

# IS THERE FOOD INSECURITY IN THE ILLAWARRA REGION

The Food Fairness Forum

October 2005

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There is a growing concern by health professionals, community workers and charitable organisations concerning the increase of food insecurity across Western countries. This concern has led to studies and research into the prevalence of food insecurity, those individuals and groups most at risk, the contributing factors and predictors and related health problems associated with food insecurity. This paper continues the investigation of food insecurity on a local level and offers a small insight into the degree of food insecurity in the Illawarra region. The interest in food insecurity within Australian communities has been prompted by research and discussion by those who assist disadvantaged people to survive in an environment of high costs balanced against basic needs with a limited disposable income. The cumulative efforts of such organisations was apparent in their submissions to the Senate Inquiry into Poverty and Financial Hardship (2003-2004) where it exposed the level of food insecurity and poverty. The lack of local research has resulted in communities highlighting needs specific in their community to find suitable strategies to address food and health issues. This examination explores the areas of limited or low incomes (especially government payments), unemployment rates and housing issues that contribute to food poverty and the level of need for food assistance from organisations and agencies.

### **A SNAPSHOT OF THE ILLAWARRA REGION**

The focus is on the Illawarra region, which includes 5 sub regions, though the area of concern lies on 3 Local Government areas (Wollongong, Shellharbour and Kiama. This is due to the close proximity of each area and the mobility of said population who daily lives of work and shopping affect other areas economic movements. A snapshot of the region shows a diverse cultural population of approximately 260,000 people<sup>1</sup>, involved in various businesses including manufacturing, mining, agriculture, fishing, tourism and education<sup>2</sup>. Throughout the document references may be made about the region or more defined by focusing on the individual City of Wollongong. The population is spread across 69 suburbs of Wollongong<sup>3</sup>, 21 suburbs in Shellharbour<sup>4</sup> and 8 suburbs/ rural areas within Kiama region<sup>5</sup>, each functioning as a separate entity supported by food sources though connected to each other by transport links. There are 60 supermarkets and grocery stores servicing the Wollongong area<sup>6</sup>, while throughout the region there are approximately 24 major shopping stores. (The main food sources for the region are; Coles, Woolworth's, Aldi and Bi- Lo). The Wollongong area rated 12<sup>th</sup> (middle range) on the list of 24 of the cheapest / dearest towns for food prices<sup>7</sup>.

The employment rate within the Wollongong area as of the 2001 Census was 90.9% of the working population (73,153), of this number 24,910 people are employed on a

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<sup>1</sup> Twyford Consulting, 2004; *Social Needs Assessment- Illawarra Region: A Report for the Salvation Army* (Illawarra), pg 7

<sup>2</sup> Illawarra Regional Information Service, 2004, [www.iris.org.au](http://www.iris.org.au)

<sup>3</sup> Wollongong Council, July 2005, Media Release, [www.wollongong.nsw.gov.au/yourcouncil/mediarelease/index\\_3336](http://www.wollongong.nsw.gov.au/yourcouncil/mediarelease/index_3336)

<sup>4</sup> Shellharbour Community Profile, 2004, [www.shellharbour.nsw.gov.au](http://www.shellharbour.nsw.gov.au)

<sup>5</sup> Kiama Municipality, Community Profile, 2004, [www.kiama.nsw.gov.au](http://www.kiama.nsw.gov.au)

<sup>6</sup> Illawarra Regional Information Service, 2004, [www.iris.org.au/index.pl?=-38](http://www.iris.org.au/index.pl?=-38)

<sup>7</sup> Australian Consumer Association, 2003 Supermarket Price Survey, [www.choice.com.au](http://www.choice.com.au)

part time basis<sup>8</sup>. These figures do not include hidden unemployment, especially those who are looking for work though are not registered with any agency for example Centrelink or an employment service. Changes in the workforce include the increase in part time and casual work that has affected peoples disposable income and the ability to stretch their resources particularly in the current climate of rising fuel prices, rising child care costs.

### **Food Security/ insecurity**

Food plays an important part of our lives, it requires time and energy to obtain and prepare, is a ritual of family and communication. Food is a basic building block of life and of health, a part of social interaction, and a link to the community. What we eat defines in part who we are, our link to culture, our heritage, playing a role within society. It moulds our health and wellbeing, allows us to share our knowledge and skills with others, becomes an heirloom for later generations. Food is a discussion, an art form, entertainment, an activity, and a gift. It marks special occasions and celebrations, marks our passage through life. For some it is an obsession, a comfort, an enemy. For others it is the all-consuming search to obtain, another barrier of exclusion. Food is life.

Food then plays an important part in our lives; it allows us to fully function within society, to take part in the social rituals such as employment, education and leisure activities. But for some this is not the case, their energy and time are focused upon securing food, leaving little else for other pursuits. The importance of food extends beyond a basic need, it has become a consumer product that makes a profit and creates businesses and employment. Our society is filled with food, fast food outlets, restaurants, adverts, diets, fads, programs and advice. Within this environment are those who still face hunger, and are forced to turn to other food sources. The user pay ideology promoted by those who can afford a wealthier lifestyle has excluded marginalised people in obtaining sufficient food for their needs.

Being food secure 'exists when all people at all times have physical and economic access to sufficient safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life'<sup>9</sup>. On a Household level this definition of food security extends to include the quantity, quality, and cultural specific foods<sup>10</sup> to ensure individuals needs are met. Thus if one has low income, a lack of mobility, limited access to main food sources, cultural barriers one is restricted by social issues from obtaining a basic necessity of life. Within the Illawarra region there is a substantial percentage of people who are affected by food insecurity, the level stated by the ABS is 6.8% of the regions population (approx 18,000 + people)<sup>11</sup>.

Traditional studies have stated it is the most vulnerable within our society who are affected, those who are homeless and the poor, though current research is moving the focus on those who have limited / low incomes. Many of these people are reliant on Government benefits to survive, those who face this risk are students, aged, single

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<sup>9</sup> United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation, 1996, < [www.foodsecurity-ng.org/faq](http://www.foodsecurity-ng.org/faq) >

<sup>10</sup> United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation, 1996,

<sup>11</sup> <[www.abs.gov.au/asstats/astat@nsf/](http://www.abs.gov.au/asstats/astat@nsf/)>

parents, unemployed, indigenous people, disabled, carers, and those who have mental health issues. Other groups who are at risk are those with addictions (smoking, drugs and alcohol), part time and casual workers (inclusive in this is the working poor), migrants, refugees and retirees. These are the major population who suffer from food insecurity due to limited or low incomes, high demands on their disposable incomes, and face barriers that limit their choices in food to sustain a healthy lifestyle.

When one is food insecure, one spends more time securing sources of food leaving less time for other pursuits within the social sphere. It becomes the main focus of life and can lead to anxiety and stress over worrying about obtaining food, surviving until the next pay, if special diets require strict intake of food due to medical conditions or medicine taken. Above all are families who worrying about the needs of their children, many times going without to ensure the children have enough to eat. Numbers and statistics do not give us the whole picture, they are the only tangible evidence that food insecurity exists, a hard copy to substantiate the researcher's claim, to wave within a debate, it ignores the physical and mental assault upon the individual. As food is not only a basic need of life and plays an important part of our daily ritual, what happens when one cannot fulfil this function. We create coping strategies; skills that allow us to modify our eating behaviours to ensure those resources are stretched until next pay. It requires choosing between competing demands, such as shelter, utilities, clothing, medicine and food. It demands flexibility in budgeting 'when disposable income is limited, food is one of the first discretionary items to be pared'<sup>12</sup>.

The individual has no control over what they eat and when they eat. Nutrition is the second thought, ensuring that one eats and stave off hunger is the main issue. Budgeting and shopping become more than a chore it becomes a struggle. Fortnightly payments force the individual to count how many meals to serve throughout the week, what size portions to serve per meal, how many meals can be missed. It becomes a challenge when food costs rise without warning, though alternatives are chosen when possible, when they are not the answer is go without. These changes over time condition the individuals eating behaviour, thus becomes a normal way of life. Studies and research focus on required amounts and nutrition one should obtain, though it ignores those who require special diets, due to illnesses, allergies, and diseases. These issues require the individual to choose carefully what they eat, and in some cases these are more expensive than other foods.

Food insecurity not only affects individuals and marginalised groups; it can affect whole communities. When we take a closer look at the most disadvantaged areas within the Wollongong area, we find high concentrations of unemployment, a high percentage of public housing, and limited access to various services. Noted within the report by Tony Vinson's, were named 3 of Wollongong's Southern suburbs as highly disadvantaged due to these issues: Warrawong (11<sup>th</sup>), Berkeley (13<sup>th</sup>), and Port Kembla (22<sup>nd</sup>)<sup>13</sup>. These suburbs have a higher level of unemployment well above the average of the region or the state:

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<sup>12</sup> NSW Centre For Public Nutrition, 2003; pg 16

<sup>13</sup> Vinson, T., (March 2004); *Community adversity and resilience: the distribution of social disadvantage in Victoria and New South Wales and the mediating role of social cohesion.*, The Ignatius Centre for Social Policy and Research

- Warrawong - 21.2% of population unemployed
- Cringila -19.8% of population unemployed
- Lake Heights -14.3% of population unemployed
- Port Kembla -17.2% of population unemployed
- Berkeley - 15% of population unemployed<sup>14</sup>

The marginalised are not only isolated within their homes, but within their communities, offering little hope or incentive to break free,

Thus people employ coping strategies resulting from food insecurity; these strategies are classed as predictors of food insecurity. Predictors of food insecurity focus on the eating habits of people who are required to choose between household expenditures and eating. Many people are forced to buy cheaper and less healthy foods, eating less by limiting portion sizes, skipping meals or not eating for days<sup>15</sup>, or by opting to supplement their food source with emergency food relief. Studies have shown that there are “Degrees of food insecurity”<sup>16</sup>, which may range from limiting food choices, changing eating habits, degrees of hunger, finding supplementary supplies. The critical point of food insecurity is when the choices made by those with limited income put them at risk of potential health problems, or compounds already existing illnesses.

## **CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TO FOOD INSECURITY**

### *A) Income*

The social debate on the level of income needed for a person to sustain a basic lifestyle has been a political issue within our society. Major research in the areas of poverty levels and concerns of community organisations has led to the senate Inquiry into Poverty and Financial Hardship (2004), and relied on organisations and agencies to forward submissions outlining poverty, food insecurity and hardship in their local communities. The public debate on what defines poverty centers on the issue of what is required to survive with a basic lifestyle, and tries to ignore the level of social support essential to low income households to interact within the environment that embraces economic rationalism and modern consumerism. Community organisations through their own research have set the level of poverty at 2.5- 3.5 million people within Australia<sup>17</sup> who are living in poverty. In this climate the size of the disadvantaged community is growing significantly in an environment that fosters lower wages and larger household expenditures. What is missing from the argument is local community data on those living in poverty and facing food insecurity due to their circumstances.

By focusing on specific groups within the local region, we are given a glimpse of the enormity of this issue; the most notable data used in defining poverty is the income received from government benefits. The ‘benchmarking of pensions [is set] to 25% of male average total earnings’<sup>18</sup>, and allowances are set at less, which in itself shows the enormity of surviving on government benefits. Though this is disputed by the

<sup>14</sup>Illawarra Forum Inc., A community Profile of the Southern Suburbs of Wollongong NSW, (2004)

<sup>15</sup> Lorenzane & Sanjur,

<sup>16</sup> Lemke et al

<sup>17</sup> Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee., 2002-2004; Inquiry into Poverty and Financial Hardship: A Hand up not a Hand out.

<sup>18</sup> Australian Council of Social Service, 2003; *The Bare Necessities: Poverty & Deprivation in Australia Today*: Submission to the Senate Inquiry into Poverty & Financial Hardship, paper 127, [www.acoss.org.au](http://www.acoss.org.au), p 15

National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling, which has stated that poverty level set by the OECD shows that half median poverty line for a family with 2 children is \$408 per week. While for a single person \$194 per week sees them in poverty<sup>19</sup>, yet those organisations and charities that deal with disadvantaged group say otherwise and believe that 'Some payments are too low to cover basic costs of living'<sup>20</sup>. The debates raging across the political landscape are focused on defining poverty and food insecurity related to the Australian economic climate, where the bottom line is not how are people living within the community but how many are reliant on government payments. Currently within our society there are 9.7 million entitlements to some sort of Government benefit, of which most are in aged pensions.

The data in table 1 (see appendix) shows the vast disparity in resources for individuals who rely on government assistance, yet these individuals have the same basic needs and demands on their incomes as those who earn a wage. Disposable incomes then define what you eat, how much you eat and how often you eat. Reviewing this data shows that those who are prone to food insecurity is well above 6.8% of the population<sup>21</sup>, it may well be most of those individuals reliant on Centrelink payments. Those who receive some kind of government benefits in the Illawarra region is 35.4%, and if we include those who are part time workers 9.5% of the workforce within the region we may in fact come closer to the true nature of food insecurity in the region.

Before moving onto the next contributing factor to food insecurity one must also include changes to the Consumer price index. Over the year (January to June quarter 2005) increases in rents went up by 0.7%, fuel up by 7.2%, toiletries and personal care products 1.1%. Other items such as beef and veal went up by 8.3%, milk by 4.6%, and overall food prices up by 1.9%, though this was offset by falls in the price of fruit by 10.5% (apples and bananas)<sup>22</sup>. Through the year 2004-2005 the annual increase of most significance were in electricity up by 3.1%, car fuel increases by 10.5%, rents up by 2.1%<sup>23</sup>. These increases affect what an individual spends on food especially in the current climate where the increase in fuel prices will (in the near future) be passed onto food, for a majority of struggling families this will in fact affect how much they spend on food. To highlight this issue, an example of rising prices is given:

Coles at Warrawong Shopping Centre- Coles bread .89 a loaf, has currently gone up to \$1.49 (as of October) without warning to the consumer.

It has been put forth by studies that the 'Cost of achieving recommended dietary intake would account for between 20-24% of a minimum income required for healthy living'<sup>24</sup>. Other studies state that this figure could be higher and more towards 30-40%

<sup>19</sup> Lloyd, R., Harding, A., Payne, A. (September 2004) *Australians In Poverty in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, National Centre of Social and Economic Modelling, University of Canberra, page 4.

<sup>20</sup> Australian Council of Social Service, 2003; *The Bare Necessities*, pg 15

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<sup>22</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, Overview of CPI Movement, [www.abs.gov.au/Astats/abs@nsf](http://www.abs.gov.au/Astats/abs@nsf)

<sup>23</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, Overview of CPI Movement, [www.abs.gov.au/Astats/abs@nsf](http://www.abs.gov.au/Astats/abs@nsf)

<sup>24</sup> Morris, et al cited in Tingay et al

of low-income earners budget for food<sup>25</sup>. Firstly this area needs to be examined within an Australian context if this is a reliable figure is it a sustainable goal to achieve for the average family or individual on limited income. What has been excluded is the fact that the individual /family must include other items that are socially required, such as personal care products, cleaning products, bathroom essentials, and pet products.

### *B) Housing*

Housing costs are one of the main expenditures for household weekly incomes, which depending on where you live can range from 25-30% of disposable incomes<sup>26</sup>. Housing costs to the individual whether renting or paying off is a major demand on low-income households, faced with choosing rent over food results from fear of becoming homeless, thus food is not a top priority of those with limited incomes. Those facing rentals though the private sector are subjected to increases in market values, short-term tenure, and the availability of affordable housing. For those who are on government benefits, those who are forced to choose private rentals may require government assistance in paying their rent. The amount of rent assistance through Centrelink is variable (depending on rent), and within the Illawarra region I, there are 18,141<sup>27</sup> persons who access this assistance through Centrelink. This figure reflects the massive need for either more affordable housing or increases in the number of public housing dwellings to accommodate the growing number of people who are on low incomes.

The NSW Department of Housing is a major landlord within the Illawarra, in Wollongong area there are 6,871 dwellings, in the Shellharbour area there are 1,844 dwellings and in Kiama there are 60<sup>28</sup>. There are current changes proposed to the policy of tenure within Department of Housing, changes that will have far reaching effects upon those already faced with poverty, food insecurity and the fear of homelessness. These changes are due to Federal Government shortfalls in funding to States (by \$250 million)<sup>29</sup>, tenants are now faced with increase to rent payment of water usage and shorter tenure contracts. To those not familiar with rental subsidies, Main tenants are charged 25% of gross weekly income, other household members who receive income are charged 20% of gross weekly income, and those between 16-21 are charged 12% of gross weekly income. Changes will see moderate earners charged 30% of gross weekly income, and those receiving Family tax Benefits will also additional increases from 11% to 15%. Thus the political economic rationality of the day has huge impacts on those who have the least resources to cope with household increases.

Whist many studies focus on public housing /private rental issues, there is little research on the effect upon low-income households who are paying mortgages and food insecurity. Demands included in housing for them are council rates, water charges, insurance, mortgage repayments, repairs and upkeep that reduce what disposable income they have left to obtain food. Within the current climate of rising

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fuel prices, which are affecting food prices, food poverty<sup>30</sup> becomes part of their lifestyle.

For those who through circumstances find themselves without shelter, food insecurity is a way of life. Those classed as homeless ‘people without physical shelter who sleep outdoors, in vehicles, abandoned building’ are the subject of standard studies into food insecurity. This group are the most vulnerable and at risk of chronic health problems. Chamberlain and Mackenzie’s report on homelessness has broadened the definition of homelessness to include other vulnerable groups who face similar circumstances and health risks. These classes are defined as:

- *Primary homelessness* - that is traditional homelessness, specifically those who live on the streets or are squatters. Current regional data on the homeless rate is shown as 107 persons<sup>31</sup>, though the validity of this figure ignores the transient nature of their lifestyle
- *Secondary homelessness* -refers to those in emergency accommodation and those residing with friends.
- *Tertiary homelessness* -is those individuals who live in boarding houses, and
- *Unfortunately the census taking does not define boarding houses and crisis accommodation in its criteria, and is included as dwellings in the data collection.*
- *Marginal residents* of caravan parks<sup>32</sup>. Those in caravan parks in the region which is 1,774 persons<sup>33</sup>.

The lack of data available on the level of homelessness within the region allows this issue to remain invisible within the community. The homeless individual sustains their meager existence reliant of food relive as their main source of food. Again in research and studies on the issue of housing the sole focus on defining the amount spent is supported on rent rates or mortgage repayments. The issue of housing includes far more than this; it is the council rates, water rates, insurance, repairs and maintenance upkeep, which affects the individuals disposable income.

### C) Access

Accessibility to main food sources is in research dealt with objectively outlining factors that may hinder the individual from obtaining sufficient food supplies. What is needed is a more subjective view of this issue, one that encompasses not only proximity of the food source, available transport and mobility, but also looks at the individuals capacity to access all areas concerning food.

Access to food sources requires either the individual to live within close proximity to food stores, have personal transportation or access to reliable public transport. When we examine this area closely we find that this is more intricate than most studies cover. The examination of the Illawarra region shows that there are many separate

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<sup>32</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australian Social Trends- Housing Homelessness, <[www.abs.gov.au/asstats/astat@nsf/](http://www.abs.gov.au/asstats/astat@nsf/)>

<sup>33</sup> Social Needs Assessment (Illawarra), The Salvation Army, p22

suburbs that are interconnected by major roads (Wollongong 69 suburbs, Shellharbour 21 suburbs, and Kiama 8 rural suburbs<sup>34</sup>). These suburbs are serviced by major regional shopping Centres in Wollongong, Warrawong, Figtree, Corrimal, Fairy Meadow, Woonona, Dapto, Wollongong CBD, Shellharbour, Warilla and Kiama. There are in all areas smaller grocery/ convenience stores throughout the region, but current data on number and locations was not available. It is stated within the Wollongong area there is '60 supermarkets and grocery stores'<sup>35</sup> though compared to retail stores (1400<sup>36</sup>) in the same area, one can assume that it is the growth of the businesses not providing basic needs that is important. This raises major concerns for those limited in income, reliant on location of shopping centres, and a lack of personal transport; they can not determine the quality of food available, the lack of competition especially concerning pricing, limited variety of fresh food, and the availability of culturally specific foods. Consequently choice is limited, alternative foods not available and subjected to sources more focused on profit than nutrition.

The importance of access to essential cooking facilities/ storage/ knowledge/skills to prepare and cook food limits the individual to access proper healthy food. This is a concern for those in shared accommodation, hostels and boarding houses, where limited access to these items may force them to eat out. If one cannot cook or store food, then one has limited choices in a food source, either spend more time finding alternate ways, buying each day, or be forced to eat take away. Another issue within this area is social exclusion of the individual, where the ritual of breaking bread becomes a solitary practice and may lead to a lack of interest in food.

Whether access to main food sources is restricted by location, resources, facilities or transport the end result is the same, the individual has less choices and may be forced to look elsewhere to supplement their food supply. Focus then turns to other available food sources those offered by community organisations/ agencies/ charities that offer food aid relief for the disadvantaged.

#### ❖ Food aid relief

Food aid - 'refers to food relief or food assistance programs that provide free (or highly subsidised) meals and /or food parcels to take home'<sup>37</sup>. This type of food source is classified as 'second-tier' food system that operates separately from the main food source and historically services the poorest and most disadvantaged people in the community<sup>38</sup>.

Within the community there are many local organisations and charities that provide assistance to the disadvantaged (see table 3 in appendix). They may provide meals (Breakfast or lunches), food parcels, food vouchers, smaller items such as yogurts/ bread /dairy products. They are a supplementary food source to aid many through hard times, but for some it may be the main meal for the day. Clubs and hotels mainly

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<sup>35</sup> Illawarra Regional Information Service, Region Profile, 2004, [www.iris.org.au/index.pl?page=38](http://www.iris.org.au/index.pl?page=38)

<sup>36</sup> Illawarra Regional Information Service

<sup>37</sup> Food Options Paper, p 37

<sup>38</sup>

offer subsidised meals across the region, and are cheap meals offering people a chance to eat out. There is growing concern though with this type of subsidised food source; on one hand this offers low cost meals but has the capacity to promote an environment that may not be suitable for those who have addictions to alcohol or gambling.

Whether the food aid is a meal, parcel or voucher, this type of food source is not socially acceptable way of obtaining food and does not reduce food insecurity for the individual. It is a response to food poverty and does not address the issues that create or contribute to food insecurity it is only a short-term solution to reduce hunger.

The major concern of organisations and charities that assist the disadvantaged within the region is the increase of demand for food assistance. Due to the high demand for their assistance, the limited or short-term nature of their funding, resources are stretched and for some programs the fear of closer is imminent.

### HEALTH RISKS OF FOOD INSECURITY

The major consequence of food insecurity is the impact upon the individuals' physical and mental health, may contribute to health problems (obesity, dental) or compound existing illnesses such as cardiovascular, diabetes, ulcers. This in turn can overload the medical system that is already in crisis. Changes in promoting healthy lifestyles are promoting individuals to take charge of their health, unfortunately those with limited resources are faced with many barriers that impede implementing such preventative measures. The main focus for people on low incomes is to stretch their resources to ensure they can buy enough food for their needs till next payday, the second consideration if viable is to focus on the nutrition of the food they buy. The continual cycle of lack of resources, poor intake of nutritious food and a lack of good eating behaviour compound the impact of poor life style choices such as smoking, alcohol and drug use<sup>39</sup>.

Dental problems are a major issue for disadvantaged people; this limits what food they can eat and contributes to health problems. Their diets are defined by what they can eat, neglect can compound their dental problem and further contribute to dental problems. It becomes a vicious cycle where relief is sort from medication or alcohol.

It has been documented by Illawarra health that 47% of adults in the Illawarra (1997-98) were either overweight or obese<sup>40</sup>. This is due in part for those facing limited access to nutritious food are reliant on foods which are affordable and cheap and high in fat and calories, which are filling and a cheap source of energy. This is a major factor that contributes to obesity; the other is change in food behaviours of those who are food insecure. Many people change their eating habits due to the lack of resources to get food, whether there are one or many demands that contribute to the changes. Changes to eating behaviours include limiting portions sizes, skipping meals, missing out on meals for a day / days, limited choices of food, lack of variety in diet. This can result in spending more energy and time in finding available food sources to supplement their supply, a lack of interest in food, bingeing or as noted a creation of a

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new disorder called opportunistic eating. The issue of affected food behaviour for those who are food insecure can be classified as opportunistic eating: Defined as 'people [will] eat what they can get when it is available' and creating a dysfunctional unhealthy eating habits which becomes 'a way of life for many'<sup>41</sup>, thus food insecurity becomes a function of diet<sup>42</sup>

The effects upon the individual can be seen in their food behaviours and consequently their health, 'whether a household is able to achieve food security depends to a great extent on how available resources are used and distributed in the household'<sup>43</sup>. This can include families experiencing Domestic Violence; parents with addictions (smoking, alcohol or drugs); illness or other demands on income such as education and work related expenses. The mental health of individuals can then be affected severely by anxiety and or stress over the lack of food, no money to purchase extra needed foods, and are faced with going hungry is a constant strain on their mental wellbeing and resulting physical ailments arising from this strain. They can suffer depression, a lack of interest in food .For households with families the strain is compounded further when children are concerned. It has been noted by Larson ( ) that 'for those whose household income was reported to be less than \$15,000 per year, physical health, physical function, general health and vitality were not found to be significantly different from the homeless sample'<sup>44</sup>.

There are within the community those who are nutritionally vulnerable<sup>45</sup>, the elderly, those with chronic conditions, and the disabled. They rely on medication and health services, which may drain their small amount of income, leaving little money to buy food; this then can compound their frailty and their health. Poverty can increase the patterns of illness, though research has yet to define these illnesses due to the broad nature and scope of other factors contributing health problems. For example poor choices of life style, addictions, existing conditions hereditary diseases, thus

## CONCLUSION

What has become apparent throughout this paper is that Food insecurity does exist in the Illawarra, and is apparent when we view the number of people who require food assistance through programs run by local organisations and charities. It affects those who are already disadvantaged by limited access to employment, material needs, services, transport and income. Some factions within the community may debate the level of food insecurity inferred within this paper. Though the data shown on those who seek food assistance are on low incomes, unemployed or underemployed, or part of the public housing system gives insight into those prone to food insecurity and the demands on their income.

What is of major concern is the coping strategies employed by those who are on low incomes, strategies that condition inadequate eating habits which put the individual at risk of health problems. These eating behaviours have the capacity to create a major

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<sup>41</sup> Evans & Dowler

<sup>42</sup> Lemke et al

<sup>43</sup> Lemke, Vorster, Jansen, Ziche, Empowered Women

<sup>44</sup> Larson p 742

<sup>45</sup>

health problem for younger generations that believe it is normal to change food behaviour due to other demands on their income.

Whilst education and knowledge of a healthy lifestyle is continually reinforced throughout the community by health professionals, food aid programs and the media, it is contradicted by the limited resources of the individual. Food insecurity including contributing factors becomes a function of diet, dictating what people eat and when they eat. It then promotes a conditioned response to food poverty, an eating disorder, and another barrier preventing people from taking part in social life. By increasing the resources of the individual allows more choices to be made, this in turn will benefit the health of those disadvantaged. Contrary to political beliefs people do not chose to be poor, the same can be said about food. The low-income earner, the unemployed, the aged, the disabled, those excluded due to cultural differences, do not chose to eat cheaper, unhealthy food, they have no choice, they eat what they can.

Whilst there are many limitations within this paper, due to time constraints, a limited access to information, it does give a broad overview of the barriers of many who are restricted in what they eat. It raises many questions and many more possibilities on what can be done in the future to reduce food insecurity within the Illawarra region.

- The author recommends that a more in depth examination is needed into the Illawarra region, that focuses on relevant social issues, such as disadvantaged communities, coping mechanisms employed by marginalised people, the level of homelessness, the necessity of food aid programs.
- The creation of working parties and committees made up of local organisation / charities and agencies to promote community gardens throughout the region, allowing individuals access to healthy produce.
- The creation of lobby groups to advocate on behalf of disadvantaged people on social issues faced in the Illawarra.
- To lobby governments for long term or continual funding for food aid programs.
- Creation of a regional database supported by food aid programs to collate figures on those who require food assistance, thus can be used in funding submissions, and concrete evidence that food insecurity exists in the region.
- Promotion of t local food growers in the region allowing more access for individuals to cheaper food sources.

**APPENDICES**

Table 1: CURRENT RATES -CENTRELINK PAYMENTS

Payments	Per week	Per fortnight
Youth allowance (16-24)-under 18 (home)	\$89.35	\$178.70
Youth allowance-away from home	\$163.25	\$326.50
Austudy- over 25 (single)	\$163.25	\$326.50
Austudy- over 25 (with child)	\$213.90	\$427.80
Austudy- over 25 (partnered with child)	\$179.25	\$358.50
Austudy- over 25 (partnered)	\$163.25	\$326.50
Newstart- single	\$202.25	\$404.50
Newstart- partnered	\$182.50	\$365.00
Disability single-home- 18-20	\$153.65	\$307.30
Disability- independent	\$209.45	\$418.90
Aged pension- single	\$244.45	\$488.90
Aged pension - couple	\$204.10	\$408.20 (each)

Source: Centrelink

Table 2: NUMBER OF PEOPLE ON GOVERNMENT BENEFITS IN ILLAWARRA

Type of Payment	Number of people in Illawarra and % of population
Youth	7,549 (2.9%)
Parent single	9,774 (3.75%)
Parent Partnered	2,929 (1.1%)
NSS Mature	1,184 (0.45%)
Newstart Allowance	10,022 (3.85%)
Disabled	14,010 (5.3%)
Carer	1,970 (0.75%)
Carer allowance	6,924 (2.6%)
Aged	38,208 (14.7%)

Source: Twyford Consulting, 2004; *Social Needs Assessment- Illawarra Region: A Report for the Salvation Army (Illawarra)*, pg 4.

**Table 3: FOOD AID IN THE ILLAWARRA**

<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Type of food aid offered and comments</b>
Warrawong Community Centre	Community Kitchen Lunch- approx 906 clients per month Bread & yoghurt- Youth- Demographics of clients: Unemployed, Disabled, Elderly, Single parents, Dept of Housing tenants
Barnardo's	Offer food assistance- data not given
CHAIN	Breakfast- 30-50 youths per month
Darcy House	Offers what food is available to 300 clients per month frozen meals that can be heated in the microwave, bread to make sandwiches or toast and cereal
Power Christian Church	Holds outreach at Port Kembla on a Friday night- approx 100 per month Demographics- unemployed, on pension, disabled, homeless
Mission Australia	Breakfast for youth who are in the Links to learning program- 12 Personal support program- approx 10 or less offered food assistance
Wesley Mission	Meals per month- 1800, food parcels 30 per month About 10% of the people coming in are women and occasionally we have children 100% are on government benefits 80% suffer from some form of addiction and/or mental illness
Bellambi Neighborhood Centre	Breakfast- for the year (2003-04) 5938, Lunches- for the year (2003-04 ) 3549 Bread parcels- 1000 per month Yoghurt parcels- 20 per month vegetables from the garden from people in need which is probably about 10 families per month
Unanderra Neighborhood Centre	No food aid assistance in the area Did run food share but program finished
Nth Kiama NC	Offers Woolworth's food vouchers- 15 per month
Shellharbour City Baptist Church	Food vouchers/ bread /milk- 24-30 families per month Demographics-department of housing tenants. many are in defacto relationships. A smaller proportion being single parents. Most of those we help have school age kids at home. A high proportion of people we help who have a drug addiction.
Dapto NC	Breakfast program for youth- 300 per month Bread given
Helensburgh NC	No food aid programs
Koonawarra NC	Breakfast- 600 per month- broad range of clients, most from working families
Warilla NC	No food aid programs
Nth Warilla NC	Breakfast program -540 per month Children, parents welcome
Albion Park NC	We used to have a weekly pick up of bread from Bakers Delight. The bread was distributed to DoH tenants in Albion Park. About 100 units (1,2 and 3 bedroom) in two complexes.
Berkeley NC	Dairy /yoghurts- 80 families per month Restarting breakfast program for children from pre-school to year 12.
Food Share	Approximate participants throughout the Illawarra- 300 per month Also donated food distributed to organisations and individuals Program not running due to lack of funding

	Demographics- retirees, single parents, students, low income, unemployed, migrants, indigenous, disabled
St Vincent De Paul	<u>Data not supplied-</u> In annual report people assisted in the Wollongong area -59,320 (p16-p18.) Media release- August 16 <sup>th</sup> 2005 states the organisation has seen over 66% rise in financial and material assistance over the last 4 years.
Salvation Army	<u>Data not supplied</u>
Anglicare	<u>Data not supplied</u> Anglicare stated to the senate inquiry into poverty and financial hardship (2003-2004) that there has been a 42% increase in the number of people requesting emergency food and financial assistance in the past 2 years <sup>46</sup>

Source: Survey of organisations 2005

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