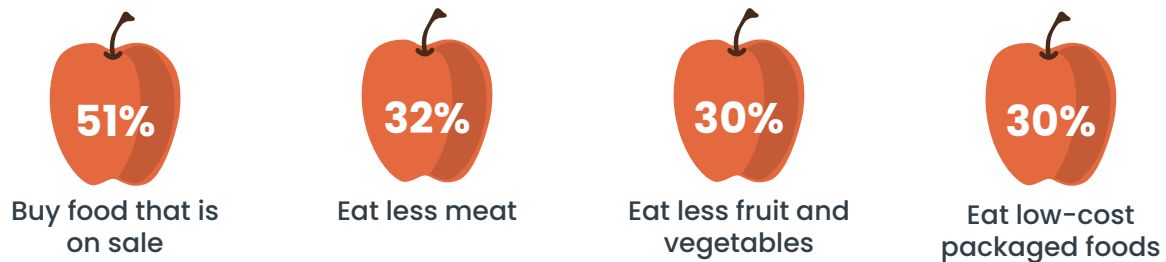


It is more affordable to eat a nutritious diet, high in fruit and vegetables

As depicted in Graph A, the cost of fortnightly groceries for a family of four varies greatly across the Shire. However whilst the price fluctuates, what was consistent was the recommended diet was more affordable at every store. The findings demonstrate, the recommended diet is on average 19% more affordable than the current diet consumed by Australians.

When people had run out of food or did not have enough food in the house the most common coping strategy reported was to buy food that is on sale, followed by eating less meat, eating less fruit and vegetables and eating low-cost packaged foods.

Top 3 coping strategies for managing food costs

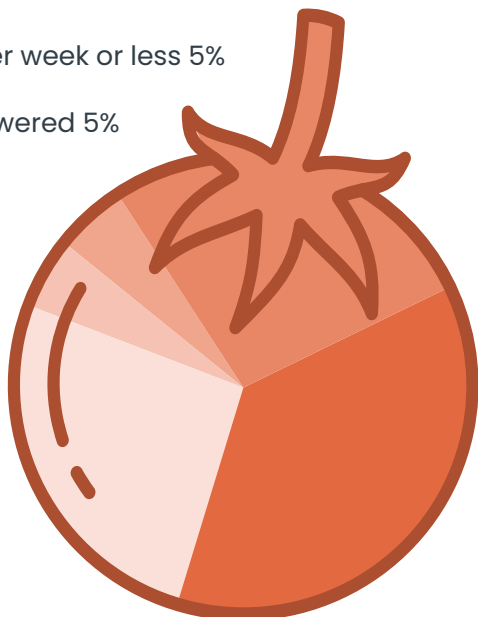


The coping mechanisms that people employ reflect the common misconception that the costs of eating fresh healthy foods are higher than relying on packaged and processed foods. Whilst we know from our research that eating a diet consistent with the dietary guidelines is more affordable than the current Australian diet, that includes packaged and processed foods, often the more time-intensive and less convenient food items are reduced when households are struggling. This reliance on low-cost, packaged foods and lower intakes of vegetables has far-reaching health impacts

on both adults and children and can impact a child's eating habits and behaviours throughout their life. It is recommended that adults consume five serves of vegetables per day to maintain good health and protect themselves against many chronic diseases. Results from the community food survey show that 37% of respondents report Eating vegetables only once per day meaning these households are likely falling short of the recommended intake and may have increased risk of diet-related diseases.

How often does your household eat vegetables?

- More than once a day 27%
- Once a day 37%
- A few times a week 26%
- Once per week or less 5%
- Not answered 5%



Locally grown food and community initiatives can help improve access to nutritious food.

Current community assets to help address food insecurity that are valued by the community include the community meals available in Camperdown, the school breakfast programs and school gardens, the broader community gardens and the Camperdown Food Bank.

There was considerable interest by participants in the availability and redistribution of food throughout the community as an alternative to emergency food relief, by building community resilience. Sharing produce and food was highlighted as a simple but effective way to bring community together and increase food security. A regular fruit and vegetable market in my area was by far the most popular solution seen to make it easier to have enough nutritious food, by community food survey respondents, as depicted in the graph above.

"I think people now realize the cost of food and the impacts at the moment, I think people are becoming more interested in how can I actually reduce the cost of my weekly or fortnightly bill or to actually make some produce or share some food, you know, it helps everybody out helps the community".

Please choose your top three things from the list below that would make it easier for you to have nutritious food to eat



Recommendations



Continue to explore flexibility of emergency relief to support families on low incomes

High food costs and low incomes were the main reasons that people are not able to eat the nutritious foods they would like, and there has been an increased demand for food relief in the Corangamite Shire. People who are welfare dependent would need to spend 37-43% of their income to afford the foods their household needs. Services we spoke to would like to better enable welfare recipients to have greater access to everyday essentials (such as food, housing, medical care etc). Food relief boxes are a vital initiative to support those in immediate need of food. However further flexible forms of assistance to access food were deemed necessary and valued by the local community. Petrol vouchers and supermarket vouchers were highly regarded, and were seen as a solution to increase access to food, that also enabled dignity and autonomy for households to meet their needs.



Increase access to healthy foods through wider promotion of local producers and initiatives offering local produce

More than half of the respondents wanted to see a regular fruit and vegetable market in their area to support them to eat more nutritious food. Corangamite has strong foundations to build on including local food producers, roadside stalls, food swaps, community houses and community spaces. Further support and promotion of local food producers and local food availability could assist in connecting more of the community with these options. Establishing farmers markets in key locations would offer local producers the opportunity to sell directly to customers as well as offering regular availability of fresh produce and the opportunity for the community to connect with each other. In the rural context, featuring local produce and focusing on supporting the local community have been seen as enablers for improving food environments (Wheaton et al, 2023).



Use food initiatives and existing assets as a way to bring the community together including food swaps, redistributing excess produce, community houses and community meals.

Community members and service providers spoke highly of current community initiatives and assets such as Community Houses, meals, swap and shares and markets. These kinds of initiatives serve multiple purposes including improving access to affordable food, modelling healthy food behaviours and providing opportunities for social connection. Increased support and incentives for community members to become involved would be beneficial and help to activate these activities in smaller towns.





Promote the benefits of eating more fruit and vegetables to support cost-savings at the supermarket as well as health and wellbeing

Only 27% of households reported eating vegetables more than once per day and eating less fruit and vegetables is used as a coping mechanism to manage high costs of groceries. However, from our local research, we know that a diet aligned with the Australian Dietary Guidelines that includes more fruit and vegetables, costs less than a diet high in packaged and processed foods. Promotion of eating fruit and vegetables for your health as well as for cost-savings could offer increased motivation for people to add a higher intake of vegetables to their diets. Further promotional activities and communication could also include highlighting other identified priorities such as minimising food waste, the environmental benefits and the link between mental wellbeing, and a nutritious diet.



Increase educational opportunities around food, shopping and cooking literacy to support households with meal planning and cooking on a budget.

35% of People who indicated they had experienced food insecurity in the last 12 months, chose “recipes for easy and cheap meals” as something that would support them to eat more nutritious food. Given the misconceptions around the costs of healthy foods (such as fruit and vegetables), skill building opportunities to increase food and cooking literacy would be highly beneficial. Young families as well as older people living alone would both benefit from opportunities to build their skills and knowledge to manage food.



Investigate opportunities for healthier retail environments – high cost of food is a consistent theme.

There has been work across Australia to enhance retail environments, with supermarkets making changes to focus on the promotion of nutritious foods and local produce as well as seasonality. The high cost of food in Corangamite has been a consistent theme throughout this project and data from the ASAP tool confirms that this is an issue for local residents. Working alongside local food retail providers to implement strategies and tools could help to encourage consumers to purchase healthier and more affordable foods.



Summary

The South West Healthcare Health Promotion food insecurity investigation has confirmed that the increasing cost of living, high food costs and challenges of living in rural areas are having a significant impact on resident's ability to access and afford nutritious food.

Residents of Corangamite are not consuming the recommended servings of fruits and vegetables, and we know that eating a variety of nutritious foods improves health outcomes. Further investment and support for local initiatives that reduce barriers to food, increase household and community resilience and improve affordability of food are vital for mitigating the impacts of food insecurity. To address the issue of food insecurity across the Corangamite Shire, greater awareness of the significant cost of food, and the implications of food stress needs to be shared. Collaborative initiatives and grass roots approaches driven by community members and service providers are an effective method to mitigate food insecurity, and are valued by the local community. Additionally, inspiration can be drawn from existing projects that look to implement in-store supermarket interventions designed to promote healthier diets. The Corangamite community has solid foundations to build on and many opportunities for local council and organisations to work together to support our communities and create an equitable, affordable and resilient food system for good health.



References

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