

Harvard Style Paper

As in many countries, consumers in Australia have recently had to accommodate increases in the costs of basic food (Webb & Leeder 2007). During the financial year 2007–2008, overall food prices rose 5.9% (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] 2008a), while some basic food prices rose sharply compared with the same period in previous years: cheese by 14.2%, milk by 12.1%, poultry by 11.0% and bread by 6.8% (ABS 2008b, p. 3). Food cost “plays a significant role in mediating food choice among low socio-economic status (SES) groups” (Harrison et al., as cited in Henderson & Foley 2010). People in low-income demographics often have to reduce food spending to allow for other essentials such as housing and utilities (Douglas 2006), leading to decreased food security. The literature on food access indicates that people from low-income backgrounds experience higher rates of food insecurity and obesity, and studies have found that affordability is a primary reason given for not choosing healthy foods (Banerjee 2007; Innes-Hughes et al. 2011). Thus, the assessment of food cost and affordability are essential steps in better understanding individual and community food choices.

Food costs entered the political limelight prior to the Australian 2007 federal election, with voters demanding government action to reduce prices. To honor pre-election promises, the newly elected Labor government initiated a national inquiry into grocery pricing soon after taking office (Australian Competition and Consumer Commission [ACCC] 2008). However, following the release of the grocery pricing inquiry and the consequent launch of the government website to monitor prices, critics considered there would be minimal, if any, impact on prices (Irvine 2008). This is partly because of international trends, with Australia not immune to global factors attributed to raising the costs of basic foods (Queensland Health 2001), and partly because the inquiry outcomes did nothing to address food costs.

To be food secure means to have regular access to safe, nutritionally adequate, culturally acceptable food from non-emergency sources (Kirk 2002). Food insecurity, then, describes a limited or uncertain ability to acquire appropriate foods in socially acceptable ways (Bowden & Fairley 2006). This is not merely a lack of food, but occurs when people fear running out of food, or are forced to make significant changes to their usual eating patterns due to economic constraints. The diets of those who are food insecure are likely to lack variety and be of poor quality with lower levels of micronutrients.

The Australian Guide to Healthy Eating shows the range of food groups recommended for a healthy adult (Petschel 2013). There is some evidence to demonstrate that populations living in rural areas of Australia have to pay more for healthy food than their metropolitan (‘metro’) counterparts. The Healthy Food Basket (HFB) survey conducted in Queensland demonstrated higher food costs in rural and remote parts of the state (Queensland Health 2001). In South

Australia a study conducted by Douglas (2006, p. 16) demonstrated that “food costs were higher in remote areas of that state”. However, Bowden and Fairley (2006) in a survey of 42 rural towns in Victoria could find no difference in the cost of a HFB according to rurality, nor did the mean cost of the rural Victorian HFB differ significantly from a basket priced in state capital Melbourne.

Some of the above are excerpts from:

Ward, PR, Coveney, J, Verity, F, Carter, P & Schilling, M 2012, ‘Cost and affordability of healthy food in rural South Australia’, *Rural and Remote Health*, vol. 12, no. 2, pp. 1938-1948.

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Petschel, K 2013, ‘The Australian guide to healthy eating: What you need to know’, Australian Coeliac, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 21-31.

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Webb, K & Leeder, SR 2007, ‘New Year’s resolution: Let’s get rid of excessive food prices in remote Australia’, Medical Journal of Australia, vol. 186, no. 1, pp. 7-8.