FOOD SECURITY: WHAT IS IT?

In an ideal world, everyone eats breakfast, lunch and dinner every day. What and how we eat is important to our health and wellbeing and how the food is grown and processed impacts the environment and the economy. Food security is defined as ‘the ability of individuals, households and communities to acquire food that is healthy, sustainable, affordable, appropriate and accessible’¹. This means the aim of food security is for people to be able to afford a nutritious healthy diet that does not cost too much, is what they want and need and is not from a short-term food supply – it’s food that will be available for their children and grandchildren.

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To completely understand the term ‘food security’, we need to look at the whole food system from paddock to plate. This includes everything from land use to food production, transport and retail, right through to the ability of individuals and households to afford, physically get to, store, cook and consume food. Food security is a big topic with people working on a local, national and even at a global level to address some of the issues we’re facing.

To help understand food security, these key elements break down the definition and describe what it means to be ‘food secure’:

- **HEALTHY** – a food secure individual, household or community can access a variety of healthy foods.
- **SUSTAINABLE** – a food secure individual, household or community can access food that is environmentally sustainable so that future generations can continue to enjoy this food.
- **AFFORDABLE** – a food secure individual, household or community can afford to buy enough food to live a healthy life without suffering financial hardship.
- **APPROPRIATE** – a food secure individual, household or community can buy foods that are culturally appropriate and can access this food through ‘socially acceptable’ means (i.e. not emergency food relief, begging or scavenging).
- **ACCESSIBLE** – a food secure individual, household or community can physically get to a food outlet to buy sufficient food e.g. adequate public transport, safe walking paths, wheelchair access etc.

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FOOD SECURITY: WHAT IS IT?

The concept of ‘food security’ can also be presented visually where there are three key elements:
1. Food Availability  
2. Food Access  
3. Food Utilisation

![Diagram of three pillars of food security: Availability, Access, Utilisation]

**Figure 1. The three pillars of food security**

1. Food availability refers to the physical existence of healthy food. Food availability is affected by:
   - location of food outlets
   - availability and variety of food within stores
   - price and quality of available food

2. Food access refers to the ability of an individual, household or community to physically get their hands on healthy food. Food access is affected by:
   - availability of funds to purchase food
   - ability to physically get to food outlets and transport food

3. Food utilisation refers to the way food is prepared once it has been accessed. Food utilisation is affected by:
   - storage, preparation and cooking facilities
   - nutrition knowledge
   - food preparation skills
   - cultural considerations
   - social environments for preparing and enjoying food

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WHAT CAUSES FOOD INSECURITY?

Food insecurity is an incredibly complex issue that results from a number of different factors, each contributing in its own way. For food security to exist there needs to be a good food supply and good access to food. Look through the diagram below to see a wide range of factors which affect food security.

**Figure 1. Factors contributing to food insecurity, adapted from Rychetnik.**

WHAT CAUSES FOOD INSECURITY?

**Income**
Limited finances, poor budgeting skills and rental stress all impact on the available money to purchase food. Community members accessing Community Food Programs (CFPs) suggest this is a major concern leading to food insecurity. The average cost of a healthy food basket has increased nationwide and can cost low income families up to half their weekly income. This results in people relying on government assistance living below the poverty line or being unable to afford a healthy diet.

**Food skills**
Limited knowledge of healthy eating, food safety and food preparation skills affect the ability to plan, cook and consume healthy meals. Community members can have limited cooking facilities and equipment which makes preparing meals difficult.

**Health**
Individual health, including chronic illness, physical disability and mental illness, can all impact on ability to purchase, transport, store, prepare and consume food.

**Mobility**
Poor mobility can affect the ability to shop or prepare food; this can be further affected by limited transport to access food stores.

**Priorities**
Addictions such as alcohol, drugs and gambling can affect the amount of money, time and motivation required to purchase and prepare healthy foods.

**Social isolation**
Living without a social support network can affect the ability and motivation to develop essential cooking skills and to source non-emergency food during times of hardship.

**Culturally appropriate**
Language and cultural barriers can affect the ability to access food, including culturally appropriate foods.

Table 1. Adapted from ISEPICH Food Security Toolkit

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10. Adapted from Isepich Food Security Toolkit, City of Port Phillip. ISEPICH. Melbourne, Australia: Port Phillip City Council. [cited 21/1/2014]. Available from: http://isepich.org/
FOOD INSECURITY IN AUSTRALIA

Australia is often considered the lucky country and for most Australians this is the case. When one thinks of hunger, countries such as those in Africa and parts of Asia may come to mind. The table below indicates where Australia fits into the global setting of food security.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ranking</th>
<th>Country</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>United States of America (most food secure)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>Peru</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66</td>
<td>Indonesia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>107</td>
<td>Congo (least food secure)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Global Food Security Index 2013

When comparing Australia to many other countries, we are the 15th most food secure country in the world. So it may come as a surprise that for 1.2 million Australians (that is 5.2% of the population) the human right to food is not a reality. This staggering figure was obtained by asking Australians if they had run out of food at least once in the past 12 months and been unable to afford to buy more. Unfortunately, this figure is likely to be an underestimation as the most disadvantaged members of a community are usually under-represented in general population surveys. For example, higher food insecurity has been identified in Asylum Seekers (71%), Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people (24%), disadvantaged urban households (25%) and people who are unemployed (23%).

It may come as a surprise that for 1.2 million Australians (that is 5.2% of the population) the human right to food is not a reality.

6. Burns C. A review of the literature describing the link between poverty, food insecurity and obesity with specific reference to Australia. Centre for Physical Activity and Nutrition; Deakin University, 2004.
FOOD INSECURITY IN AUSTRALIA

WHO IS MOST AT RISK OF FOOD INSECURITY?

Certain groups in Australia experience food insecurity at a higher rate or are more vulnerable to food insecurity compared to the general population.7

These groups include:

- Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people
- People who are unemployed
- Single parent households
- Low-income earners
- Rental households
- Young people and the elderly
- People experiencing homelessness
- Some culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) groups including refugees
- People who live in remote or regional areas
- People who misuse alcohol, tobacco or other drugs
- People who are disabled, unwell or frail

Unfortunately, as food security becomes a bigger issue in Australia, more population groups are being affected such as first home owners and students.9

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IMPACT OF FOOD INSECURITY

We know that food insecurity is a significant issue here in Australia, affecting over 1.2 million people. Food security refers to ‘the ability of individuals, households and communities to acquire food that is healthy, sustainable, affordable, appropriate and accessible.’ So what does this all really mean and why is it such an important issue? Food insecurity can have a big impact on a person’s physical, mental and social wellbeing.

THE PHYSICAL IMPACT OF FOOD INSECURITY

An individual who is experiencing food insecurity will not have regular access to fresh, healthy food. Food provides fuel for our bodies, so when nutritious food is no longer available, there are short and long-term consequences. Individuals affected by food insecurity are more likely to experience:

- **POOR GENERAL HEALTH** – children and adults who are food insecure are more likely to have poor health, increased visits to the Doctor and more days off school/work due to illness.

- **MALNUTRITION** - while this is not seen widely in the Australian context, there is an increased risk of the elderly becoming malnourished.

- **DIET RELATED CHRONIC DISEASES** – people experiencing food insecurity are more likely to develop chronic diseases such as heart disease and diabetes.

- **OVERWEIGHT AND OBESITY** - The risk of obesity is 20 to 40% higher in women who are food insecure, increasing the risk of cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes and some forms of cancer that are linked with obesity.

It may initially seem illogical that an individual who finds it difficult to access food is more likely to be overweight. However, people experiencing food insecurity are more likely to consume cheaper food, which is often much lower in nutritional content and higher in fat, salt and sugar. This is also complicated by the fact that individuals experiencing food insecurity are also more likely to have sub-standard cooking facilities, a limited budget for food and a complex social situation whereby food and health may not be a high priority.

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IMPACT OF FOOD INSECURITY

THE PSYCHO-SOCIAL IMPACT OF FOOD INSECURITY

• The experience of not being able to provide food often has a significant negative impact on a person’s mental health and social interactions. There are often feelings of stress, anxiety, and guilt which can lead to depression and social isolation which further contribute to food insecurity. 7

• Children and adolescents who are food insecure are more likely to experience developmental delay, learning difficulties and lower academic performance. 8

1. Gender and age
2. Ethnicity, education and family type
3. Low income/poverty, socio-economic position

FOOD INSECURITY:
- Insufficient access to nutritious/culturally acceptable food
- Insufficient access to shops containing food
- Inability to obtain food in socially acceptable ways

- Decreased consumption core foods (fruit, vegetables, wholegrain breads and cereals, meat, dairy)
- Decrease in variety of foods
- Decrease in portion sizes

- Depression/anxiety
- Overweight/obesity
- Development of chronic/diet-related disease

- Increased consumption energy-dense convenience foods
- Skipping meals/periods of fasting (often followed by periods of bingeing)

- Inadequate intake of core food groups
- Inadequate nutrition intake

- Poor general health
- Increased visits to doctors or hospital

Figure 1: Hypothesised relationship between food security, dietary and health outcomes taken from Ramsey et al 2011 9

WHAT CAN WE DO TO IMPROVE FOOD SECURITY?

The issue of food insecurity exists on a global, national, community, household and individual level. Food security is affected by a multitude of factors in our society and each step of the food supply chain plays a vital role in ensuring all Australians have access to safe, nutritious, affordable and socially acceptable food.

Therefore, when describing what can be done to improve food security, there are many strategies and important players involved. For example:

- The Australian government has great potential to improve the food security of our most vulnerable community members by reviewing and establishing policies at a regional, state and federal level.  
- Food Industry can influence changes to standard practices within our food system from paddock to plate.  
- Individuals can improve food security, especially when supported by effective community development and empowerment initiatives.

At SecondBite, we rescue and redistribute surplus fresh food to Community Food Programs (CFP) throughout Australia. A CFP is a community initiative which provides free or subsidised food to vulnerable people. CFP’s often use the following strategies to offer food to their local community:

- Food parcels
- Help Yourself Mini-marts or pantries
- Meals (in house or outreach)
- Soup vans
- Breakfast programs
- Cooking classes
- Growing vegetables and herbs
- Community and local neighbourhood gardens and farms
- Snack or fruit-bowls

WHAT CAN WE DO TO IMPROVE FOOD SECURITY?

As we know, an individual who is accessing Emergency Food Relief is not considered to be food secure, it is also important to acknowledge the vital role that CFPs can play in improving food security. Food security is not just the responsibility of nutrition experts, government officials or individuals themselves. Community organisations can do much more than provide emergency food relief but can impact food insecurity in many ways due to the complex and diverse work they do.

Achieving food security is not solely the responsibility of nutrition experts, government officials or individuals themselves. Many community food programs are achieving much more than simply providing emergency food relief.

Many CFPs are looking at why their community members are accessing their service and striving to support them to address the root causes of their food insecurity. Numerous CFPs see their service as an opportunity to start discussions with community members and open doors to additional trust, care and practical support. CFPs are also in a unique position to begin discussions with colleagues, other organisations and high profile stakeholders to feed into the national advocacy for food security. To find out what action is currently happening in your local area, contact your local council representative.