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

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Introduction

The food security and related health risks facing vulnerable youth in the north-west coast of Tasmania study was aimed at building an evidence-based understanding of how issues of food security, socio-economic factors, and related health problems impacted on the lives of vulnerable youth residing in three regional local government areas (LGAs) on the north-west coast of Tasmania. The study, funded by the Department of Regional Australia, Regional Development & Local Government was undertaken by the University Department of Rural Health, Tasmania (UDRH) in collaboration with the Tasmanian Institute for Regional Development (IRD).

Since the 1996 World Food Summit, food security has emerged as a global issue, threatening not only developing countries but also more developed and wealthier countries. Food security is described as a situation that exist 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.¹ When extrapolated at a local or individual level food security refers to the ability of individuals, households and communities to acquire food that is sufficient, reliable, nutritious, safe, acceptable and sustainable.²

A number of studies have examined the relationship between levels of food security, the characteristics of the population, their environment and the interaction between the two variables within the local food system. Less is known about the interplay of these variables within the context of vulnerable youth living in more isolated and disadvantaged areas.

Map 1 Area of study NW Tasmania

The study targeted young residents (18-25 year old) from the three rural regional municipalities of Devonport, Central Coast and Burnie on the north-west coast of Tasmania. These areas have a high level of relative socio-economic disadvantage compared to other regional areas of Australia, especially in the areas of education and employment.³ Notably, the three local government areas in the study area are in the bottom 30% of all Australian Local Government Areas in terms of SEIFA national indices of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage and Relative Socio-economic Advantage and Disadvantage. Trends in the age structure of the population in the three municipalities between 1996 and 2006 saw increasing numbers in all age groups of 45 years and over and declining numbers in all age groups below 45 years, contributing to the ageing of the population.⁴
Aims
The aims of the research included:

- to identify the relationship between the social environment of north-west Tasmania and the living conditions of local youth who are experiencing employment difficulties in terms of regional disadvantage, food security and related health risks
- to identify food consumption behaviours and related health risks of targeted youth
- to provide recommendations to local communities, health and associated service providers on pathways to improving health and well-being through the promotion of social inclusion and improved food security.

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.

Methods
The selection of appropriate data collection methodologies was critical in ensuring the findings captured the breadth and depth of issues related to food security, socio-economic conditions and related health problems associated with the target study group. For this reason the research adopted a mixed methods approach with both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analyses.

Advice from locally based community support agencies suggested that recruitment of participants and data collection through more traditional approaches would prove challenging and that a community based participatory approach would assist in achieving the best outcomes. This rationale was based on the assumption that the target study group experienced conditions of exclusion, oppression and marginalisation with potentially a low level of trust in people outside their immediate social network. A community based participatory approach relied heavily on input from outreach workers who were in direct contact with vulnerable youth. Outreach workers were able to assist with the framing of research questions, recruitment of participants and distribution and collection of survey data.

Data was collected through the completion of a questionnaire distributed through local youth networks and the establishment of focus groups. In addition, questionnaires were distributed through social media channels. The use of social media provided access to a larger pool of youth who may not have access to, or may not be utilising local community outreach programs and services.

Perspectives on food security and related health issues were obtained from both local service providers and vulnerable youth through separate focus groups. Youth participating in the focus groups each received a food voucher as acknowledgment for their participation.

Nvivo software was used for data collection and coding. Thematic analysis of the data was used to identify key patterns and trends. The quantitative data was coded and entered into a SPSS program. Non parametric tests such as Chi-square tests were applied to examine the association between different socio-economic factors, health related issues and the different aspects of food security.

Results
The study confirmed a close association between socio-economic 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.

Similarly, employment status was found to be correlated with various aspects of food security. Participants who were either employed on a full time or part time basis were found to be more likely to have a healthier and more varied diet than their more vulnerable counterparts who were unemployed, disabled or were employed on a casual basis. The significant difference in food consumption behaviours was closely related to the ability to purchase healthy food (financial status), distance to food retail outlets, and motivation to cook healthy meals. These differences were also manifested in the coping strategies used by the participants in times of limited food. The findings indicated that employment status impacted on the type and nature of coping strategies. Those participants who were unemployed were more likely to skip meals or use creative ways, using their social networks, to source meals such as sharing food, bartering or accessing food relief services.

**Research recommendations**

The research findings informed a number of practical recommendations for improving food security through the adoption of a “determinants of food security” approach which underscores the close relationship between the three factors of living conditions, food security and health outcomes.

Recommendations form the study included:

- support for programs that connect with, and inform, young people about the source and value of nutritious food
- continued support of programs that help inform young people about healthy food choices
- support for programs that acknowledge the importance of individuals as peer group leaders in modelling healthy eating choices
- raising the profile of food security as a key priority on the agenda of State and community based organisations working in the areas of health, living conditions and education
- the establishment of an appropriately resourced government policy portfolio that oversees the development and implementation of food security initiatives
- further research into the opportunities that social media provide in connect young people to issues relating to food security
- continued investment into community driven food initiatives such as farmer markets and community BBQs.

**References**