



“Let’s Talk About Food”

Food Insecurity in the Illawarra and Shoalhaven

RESILIENT & SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS RESEARCH GROUP | UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

November 2024 | Prepared by Dr Katherine Kent and Professor Karen Charlton in collaboration with Kelly Andrews and Grace Potter from Healthy Cities Illawarra





SUMMARY

The "Let's Talk About Food" survey, conducted with >600 households in the Illawarra and Shoalhaven regions assessed food insecurity, and use of food relief.

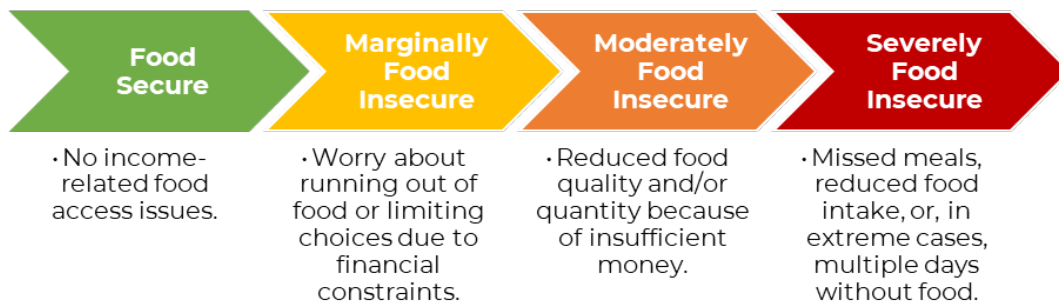
- **Food Insecurity Prevalence:** Over a third (38%) of Illawarra and Shoalhaven households experience food insecurity, with 19% moderately and 12% severely affected, including 30% of households with children.
- **Food Relief Access:** Only 23% of severely food-insecure households and 10% of moderately food-insecure households accessed emergency food relief.

Our findings highlight the urgency for local policy and community action to address food insecurity and improve access to nutritious, affordable food for vulnerable groups. These survey findings have spurred the establishment of **the Illawarra Shoalhaven Food Futures Taskforce**, a network of health experts and community advocates working collaboratively to promote a healthier, more accessible regional food system.

WHAT IS FOOD INSECURITY?

It is a fundamental human right for all people in the Illawarra and Shoalhaven to be able to put healthy food on the table every day.

Food insecurity occurs when individuals or households do not have reliable access to enough nutritious and affordable food to lead a healthy and active life. Food insecurity is considered to range in severity from the experience of anxiety that food will run out (marginally food insecure), to a reduction of the quality, variety and amount of food consumed (moderately food insecure), or regularly going without food at all (severely food insecure).





WHY UNDERSTANDING FOOD INSECURITY MATTERS

Food insecurity is a powerful determinant of health. It affects the health, wellbeing, and the ability of families to function day-to-day. This report reveals how many households, including those with children, are struggling to access enough nutritious food. By understanding the scale and severity of this issue, we can push for urgent local action to ensure every household has the food they need to live healthy and productive lives.

HOW DID WE MEASURE FOOD INSECURITY?

As part of the Let's Talk About Food survey conducted by UOW researchers from the [Resilient and Sustainable Food Systems Research group](#), in collaboration with Healthy Cities Illawarra and Food Fairness Illawarra, we explored food insecurity among residents of the Illawarra and Shoalhaven regions. We used the validated [USDA Household Food Security Survey Module \(HFSSM\)](#), which is a [widely recognised tool](#) for measuring food insecurity. It assesses food insecurity at a household level with questions for adults (10 questions) and children (8 questions). It includes questions about a household's ability to afford balanced meals, instances where meals were reduced, and whether adults and children went hungry because there wasn't enough money for food. This approach captures the full scope and severity of food insecurity in both adults and children.

Results of the “Let’s Talk About Food” Survey

FOOD INSECURITY AMONG HOUSEHOLDS

Of all respondents to our survey (n=666), **over a third of households (38%) in the Illawarra and Shoalhaven regions reported experiencing some degree of food insecurity**, highlighting the challenges many families face in accessing enough food (Figure 1). About one in five (19%) experienced moderate food insecurity, where the quality or amount of food was compromised due to a lack of money, while 12% faced severe food insecurity, meaning serious disruptions to their food supply resulting in hunger. Another 8% were marginally food insecure, showing early signs of struggle to keep food on the table.



Prevalence of Households Experiencing Food Insecurity in a Survey of Illawarra and Shoalhaven Residents (n=666)

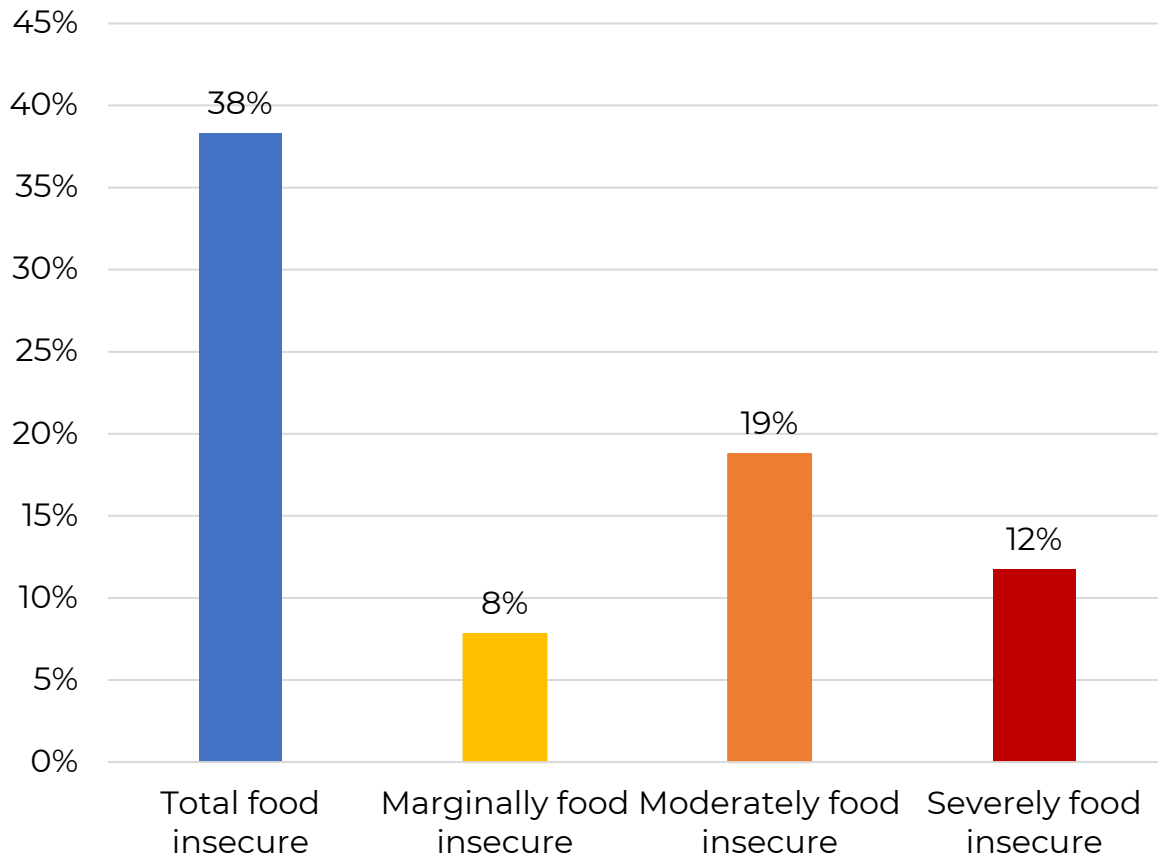


Figure 1.

People said the cost-of-living has impacted their ability to buy enough, healthy food

“Cost of living makes me reluctant to get much more than cheap food I know won't go off... Also leads me to eat less, including skipping meals, to save.”
(Female, Gwynneville)

“ 70% of my income goes to rent. I need to save money for emergencies... That affects my decision of buying food...”
(Female, Fairy Meadow)



FOOD INSECURITY AMONG CHILDREN

Food insecurity doesn't affect all household members equally. Parents often shield their children from the worst impacts by skipping meals, eating less, or making other sacrifices to ensure their kids have enough to eat. However, when food insecurity becomes severe, children are inevitably affected. Among respondents to our survey, 196 households reported having dependent children in their household. Of these, **30% said their children experienced food insecurity** (Figure 2). The most common issue was moderate food insecurity (15%), where families struggled to afford balanced meals for their children due to financial difficulties. Another 13% of families reported marginal food insecurity, indicating they were worried about being able to feed their children. Severe food insecurity, where children may go hungry, was much less common (3%) but this remains a critical concern due to its serious impact on children's health and development.

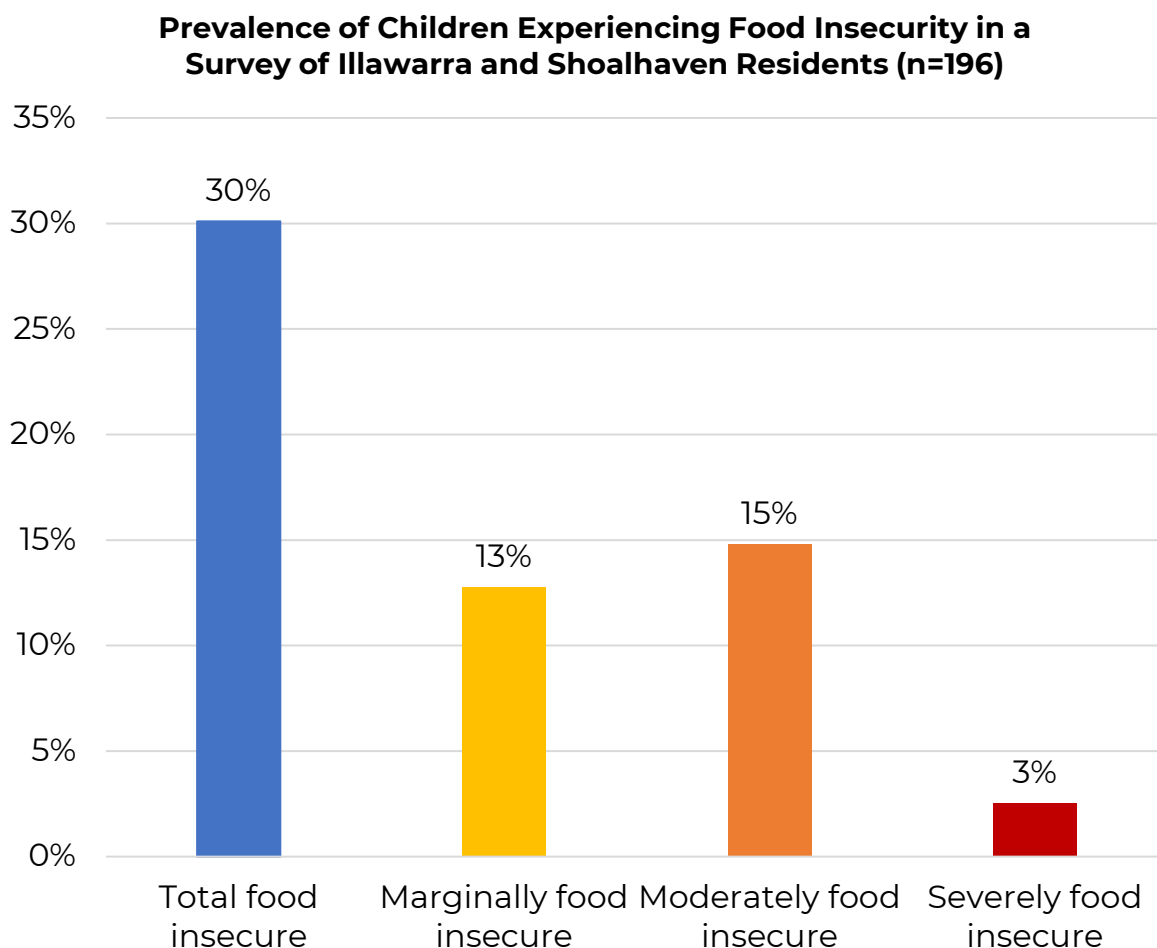


Figure 2



On dealing with food insecurity, parents said

***“As I have 5 children,
it's hard to buy
enough food to last
the week.”***

(Mother, Farmborough Heights)

***“With having 2 young
kids we have to
sacrifice other things
so they can eat fresh
fruit and veg”***

(Father, Bellambi)

***“I have stopped
being able to offer
more variety to my
children because it is
too expensive to buy
healthy foods, in case
they don't eat it and
it's a waste.”***

(Mother, Cambewarra)

***“When bills come in,
as a parent, I will
starve rather than
see my children go
hungry... I do without,
so the rest of the
family can eat.”***

(Father Shoalhaven Heads)

WHO IS AT THE HIGHEST RISK?

Certain groups in the Illawarra and Shoalhaven are disproportionately affected by food insecurity (Figure 3).

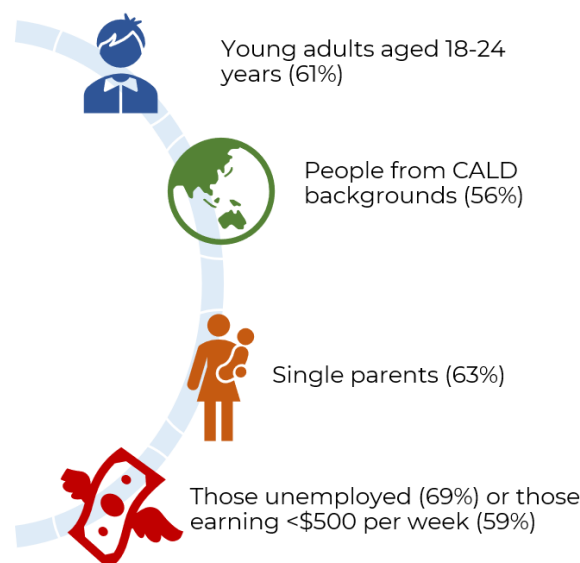


Figure 3



HOW ARE PEOPLE EXPERIENCING FOOD INSECURITY GETTING HELP?

More than half (53%) of households experiencing severe food insecurity reported using the [Food Fairness Illawarra Free and Low-Cost Meals Directory](#) suggesting that this resource is relatively well-known and accessible.

Despite this, only 23% of severely food-insecure households and 10% of moderately food-insecure households accessed emergency food relief (e.g., food banks). Low uptake of emergency food relief may stem from barriers like stigma, access issues, eligibility restrictions, and a preference for more flexible and empowering options.

On their critical need in using emergency food relief, participants said:

The cost of buying regular groceries has also gone up and changes the way we shop ... including at times accessing charities... as some weeks there has not been enough to pay bills AND food... [it is] one or the other."

(Female, Figtree)

Only 15% of all respondents agreed that there are enough programs in their neighborhood that support food assistance for people who need help with getting enough food.

The underuse of emergency food relief by households experiencing food insecurity suggests a critical need to explore and address the barriers preventing people from accessing these services.

ACT NOW

If you or someone you know is in need of food relief, you can find your nearest food relief agencies on the [Low Cost & Free Meals directory](#). This is a frequently updated resource with a printable version – for the most up-to-date details, please check the web-based directory.



WHERE NEXT?

The findings from the "Let's Talk About Food" survey highlight the urgent need for action to address food insecurity in the Illawarra and Shoalhaven regions. **In response, the Illawarra Shoalhaven Food Futures Taskforce has been established.** This network brings together health experts, community advocates, nutritionists, and policy influencers with the goal of improving the regional food system to make it healthier, more equitable, and more sustainable. Moving forward, UOW together with the Illawarra Shoalhaven Food Futures Taskforce will work to:

- Advocate for a regional food strategy to ensure equitable food access, support local producers, and integrate food security into broader development plans.
- Collaborate with local councils, community organisations, and policymakers to prioritise food security in regional planning, and use our data to advocate for increased funding and support for targeted food assistance programs.
- Increase food relief by diverting surplus food that would otherwise go to landfill to food relief organisations, as part of a [Regional Food Donation Coordinator project](#) run by Healthy Cities and generously funded by [EPA NSW](#).
- Work to reduce stigma and improve accessibility to emergency food relief by developing flexible, empowering, and culturally appropriate support options.
- Strengthen partnerships and expand community-led initiatives such as food cooperatives, urban agriculture initiatives and educational programs that build cooking skills, promote healthy eating, and empower households to make healthy and sustainable food choices.