

New Zealand study: Significant struggle of feeding a family as sole-parent

July 12 2022



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Skipping meals, neglecting their health, and constant stress—this is the lived reality of sole-parents struggling to feed their family, a University of Otago study has found.

The study, published in *Journal of the Royal Society of New Zealand*, explores the experiences of food insecurity for low-income female sole-parent families—including their proposed solutions.

Lead author Dr. Grace Macaulay, previously of the Department of Women's and Children's Health and now based at the University of Oxford, says food insecurity exists when accessing sufficient nutritious food is limited or uncertain, with [damaging effects](#) on health and well-being.

Previous research has shown 19% of New Zealand children were living in households which experienced severe-to-moderate food security.

As the relative cost of living is rising, food insecurity is becoming an increasingly significant problem and she describes the study's insights as "compelling and sobering."

The six [women](#) interviewed described the daily struggle of feeding a family, notwithstanding a range of sacrifices, coping strategies, careful budgeting, and family and community support.

"Women were missing meals, neglecting personal and medical needs, and experiencing significant stress in feeding their families. They also expressed their concerns for the flow-on effects of low-income and food insecurity on their children, including reduced quantities of food, repeated exposure to stress and constrained social and recreational opportunities.

"The women's numerous coping strategies and sacrifices were, at times, and sometimes often, unable to achieve adequately provisioning for their families—and likely masked the full extent of hardship faced."

"All women stated that having more [disposable income](#) would make a

significant and lasting difference to addressing food insecurity for their families," Dr. Macaulay says.

She is quick to point out the women's struggles were not due to an inability to budget, or careless use of resources.

"Women described their difficulty in understanding how their struggle putting food on the table for their families could be so enduring, especially given New Zealand's relative affluence, and some felt the wider public neither fully understood nor sought to understand their daily plight."

Co-author Dr. Mavis Duncanson, also of the Department of Women's and Children's Health, says the research reinforces the enduring hardship food insecurity causes and highlights how co-ordinated systemic governmental change is required.

"Our findings point to the urgent need for social policy reform to increase financial support for low-income households if we want to see children and families flourishing and ensure food security for all."

The researchers believe food insecurity in New Zealand needs to be a key focus of further investigation and policy action, particularly around ways to enable all households to enjoy nourishing [food](#).

Co-author Dr. Jean Simpson, also of the Department of Women's and Children's Health, says that relief for [family](#) hardship has been too slow for at least two whole generations. "We need to examine the roadblocks to change. Why do successive governments condone such high levels, and extent, of poverty and [food insecurity](#)? The health impact alone has been documented and is costly.

"Tamariki and rangatahi and those who care for them need effective and

equitable action implemented urgently to mitigate harm to the next generations and, indeed, to the fabric of our society," she says.

More information: Grace C. Macaulay et al, Food insecurity as experienced by New Zealand women and their children, *Journal of the Royal Society of New Zealand* (2022). [DOI: 10.1080/03036758.2022.2088574](https://doi.org/10.1080/03036758.2022.2088574)

Provided by University of Otago

Citation: New Zealand study: Significant struggle of feeding a family as sole-parent (2022, July 12) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-07-zealand-significant-struggle-family-sole-parent.html>

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