

Disadvantaged children missing out on meals in childcare

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Researchers at The University of Queensland have found children in disadvantaged communities often go hungry when they attend early education and childcare centers.

UQ Laureate Fellow Professor Karen Thorpe from the Queensland Brain Institute led a study of more than 900 [childcare](#) centers across Queensland that showed those in disadvantaged communities, where [food insecurity](#) was highest, were less likely to provide meals to children than those in more affluent areas.

"We discovered only 65 percent of childcare centers in rural and remote areas provide food," Professor Thorpe said.

"Often it's about keeping costs down, with services providing lunch for children charging up to \$140 a day compared to as low as \$60 a day for those without meals."

Professor Thorpe said some centers in low-income areas with high market competition did provide food without increasing fees.

"But a subsequent study has found the amount and quality of the food served to the children was inadequate," she said.

"A report released by the United Workers Union earlier this year showed some childcare providers had a daily food budget as low as 65 cents per child."

Professor Thorpe said some children were going hungry at the most important time of their early learning journey.

"We know without [adequate nutrition](#) it's harder for children to learn and regulate their behavior," she said.

"For children living in disadvantage, to then get [poor quality](#) food at childcare is a further blow."

Professor Thorpe said the study found some families living below the

[poverty line](#) simply couldn't afford enough food for their children, or if they did, it was poor quality.

"We found in some childcare centers, staff were giving their own food to the children when they themselves were struggling financially," she said.

Professor Thorpe said the provision of high-quality food in Queensland's most disadvantaged communities should be a public health priority.

"It would mean children can learn and have a positive trajectory in health and education," she said.

"There's currently a lot of investment in early childcare, but you need to spend the money wisely.

"You can't deliver a high-quality education program if the children and staff are going hungry."

The study has been published in *Social Science and Medicine*.

More information: Karen Thorpe et al, Meal provision in early childhood education and care programs: Association with geographic disadvantage, social disadvantage, cost, and market competition in an Australian population, *Social Science & Medicine* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.socscimed.2022.115317](#)

Provided by University of Queensland

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