Food security and health risks facing vulnerable youth in north-west Tasmania

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Aims: Food security is determined by several interrelated factors—including food available, food access and food utilisation—all of which have a direct influence on health outcomes. The north-west coast of Tasmania has in recent years faced a number of socioeconomic challenges resulting from the loss of industry and infrastructure. Vulnerable and marginalised communities, including young unemployed people, have been significantly impacted by the economic downturn. The study examined the relationship between the socioeconomic environment, food security and the health status of vulnerable young people (18–25 year olds) on the north-west coastal areas of Tasmania.

Methods: An exploratory research design using a mixed-method approach was adopted to ensure the findings captured the breadth and depth of issues related to food security, socioeconomic conditions and related health problems associated with the target study group. A special feature of the project design was the use of a community-based participatory approach for the effective recruitment of participants. This approach complemented more traditional qualitative and quantitative approaches such as focus groups, interviews and online surveys distributed through social media networks.

Relevance: The study has direct relevance to the development of government policy frameworks associated with social inclusion, food security, community health and urban/regional planning.

Results: The study confirmed a close association between socioeconomic factors, health issues and food security amongst the target study group. The vulnerability of young people on the north-west coastal areas of Tasmania to food insecurity was determined by a number of interrelated factors that impacted on their individual level of food security. These factors included: influence of peer groups towards food choice; access and prevalence of cheaper food sources; personal attitudes toward food and diet, such as an acceptance of food insecurity as being the ‘norm’; lack of motivation and food preparation skills; lack of awareness of what constitutes a healthy diet; and the health implications of poor nutrition and access to transport.

Conclusion: Increased socioeconomic disadvantage has a direct correlation to increased levels of food insecurity and related health conditions. A whole-of-government approach in addressing the social determinants of food security that relate to food access, supply and utilisation has the potential to improve food security within vulnerable communities.