

Researcher exposes the reality of food insecurity

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A family discussing scavenging for food in rubbish bins and the ethics of killing a pet rabbit for meat is just one story from Dr. Rebekah Graham's doctoral study on New Zealanders experiencing food insecurity.

Her research took her into the homes of those living in poverty. She reveals in harrowing detail the daily lives of families struggling to survive without enough money to buy adequate [food](#), as well as their resilience in coping. Participants report having to ration or go without food, rely on emergency food parcels, charities, food banks and ad hoc donations, as well as begging or busking, and sometimes having to sell or pawn possessions for food money.

As a community psychology researcher, she set out to make links between New Zealand's growing poverty statistics and increasing gap between rich and poor, and everyday experiences of [food insecurity](#).

Dr. Graham, who graduated from Massey's School of Psychology in April, says food [insecurity](#) is a lot more hidden than people realise.

She attended a community centre that provided weekly hot meals for families for fifteen months. From the visits she established trust with diners and recruited seven people from five households to participate in further aspects of this study, including going supermarket shopping. They shared with Dr. Graham the varied ways in which they source and prepare food for themselves and their respective households, enabling

her to build up a detailed picture of experiences of food insecurity.

What is food security?

Food security, says Dr. Graham, "exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life" – as defined by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations

In New Zealand, a growing number of people experience food insecurity – the result, says Dr. Graham, of governments over the past 30 years pursuing the doctrine that "economic and social changes based on the neoliberal belief system that market forces, competitive globalization and individualized choice would better promote individual freedom and wellbeing.

"Subsequently, inequality and poverty in Aotearoa/New Zealand has grown at an extraordinary rate. The divide between the wealthy and everyone else has grown faster than in any other OECD country, despite sustained economic growth."

Shame and stigma attached to lack of food

As part of her study, titled *The lived experiences of food Insecurity within the context of poverty in Hamilton, New Zealand*, she spent time with participants as they sourced food for themselves and their families. Strategies for survival included tactical supermarket shopping, accessing food grants, foraging for food, sharing surplus food items, utilising foodbanks and charities, and distributing food-related tasks across family members. Dr. Graham's research highlights that, despite using a range of strategies, feeding a family with limited resources is time-

consuming, stressful, and difficult.

Shame and stigma are part of the reality of living without enough food, her research found. Supermarket shopping trips, for example, incur embarrassment at buying just a few budget items while surrounded by fellow shoppers with overflowing trolleys, and often having to return some items at the checkout.

Another pressure for those experiencing food insecurity is the middle-class "nutritionist approach" that tends to judge those living in food insecurity about poor food choices and lack of nutrition knowledge.

"For example, foods such as potatoes and bread were once considered healthy but have now been reclassified and constructed by nutritionists as less than ideal. Yet, for lower income people bread and potatoes are staple foods. These issues of class, along with social and economic factors, are typically disregarded when taking a nutrition-only approach," she says.

There is also an inherent contradiction between the mindset that 'beggars can't be choosers' and nutritional advice that beggars should make healthy choices. "Ultimately, charities provide an 'ambulance at the bottom of the cliff' short-term solution. We also need to address the deeper structural causes of poverty and its long-term consequences."

Dr. Graham is currently working as a research officer at the University of Waikato on two different community projects, one in conjunction with the Waikato DHB on the Harti Hauora Tamariki tool trial.

The second is with The People's Project, a Housing First initiative in Hamilton, in which she will be talking with people involved about their experiences of finding a home to live in.

"Longer term I want to continue with research into [food security](#), specifically how we can ensure that all New Zealanders have enough to eat for health and well-being," she says.

"We can address food insecurity by implementing policies that address the underlying drivers of poverty and which prioritize citizen's well-being. Crucial to this is the cultivation of non-stigmatizing public narratives regarding hardship."

More information: The lived experiences of food insecurity within the context of poverty in Hamilton, New Zealand:

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