

Exploring the capacities and responses of the community and  
emergency food sector in the Geelong region:

Report 4

February 2021

Prepared by Dr Fiona McKay, Deakin University

For more information, please contact:  
Dr Fiona McKay  
School of Health & Social Development, Faculty of Health  
Deakin University  
Locked Bag 20000, Geelong, VIC 3220  
+61 3 92517183  
[fiona.mckay@deakin.edu.au](mailto:fiona.mckay@deakin.edu.au)



## Executive Summary

This is the fourth report in a series exploring the emergency and community food landscape in the Geelong region. This work seeks to investigate how the emergency and community food aid sector are responding to the Covid-19 pandemic and the constant changes and uncertainty related to welfare payments.

Building on the work of the Give Where You Live Foundation, and their support of the Geelong Food Assistance Network, this study focuses on the various providers of emergency and community food aid in the Geelong region to gain an understanding of how they are responding to the Covid-19 pandemic, and to investigate the relationship between the provider of food aid itself and those in need. This research seeks to enable additional collaboration and assist share results as they come to hand for rapid evidence-informed policy and practice.

Data for this report were collected from 9 of the 40 emergency food aid providers in the region, including community, religious, welfare and/or non-profit organisations. The online survey was open from 15 February 2021 to 25 February 2021.

Respondents reported a stabilisation of need and supply this month. While the snap lockdown was somewhat challenging, given that it was only 5 days, most agencies were able to respond to the needs of their cliental.

While the federal government has approved an increase to the base rate of the JobSeeker payment, there is widespread concern that this is an insufficient amount to meet needs. Time will tell if the reduced rate of JobSeeker will have a noticeable impact on the emergency and community food sector.

Once again, we thank all agencies who took time to complete this survey.

## Introduction

Covid-19 continues to surprise us, this month was no different with a state-wide 5-day snap lockdown. Thankfully, it seems to have done the job, and community transmission has once again been brought back under control.

Pressing concerns this month relate to changes to government welfare payments. While there has been a (very) small increase in the base rate for JobSeeker, many in the sector believe that this return to well below poverty level rates will once again increase the number of people who are reliant on emergency and community food and on charity generally in order to survive day to day.

This is report 4 of 6 exploring the response of emergency and community food agencies in the Geelong region to the immediate and long tail of the Covid-19 pandemic.

This research builds on the work of the Give Where You Live Foundation, and their support of the Geelong Food Assistance Network to explore the response and capacity of emergency food aid agencies in the Geelong region. Understanding who is seeking emergency food relief, the capacity of the agencies to meet this need and any changes in demand will give us a greater understanding of community and emergency food aid provision within the Geelong region. Furthermore, how the sector is functioning in this crisis period, in terms of human resources, food supplies, funding and similar operational functions, will help to illustrate opportunities for additional support and collaboration as we move out of the initial crisis period of the pandemic in Victoria.

### Aims

The aim of this project is to explore the various providers of emergency and community food aid in the Geelong region to gain an understanding of how they are dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic, and to investigate the relationship between the provider of food aid itself and those in need.

Specifically, the aims of this research are to:

1. Investigate any change in client need as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.
2. Explore problems in meeting demand as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.
3. Investigate the implications of food insecurity and food aid use as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Additionally, this research will provide an up-to-date overview of the emergency and community food aid sector in the Geelong region and will provide a space in which emergency and community food sector and their clients' experiences and inequalities can be reported and recorded. This research seeks to enable additional collaboration and assist share results as they come to hand for rapid evidence-informed policy and practice.

## Method

### Sample and recruitment

A database of agencies and organisations providing food relief services to people in need in the Geelong region was compiled by the Give Where You Live foundation from information publicly available on the Geelong Food Assistance Network website. This database included information such as name, email, and location, and included 40 individual organisations with 69 email contacts in total. An email containing an overview of the study and a link to the second web-based survey was sent to each organisation. A reminder email was sent out 4 days after the second survey was opened and the survey was open for approximately 2 weeks. Ethics approval was granted by the Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee [HAEG-H 219\_2020].

### Data Collection

The survey was open from 15 February 2021 to 25 February January 2021. It consisted of 35 closed and open-ended questions with no forced responses. This survey is the third of six and aims to gather continuous data which can be assessed against previous surveys to report any changes. This survey covered the following areas of investigation

- General overview of the organisation including services provided, operating hours, location, and any impacts on the delivery of services due to the Covid-19 Pandemic
- Staffing and funding; including percentage of paid to volunteer staff, where funding comes from and if/how this has changed due to the Covid-19 Pandemic
- Food that the organisation provides; including types of food provided as per the Australian Guide to Healthy eating, sources of the food supply and any changes to this supply, and storage preparation and delivery of food
- Profile of who the organisation supports, including any changes in clientele since the Covid-19 Pandemic, how the changes in government support has affected clients and if the organisation is supporting more children than before

### Data analysis

Data from close-ended questions were analysed using basic descriptive statistics to characterise the sample. Categorical data were reported using frequencies and percentages while continuous data were presented as means, medians, and standard deviations. Data were analysed using Excel. To ensure respondent privacy and confidentiality, a participant identification number is used to differentiate between quotes. Data are presented as statistics supported by direct quotes where appropriate.

## Results

### General characteristics

Of the 40 emails sent, 9 completed surveys were received, this is a similar response rate to previous months, with most respondents also having completed previous surveys.

Of the 5 agencies that provided meals as part of their food relief services this month, the number of meals provided by these agencies varied considerably, ranging from 140 meals to 1895 meals, with an average number of meals closer to 439, with an additional agency supplying groceries to 103 clients and another providing vouchers. This is similar to the previous month.

Most respondents provide a range of foods from the different food groups. The most common food groups provided by respondents were meat and proteins, fresh, tinned and frozen fruit, grains and cereals, dairy and alternatives, and fats and oils were (n=8, 89%); this is higher overall compared to previous reporting periods – possibly suggesting some stabilisation in supply. When asked if they had sufficient supply of these food groups to meet demand, most respondents had no supply issues.

Respondents reported referring clients to a range of services, most notably to accommodation services. The need for accommodation services was noted by some respondents who expect demand to increase as governments change current pandemic-related responses to homelessness.

We expect significant changes when Government funding ceases the funding for hotel/motel accommodation for homeless clients

The distribution of primary population groups serviced by respondents was similar to previous months. The most serviced group were families, aged people, people from casual/unstable industries, people with a drug and/or alcohol dependence, and people experiencing homelessness (n=6, 66%). This month all respondents reported servicing women more frequently than men, this could be an indication of the number of families being assisted this month.

See table 1 for an outline of the general characteristics of the emergency food providers who responded to the survey.

Table 1. General characteristics of emergency food aid providers (n=9)

Referrals*^	
Accommodation support services	5 (63%)
Family support services	2 (25%)
Family/domestic violence services	2 (25%)
Mental health service providers	2 (25%)
Addiction specialists	1 (11%)
Financial counselling	1 (11%)
Primary population*^	
Families	6 (66%)
Aged People	6 (66%)
People from casual/unstable industries	6 (66%)
People with drug and/or alcohol dependency	6 (66%)
People experiencing homelessness	6 (66%)
People with a disability	5 (56%)
Migrants (including refugees and asylum seekers)	4 (44%)
Young people/children	4 (44%)
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people	4 (44%)
International Students	2 (22%)
Other	1 (12%)

\*respondents could chose more than one option, ^not answered by all respondents

### Changes in services and need as a result of Covid-19

In this reporting month, Victoria had a 5-day lockdown of all non-essential services. This posed many problems for many people across the state, including respondents of this survey. Given this most recent lockdown, and the ongoing uncertainty, respondents described having to temporarily close or change their operations. These changes have included a lack of funding resulting in some operations having to be wound down or ceased, or an inability to meet all the needs of their clients.

Like last month, most agencies reported no major challenges or changes in staffing (n=6, 66%). However, there are concerns that ongoing uncertainty will result in an unstable workforce.

If Covid flares up- many older volunteers will choose not to assist.

There are also concerns that staff will experience burnout and will not be able to continue if life doesn't return to some form of normality soon.

We have been working continuously face to face since March 23 and survived the shopping traumas, but our workforce is tiring. An essence of unreliability has crept in which means emergency staffing has to be sought.

Government imposed public health restrictions related to Covid-19 continue to impact the operation of many services (n=7, 78%) with the most common effect being the inability to have face-to-face contact with clients and capacity limits for indoor gatherings, and a limit to home visits. While the month has seen some restrictions reimposed on all Victorians, there is hope that with the arrival of the vaccine, things will begin to return to normal.

We're limited to our existing small space, so we have restricted numbers of clients allowed inside at any time.

Most respondents (n=6, 66%) reported that government restrictions had not impacted their clients' ability to access services over the past month, with the temporary lockdown the real impediment to providing services in the reporting period.

Around half of respondents reported that the number of people accessing their services this month were roughly the same or had increased (n=6, 66%), with most respondents reporting that their numbers are leveling off or returning to normal. Most respondents are providing food to families, people experiencing homelessness and people with a drug and/or alcohol dependency.

Respondents reported consistent supply of food from providers, with most food coming from Foodbank and SecondBite. Promisingly, unlike previous months, respondents were not overly concerned about supply.

Not really but we sometimes have either under or over supply of some types of fruit and veg.

Like previous months, most respondents reported no change to their funding this month (n=6, 66%); one respondent reported less funding this month and two reported receiving more.

Table 2. Changes in services and need as a result of Covid-19 this month (n=9)

Impact on operation as a result of Covid-19 Pandemic	
No change	6 (66%)
Providing services to more people	1 (11%)
Temporary closed	2 (22%)
Impact of government restrictions on agency <sup>^</sup>	
Impacted by government restrictions	7 (78%)
No Impact	2 (22%)
Impact on funding amount since Covid-19 Pandemic	
No Impact	6 (66%)
Increase in funding	1 (11%)
Reduction in funding	2 (22%)
Frequency of use by regular clients <sup>^</sup>	

No change	5 (55%)
Increased	3 (33%)

^not answered by all respondents

## Implications for food security

This reporting period saw another, albeit, temporary lockdown for all of Victoria. Once again stressing families and services. Thankfully the outbreak of Covid-19 from hotel quarantine was able to be brought under control quickly and things have largely returned to a new Covid-normal. The threat of ongoing lockdowns and the uncertainty of 2020 appears to have continued into 2021, but there is hope thanks to the increasing number of vaccinations available, and the promise that they bring.

The coming month will see changes to government payments. While the news of an increase in jobseeker is promising, the small increase will no doubt, leave many people returning to a reliance on emergency and community food as they attempt to make ends meet.

## References

- Crawford, B, Yamazaki, R, Franke, E, Amanatidis, S, Ravulo, J & Torvaldsen, S 2015. 'Is something better than nothing? Food insecurity and eating patterns of young people experiencing homelessness'. *Aust N Z J Public Health*, 39, 4, 350-354. 10.1111/1753-6405.12371.
- FoodBank 2020. 'FoodBank Hunger Report 2020'. NSW: FoodBank Australia.
- McCarthy, L, Chang, AB & Brimblecombe, J 2018. 'Food security experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families with young children in an urban setting: influencing factors and coping strategies'. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 15, 12, 2649.
- McKay, F, Bastian, A & Lindberg, R 2020. 'Exploring the response of the Victorian emergency and community food sector to the Covid-19 pandemic'. *In press*.
- McKay, FH & Dunn, M 2015. 'Food security among asylum seekers in Melbourne'. *Aust N Z J Public Health*, 39, 4, 344-349. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1753-6405.12368>.
- McKay, FH & Lindberg, R 2019. 'The important role of charity in the welfare system for those who are food insecure'. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, 39, 4. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1753-6405.12916>.
- Mungai, Nw, Priestly, J & Pawar, M 2019. 'Food Insecurity in Regional Rural Australia'. *Australian Social Work*, 1-13.
- Pollard, CM & Booth, S 2019. 'Food Insecurity and Hunger in Rich Countries-It Is Time for Action against Inequality'. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 16, 10. 10.3390/ijerph16101804.
- Temple, J, Booth, S & Pollard, C 2019. 'Social Assistance Payments and Food Insecurity in Australia: Evidence from the Household Expenditure Survey'. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, in press.