

# Lack of food contributing to students' poor health and absenteeism

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Teenagers whose families worry about money for food are more likely to be overweight, have poor mental and physical health, and miss school, according to new University of Auckland research.

Rising [food](#) security concerns among New Zealand adolescents and association with health and wellbeing has been published in *Kōtuitui: New Zealand Journal of Social Sciences Online*.

Food security concerns increased from 2007, affecting more than 40 percent of all New Zealand secondary school students in 2012 including approximately two out of three Pacific [young people](#) and half of Māori young people.

The paper, by Dr Jennifer Utter, Dr Simon Denny, Dr Theresa Fleming and Dr Terryann Clark of the University's Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences, explores results from two nationally representative surveys of the health and wellbeing of high-school students in New Zealand in 2007 (Youth'07) and 2012 (Youth'12). In 2007, 9107 students from 96 schools were surveyed, and in 2012, 8500 students from 91 schools participated.

"The findings highlight the growing concerns of food insecurity reported by adolescents in New Zealand. Interventions that address food security for families may provide a tangible means of promoting the healthy development of children and young people," Dr Utter says.

The students were asked, 'Do your parents, or the people who act as your

parents, ever worry about not having enough money to buy food?' with five response options ranging in frequency from 'never' to 'all the time'. Responses were asked for in three categories, 'never', 'occasionally/sometimes', or 'often/ all the time'.

In 2012, 11 percent reported food security concerns 'often or always' and 33 percent reported food security concerns 'occasionally or sometimes'. In 2007, those figures were 8 percent and 28 percent.

Young people with food security concerns were more likely to report truancy, poor general health, mental [health](#) concerns and obesity. The survey found that 32 percent of students experiencing food security concerns often skipped school compared with only 18 percent of students not worried about food security. Nearly 12 percent of young people with frequent food security concerns had made a suicide attempt in the past year, compared to 2 percent of students with no food security concerns.

Dr Utter says the increase in [food insecurity](#) mirrors the more general patterns of [child poverty](#) in New Zealand. During the late 1980s, child poverty in New Zealand rose sharply as a consequence of economic reforms that privatised many public services.

"Corrective reforms in the early 2000s helped to reduce child poverty somewhat, though the 2008 global financial crisis has countered these improvements. In addition, between 2007 and 2012, there were few new government initiatives specifically addressing issues of food [security](#) or child poverty."

"These findings highlight that to reduce problems from suicidal behaviour to truancy, family income and food affordability are critical. We need a New Zealand where families are not worried about money for food, so that young people can get on with going to [school](#) and growing

with hope and optimism."

**More information:** Jennifer Utter et al. Rising food security concerns among New Zealand adolescents and association with health and wellbeing, *Kōtuitui: New Zealand Journal of Social Sciences Online* (2017). [DOI: 10.1080/1177083X.2017.1398175](https://doi.org/10.1080/1177083X.2017.1398175)

Provided by University of Auckland

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