

Empty food baskets

Food poverty in Whangarei

Research objectives

Quantify how much food is provided to families (food parcels and other emergency food and food in schools

Provide an indication of the level of food poverty in our district.

Advocate from an informed position to address food insecurity in Whangarei.

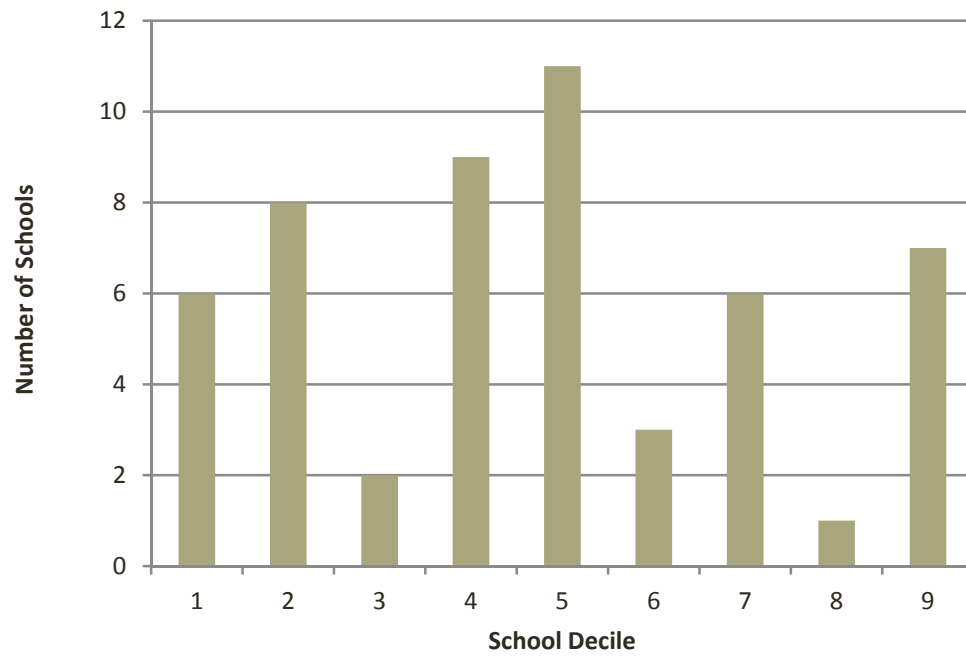
Develop a baseline measure that could then be tracked to see if there were changes in food poverty over time.

Food poverty has been found to be particularly damaging for child health and development.

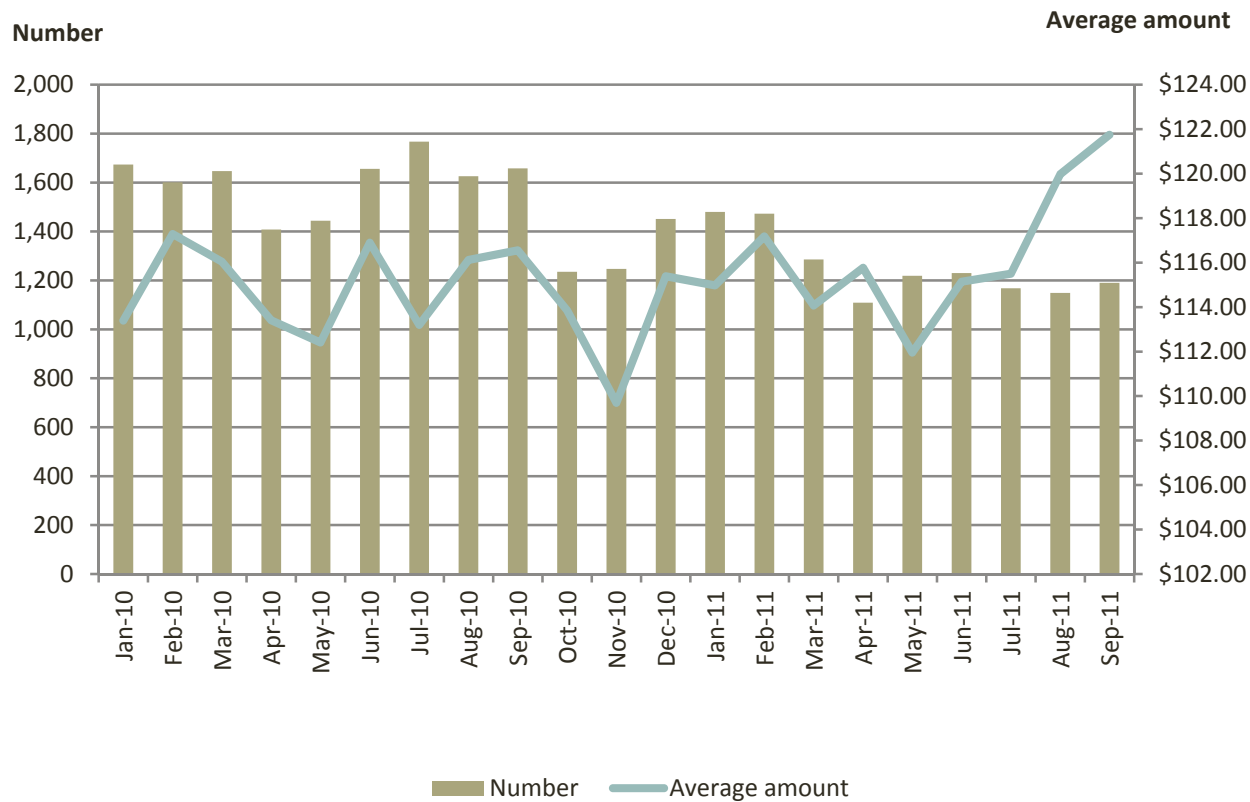
Nutritional status influences children's school attendance, health, behaviour and academic outcomes: children who eat regular meals and have an adequate nutrient intake do better at school than those who skip meals and have inadequate nutrient intakes

Overall number of malnourished New Zealand children is relatively small, in schools with a high proportion of children from low socio economic backgrounds poor nutritional status may be the norm rather than the exception.

The number of schools in Whangarei by decile rating



Numbers and average amount of SNGs for food distributed in Whangarei between January 2010 and September 2011



Source: Data supplied to Manaia PHO by MSD, 28 October 2011

Programmes offering food to Whangarei school children:

- **KidsCan**
- **KickStart.**
- **“Fruit in Schools”**
- Church groups.
- Eight schools participate in the **Enviro-schools** programme.

What the schools told us

Children are not just coming because it's free. Some children come without having had any breakfast or nothing for lunch

Some days we know that kids don't come to school because there is not enough food in the house. The breakfast programme is helping a lot in feeding these kids.

Without the food we provide, the students' nutrition will probably be very poor. We encourage them to bring their own food but most of them don't. Some of them are picked up quite early and it's quite hard to organise themselves and the babies on time.

...because our students are pregnant or very young mums breastfeeding, good nutrition and food provision is essential to their, and their babies', wellbeing.

While in the past there were some leftover (fruit) that were used in technology classes, now that times are tougher there is no surplus.

We noticed since the beginning of the year there has been less food brought to school in lunch boxes.

Developing parent's skills and self-sufficient children

- *...a large vegetable garden... run by the PolyTech as a course for parents for two years with making pickles etc.*
- *A Manaia PHO employee is going to use the school kitchen to run 'cooking on a shoestring' courses for parents.*
- *We also put nutritional notices from the kids in the school's newsletter. We also grow fruit trees at the school. It's a gradual process of education to change the kids' attitude.*
- *We're trying to get to the point that the children are 'self-managing': some children don't get any support from their parents, so what we're trying to do is teach the kids with a focus on their independence.*
- *Children can't create the change - the parents have to, which is why it was important to get the family to garden at home – not at the school. It was encouraging to see a family sitting down to Christmas lunch with vegetables from their own garden.*

- *[The school does] talk to families and aims at getting parents to ring if they're having problems. The aim is to keep communication open.*
- *Over time, I have been converted [to the Fruit in Schools Programme] and I have noticed a difference in class performance and in parents' attitudes. Children take home new attitudes and knowledge about the value of good nutrition.*
- *There has been a huge reduction in school sores since we have been part of the Fruit in Schools programme.*
- *The Breakfast Club is open and informal and the kids aren't identified. Many pupils use it as a social time.*
- *Kids aren't embarrassed if they don't have food.*
- *We have created an atmosphere where kids can say they need food. We do get some kids knocking on the door and saying they are hungry. The objective is to make certain that the kids are fed.*

Food parcel providers

Three types of food parcel providers those who;

- provide food parcels to any person or family meeting their criteria, without regard for their religious or agency affiliation,
- focus on providing food parcels to their parishioners or existing clients for whom they are providing budgeting or whanau support, or
- provide top-up parcels

We distribute food parcels, but not to people just walking in the door - it is mainly to people who belong to our congregation or are known to us. We help families we have a personal relationship with. We have been offering food parcels for about four years. All food is donated to the church or purchased with money donated to the church.

Inadequate household income

- *Families on low income or benefit in some instances can just manage if they don't smoke, drink, gamble, have no car, no debt and don't go out".*
- *Most of our clients in the past were on a benefit. Now we also see people on low income or who have been made redundant.*
- *Another real factor is that they have not enough money coming in.*
- *We talk to people about their circumstances. The main reasons are hardship, job loss, sickness and other emergency situations, and all age groups and family compositions are represented. [We had an] example of two young families last year with young children: they lost employment and have a mortgage. We provided continuous support to them (for approximately one year), because we knew they were really in need, until their situation improved.*

Debt

- *People borrow or buy more than they can afford. Often people are lured by deceptively good deals offered to them. For example, I'm aware of one shop in town which offers deals that are unrealistic, and accepts contracts without prior checking to ascertain the client's real ability to repay the debt.*
- *'Sale trucks' are also quite bad for tempting people into bad debts. Also, people often lie about their circumstances in order to obtain credit.*
- *'Sale trucks' are mobile retailers with easy, but expensive, credit options, generally targeting low income areas.*
- *There are a lot of pressures with increasing school costs. Our agency will work with parents to go to school to negotiate payments. We will act as an advocate if we have to, but we prefer to accompany the family to the school so that they get used to having to deal with the school and build up that relationship.*
- *For example, a child gets asthma, is put in hospital and the expense of having to feed the family up at the hospital while one child is in hospital means that they run out of money*

Budgeting

- *The first time a family asks for food there are very few questions; subsequently we take more of a look into budgeting.*
- *May tie into Work and Income but the delays cause a problem - it usually takes two weeks after budgeting to get an appointment. Usually try to get [people in need of assistance] to budgeting pretty quickly because they will have had to do that before going to Work and Income.*
- *If we do a budget and we see that there is not enough money to buy food and essentials, an urgent bill or other emergency situations then we will support that client with a food parcel. We assess each situation on a case by case basis. We will distribute a repeat food parcel to the same client if necessary.*

Housing costs

- *High rent: Housing New Zealand clients are better off, in general, than others.*
- *Private rental costs, lack of Housing New Zealand housing and then, even if people get Housing New Zealand housing, there are safety concerns in these areas.*
- *Clients are no longer getting TAS, so get AS, (only aware of two or three getting maximum) as Work and Income are stricter now in granting that. Rental is \$300.*

Lack of access to full and correct entitlements

- *Usually moving from one form of benefit to another – or having to apply for a house bond.*
- *Another real factor is that they have not enough money coming in, [when there is] an increase in family members: maybe children are joining the family and they are waiting to receive the unsupported child benefit and this is a long process.*

Food parcel providers

- There is unmet need for food in the community
- The data on the number of food parcels distributed was incomplete
- The degree to which data was kept was varied. Some providers were unwilling to share their data

Research discussion

Food poverty in Whangarei is a major problem particularly affecting children in low income families, who in te Tai Tokerau are disproportionately Maori

Each month :

- At least 1100 families are receiving Special Needs Grants for food from Work and Income
- 400 families receive food parcels, and

Each week

- over 1700 children are receiving food at school

- Participants had a variety of views on why families did not have sufficient food: low income was the most frequently mentioned. Ill health, high housing costs compared to family income, debt and unexpected expenditure are also contributors to food poverty
- Changes to social policy and criteria for assessments need to be monitored
- Impact of the policies on the children in low income families
- Rising food and commodity prices

Study has limitations

- We did not measure food poverty at an individual family level or describe the families' experiences
- Limited to food providers and schools
- Many food providers either did not keep data or were reluctant to share their data with us
- We acknowledge these limitations

Overall, the quantitative and qualitative findings in this study present a compelling picture of food poverty and its effects on children in Whangarei.

A significant proportion of children would be going hungry without the current level of food assistance.

Given the well-established evidence for the negative impacts of food poverty on children's learning, health and well-being, and the alarming number of children affected in Whangarei, this situation does not bode well for the future health and wellbeing of our community.

Our children only grow up once, and that is NOW.

It is outrageous that so many of the children in our town should be regularly hungry or face daily poor nutritional options due to poverty – a situation over which they have no choice or control.

This is preventable.

We urge that our children, our future, be made a top priority now by local and national leaders

- **Recommendations**
- **For government**
- Provide a free, quality breakfast to all children in decile 1 and 2 schools.
- Continue to support the Fruit in Schools programme and recognise the value of other programmes to hungry children.
- Implement a monitoring process to assess the impact on communities of the changes in social welfare policy/benefit levels.
- Fund community budgeting services for increases in client numbers caused by changes to the criteria for Special Needs Grants for food.