

Chapter 5

When Dollar Loaves Are All You Have: Experiences of Food Insecurity in Hamilton, New Zealand

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Anna lives in a two-bedroom unit with her young daughter and experiences constant anxiety about stretching her resources.¹ There isn't enough money from her welfare provisions to pay for housing, power and food. Consequently Anna purchases cheap dollar loaves of white bread from the local corner store to stave off her hunger pains. The absence of enough nutritious food means she is unable to produce enough breastmilk to feed her baby, creating a vicious cycle of hunger and sleep deprivation, culminating in an emotional breakdown at the local family support centre. Anna, along with an increasing number of New Zealanders, is experiencing ongoing food insecurity.

Winsome Parnell and Andrew Gray describe food insecurity as a situation where 'the availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, or the ability to acquire such foods in socially acceptable ways, is limited or uncertain'.² The prevalence of food insecurity in New Zealand households has increased in the past decade from 28 per cent of households to 41 per cent,³ and New Zealand-based research consistently finds that access to an adequate diet is a struggle for low-income families. Louise Signal and her colleagues, for example, identify that the cost of healthy, nutritious food, along with low incomes, are key contributors to food insecurity.⁴ Claire Smith, Winsome Parnell and Rachel Brown, in their comprehensive 2010 report on family food environments of New Zealand households, write, 'The factor with the most impact on food security for NZ families included in this survey was economic.'⁵

Sherry Carne and Alina Mancini, in their research with Whāngarei-based providers, note that 'the most frequently mentioned reason for families having insufficient food was low income'.⁶ Timothy Hopgood and his co-workers in their Auckland-based study on the affordability of nutritious food concluded that 'New Zealand should consider further strategies to make children's meals more affordable for low-income families.'⁷ More recently, Claire Smith and her colleagues found that for low-income households 'food expenditure is clearly an economic burden'.⁸ In summary, incomes and welfare provision have simply not kept pace with the increased costs of

keeping a family housed and fed. This everyday reality is often unacknowledged in conversations regarding food insecurity, particularly where those who are experiencing it are absent from the discussion.

In this chapter we draw on our combined research with 11 low-income families in Hamilton, New Zealand. The families were supported by a variety of income sources, including part-time, casual and full-time paid work, and/or benefits, but all had low food spending through necessity. Over the course of 12 months, research participants shared their stories, opened up their pantries, revealed their income and expenditure, took us along as they went to the supermarket, photographed their 'world of food', and sourced and prepared meals. These successive interactions across multiple locations provided rich detail regarding the everyday realities of living with food insecurity. By taking this ethnographically oriented case-based approach to researching food insecurity we offer depth of insight into the complexities, difficulties and perspectives of families living with poverty. Their experiences exemplify broader aspects of food insecurity that extend beyond their individual lifeworlds and highlight particular assumptions that hinder low-income families who are struggling to keep their households housed and fed.

We found significant shortfalls between the recommended expenditure to achieve a basic healthy diet and the reality of available resources. The Department of Human Nutrition at the University of Otago estimates that families (two adults and two school-aged children) currently living in Hamilton need to spend a minimum of NZ\$260 per week in order to purchase enough food to meet the nutritional requirements of all family members.⁹ In contrast, low-income families from our research had a weekly maximum of NZ\$120 for all household expenses after paying for rising housing and energy costs. Their experiences correlate with those described in Ministry of Health 2012 data, which indicates that 7.3 per cent of New Zealand households frequently have insufficient food.¹⁰ A further 33.7 per cent of households cannot reliably provide a nutritious diet for all their members, and/or food sometimes runs out before it can be replenished.

Our research highlighted the ways in which cutting back on food expenditure can be the only realistic option for meeting necessary living expenses such as school-related costs, medical prescriptions, transport or unexpected items. As Ginny puts it, 'everything comes out of the food budget'. Carys, who has two school-aged boys, can

only pay for compulsory school stationery items by reducing her already low fruit and vegetable spend. Sophie was faced with urgent dental treatment, necessitating debt that she must now pay off out of her food money each week. When the food money becomes squeezed through routine costs or unexpected events, there can be very little money left to feed the family. In response, purchases of non-food items are routinely delayed. As Anna notes, 'I can buy food but now I've got no toilet paper, gosh I haven't cleaned my teeth in a week! I know they're all luxuries but um yeah . . .' That toilet paper and toothpaste are considered luxuries indicates just how stretched many in Anna's situation have become.

Our research participants experience hunger along with the monotony of a diet predominantly made up of cheap, low-nutrient, carbohydrate-heavy foods such as instant noodles and dollar loaves of bread. The case of Anna, whom we opened with, encapsulates the trap for low-income citizens. There is simply not enough income to meet the recommended nutritional guidelines and so filling hungry stomachs becomes the focus, particularly in families with teenagers. Sophie expresses the tension — and her frustration — in juggling nutritional advice with keeping hunger pangs at bay: 'You can spend forty bucks just on vegetables and stuff . . . and there's just like a few, and if you bought forty bucks' worth of junk food you've got like nearly a whole trolley full, of crap.'

Many families on low incomes are, like Sophie, keenly aware of public health messages, and are doing their best to meet them. As Rebekah Graham and colleagues write, "There is an inherent contradiction between charity dictates that "beggars can't be choosers" and nutritional advice that beggars should make healthy choices.'¹¹

In contrast to commonly held stereotypes, New Zealand-based research finds that parents usually know how to budget, meet nutrition ideals, and 'stretch' meals. The Family 100 research project, referred to in the previous chapter, worked with Auckland families who access food banks. The researchers found that, 'Negative media stereotyping and misinformation leads many to assume that people living in poverty do so because they're poor at managing their money, and that they lack the skills needed to balance a weekly budget. The vast majority of Family 100 participants prove this to be largely false and typically demonstrate considerable talent in their ability to budget.'¹²

In terms of types of food purchased, Claire Smith and her colleagues noted that 'Ready-to-eat foods were a small component of overall food expenditure, which is

counter to the negative assumptions with respect to eating behaviours in low socioeconomic groups in NZ.¹³ Another research project across 136 households in Dunedin and Wellington found: ‘The low-income group did not differ from others in terms of behaviour such as budgeting, planning and eating meals as a family.’¹⁴

Our participants also show a great deal of working knowledge in stretching food and shopping for bargains. Raewyn mentions ‘bulking up the meals with veggies and stuff, pasta’. Juley purchases cheap popcorn as ‘it can last two days, that’s spread out between [the children] and then for afterschool snacks as well’. Leah talks of how she ‘can get four meals out of a couple of bags of pasta with cheese and a couple of cans of tomatoes’. We commonly saw our participants bulking out dishes with beans, oats or frozen vegetables.

Nevertheless, on constrained incomes even these strategies are sometimes not enough. In response, Juley will cook dinner for her children while going without herself. Carys purchases apples for the children’s school lunches while she and her partner subsist on toast or coffee throughout the day. In a difficult week, Leah will ‘just have noodles’. Such responses are not uncommon. As documented by Presbyterian Support Otago,¹⁵ and the Family 100 research project, low-income parents routinely go hungry, eat only a piece of toast for tea, water down milk, or subsist on porridge, compromising their own nutritional needs in order to feed their children. Kellie McNeill, in her Hamilton-based PhD research,¹⁶ details even more drastic tactics, with one of her participants saying, ‘I have sleeping pills because they help me . . . Sometimes I’ve taken extra and just gone to bed for the weekend to sleep the weekend off because there’s no food.’

The lack of enough food to feed the family is a source of emotional stress, worry and shame. Of all the insecurities associated with poverty, it is the absence of enough food that causes parents the most distress and anxiety. There is a particularly strong sense of stigma and shame at not being able to provide the quality and quantity of foods needed for their children. Anna articulates this when explaining her attempt to hide the severity of her situation: ‘I was hiding it from everyone, you know, it’s embarrassing.’ The absence of enough food to eat makes the impoverishment of families more obvious to outsiders. In order to avoid judgement and humiliation, parents go to great lengths to obscure the absence of sufficient food, which can contribute to social isolation.

Children also feel shame when they cannot participate in what are considered 'normal' childhood experiences. Janine recalls a childhood of not being able to have friends visit because there was no food in the house: 'We didn't even have like oranges . . . I was like, really ashamed. And yeah, I started hiding, like trying to hide the poverty.' The psychological harms from insufficient food have an impact on every family member.

Responses by the food-secure when hearing of experiences of food insecurity are typically steeped in assumptions of the laziness, ineptitude and ignorance of low-income families. Nowhere are these assumptions more evident than in the suggestion that home gardening is the solution to food insecurity. There is a nostalgic appeal to this call for backyard gardens, embedded in notions of the 'Kiwi can-do' attitude and unquestioned beliefs about the hardy previous generation. Asking 'Why don't people simply grow their own food?' assumes that those living with poverty have the time, resources, knowledge, support, space, physical ability and good health to prepare and maintain a garden. Like many people living with hunger, Anna has found that gardening is not the panacea:

I don't have a veggie garden and people are just like, grow food, and I'm like yeah but then you've got to get the plants and then you've got to wait for the food. I need food now. Like that's a long-term solution . . . Even getting seeds, you know, how long does it take for that seed to grow? You can't wait for that seed when you need [food] today.

Anna's meagre budget offers no room for spending extra dollars on the uncertain promise of a future crop. While families struggling to afford food often employ ingenuity to grow a few vegetables at low cost, the restrictions of rental properties, frequent house moves, time, health and equipment mean crops are few and far between. Home-grown produce from urban sections merely supplements families' repetitive diets but can rarely provide the quantities necessary to keep people healthy. When you consider the shortfall in people's food budgets between what they need for a nutritional diet and what is available to spend, it is easy to see that a backyard garden is not enough to ameliorate hunger.

Along with the idealised myth of the plentiful backyard garden is the assumption that the New Zealand welfare sector will provide an adequate safety net for those in need. Such assumptions coalesce in public statements such as, 'Just pop into your local Work and Income office, they'll help you out.' In reality, assistance has become ever

more complex and difficult to access. In their paper 'Urban Poverty, Structural Violence and Welfare Provision of 100 Families in Auckland', Darrin Hodgetts and his colleagues outline in detail the demeaning, humiliating and psychologically abusive process of accessing welfare and food grants through Work and Income (WINZ).¹⁷ In this way, New Zealand is following the lead of the UK in steadily eroding our once strong safety net.

Both Guy Standing¹⁸ and Loïc Wacquant¹⁹ note in their respective works that accessing emergency food assistance has become increasingly conditional and punitive in order to restrict people's access to resources. As Ginny told us, 'they [WINZ] declined me when I was in real need [of food]'. Our research participants describe interactions that left them exhausted and embarrassed when attempting to access emergency food funding. Eventually, Anna simply couldn't take the abuse any more: 'I just gave up in the end going to them, especially after that last lady the way she was, I was just like, I don't want to do this, I'd rather go without than be made to feel that horrible.'

Charities and emergency food sources (such as food banks and community meals) are also typically touted as a solution to food insecurity. In reality, such services are being placed under cumulative strain as the need for them increases. Public calls for additional assistance have become commonplace, such as the Hamilton Combined Christian Foodbank's recent plea: 'The food need is greater. In the past we'd provide food help for eight to nine individuals or families a day, now a low day is 20, we've had up to 30.'²⁰ In addition, such services are precarious and vulnerable to closure. Heavily reliant on the capability and generosity of individual volunteers, the current emphasis on paid work means volunteer initiatives and charity drives can be difficult to sustain amid increasing financial pressure. During our research, one of the charities that provided weekly free community meals folded as the primary organiser became too unwell to continue her service and, without her advocacy, the meal service was unable to continue.

Being forced to access charity in order to adequately feed themselves and their children undermines people's psychological wellbeing. Hodgetts et al. observe that, 'Having to beg for food and charity is a demeaning experience . . . Dignity is undermined by participants having to beg for necessities and in being positioned as objects of scorn in these interactions.'²¹ Leah alludes to this when she says, 'Sometimes I go to the free meals in town, it's very embarrassing for me.' Furthermore, the provision of emergency food by charities enables the state to evade its responsibility to ensure that every citizen

has adequate access to food. While mobilising compassion through charities is currently crucial to feed hungry citizens who can no longer rely on the welfare state to avert hardship, charity is no substitute for a more equitable distribution of resources.

Where low-income households receive an increase in income, this is overwhelmingly spent on more and better quality foods. The myth that children will not benefit from increased income to our poorest households should be challenged. An English study carried out in 2005 suggests that when low-income families receive increased amounts the extra money is mostly spent on items for the children.²² In Australia, Julie Brimblecombe and her colleagues found that increases in income went towards buying food and, where possible, better quality food.²³ Research with food-insecure households in Dunedin concluded that providing additional funds to food-insecure people resulted in an increase in expenditure on fruit, vegetables and better quality meat.²⁴ Our research supports these earlier studies, with our participants also spending increases in income on nutritious foods for their children, especially fruit.

Our research findings support the notion that food insecurity is the product of inequities and injustices baked into societal structures, creating traps for low-income families. As Ted Schrecker and Clare Brambra note in their book *Neoliberal Epidemics: How Politics Makes Us Sick*,²⁵ the idea that such individuals are primarily in need of education regarding their 'lifestyles' reflects a neoliberal world view, which favours a focus on individuals through market-based solutions. A focus on the responsibility of low-income citizens to seek out ad hoc and complicated ways to feed themselves fails to engage with the underlying causes of their austerity.

We argue that being able to access food in socially acceptable ways is a universal human right, one inextricably linked with health. Long-term solutions to food insecurity require progressive social and economic policies that promote equity and improve our social safety net. People and families need to be supported with sufficient income to feed and house themselves. Already proposed economic solutions, such as the Living Wage campaign, which crusades for wages that will meet the basic cost of living, abound. The Universal Basic Income is another well-established concept, and is well argued by Mike Goldsmith and Kellie McNeill who write that, while hunger is often recognised in poorer countries, it is trivialised and hidden in New Zealand, which is perceived as being a land of plenty.²⁶ Guy Standing addresses the long-term social implications of insecure, precarious work in *A Precariat Charter*, outlining why people

need meaningful, consistent forms of employment or income support for caring roles.²⁷ Similarly, Thomas Piketty in *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* makes a comprehensive and compelling economic case for more equitable wealth distribution.²⁸

Implementing any one of these already well-researched solutions would relieve the economic burden faced by those on low incomes. However, so far, the New Zealand government has abdicated its responsibility to ensure that all citizens have food security, instead forcing people to rely on emergency food systems to survive. It is only when we all support the radical notion that every citizen deserves to be fed that we can begin to implement effective, long-term solutions to hunger and food insecurity.

Notes

- ⁱ Pseudonyms are used to refer to all the participants in this research. In writing this chapter we have deliberately foregrounded the experiences of participating families and skimmed over the details of our research. For more information please contact the authors directly.
- ⁱ Winsome R. Parnell and Andrew R. Gray, 'Development of a Food Security Measurement Tool for New Zealand Households', *British Journal of Nutrition* 112 (2014): 1393–401.
- ⁱ University of Otago and Ministry of Health, 'A Focus on Nutrition: Key Findings of the 2008/09 New Zealand Adult Nutrition Survey' (Wellington: Ministry of Health, 2012).
- ⁱ Louise N. Signal, Mat D. Walton, Cliona Ni Mhurchu, Ralph Maddison, Sharron G. Bowers, Kristie N. Carter, Delvina Gorton, Craig Heta, Tolotea S. Lanumata, Christina W. McKerchar, Des O'Dea and Jamie Pearce, 'Tackling "Wicked" Health Promotion Problems: A New Zealand Case Study', *Health Promotion International*, 28 (2013): 84.
- ⁱ Claire Smith, Winsome R. Parnell and Rachel Brown, 'Family Food Environment: Barriers to Acquiring Affordable and Nutritious Food in New Zealand Households' (Wellington: Families Commission, 2010).
- ⁱ Sherry Carne and Alina Mancini, 'Empty Food Baskets: Food Poverty in Whangarei' (Whangarei: Child Poverty Action Group, 2012).
- ⁱ T. Hopgood, I. Asher, C. R. Wall, C. C. Grant, J. Stewart, S. Muimuiheata and D. Exeter, 'Crunching the Numbers: The Affordability of Nutritious Food for New Zealand Children', *Nutrition & Dietetics* 67 (2010): 251–57.
- ⁱ Claire Smith, Winsome R. Parnell, Rachel Clare Brown and Andrew R. Gray, 'Balancing the Diet and the Budget: Food Purchasing Practices of Food-Insecure Families in New Zealand', *Nutrition & Dietetics* 70 (2013): 278–85.
- ⁱ Department of Human Nutrition, 'Information Package for Users of the New Zealand Estimated Food Costs 2015', in *Food Cost Survey 2015*, edited by L. A. Mainvil, Claire Smith and Winsome R. Parnell (Dunedin: University of Otago, 2015).
- ⁱ University of Otago and Ministry of Health, 'A Focus on Nutrition'.
- ⁱ Rebekah Graham, Ottilie Stolte, Darrin Hodgetts and Kerry Chamberlain, 'Nutritionism and the Construction of "Poor Choices" in Families Facing Food Insecurity', *Journal of Health Psychology*, online (Sept 28, 2016).
- ⁱ Emily Garden, Angela Caldin, Diane Robertson, Julie Timmins, Tom Wilson and Tim Wood, 'Family 100 Research Project: Speaking for Ourselves' (Auckland: Auckland City Mission, 2014).
- ⁱ Smith, Parnell, Brown and Gray, 'Balancing the Diet and the Budget'.
- ⁱ Smith, Parnell and Brown, 'Family Food Environment'.
- ⁱ Carne and Mancini, 'Empty Food Baskets'.
- ⁱ Kellie McNeill, 'Talking with Their Mouths Half-Full: Food Insecurity in the Hamilton Community' (Doctoral thesis, University of Waikato, 2011).
- ⁱ Darrin Hodgetts, Kerry Chamberlain, Shiloh Groot and Yarden Tankel, 'Urban Poverty, Structural Violence and Welfare Provision for 100 Families in Auckland', *Urban Studies* 51, no.10 (2014): 2036–51.
- ⁱ Guy Standing, 'Understanding the Precariat through Labour and Work', *Development and Change* 45 (2015): 963–80.
- ⁱ Loïc Wacquant, *Urban Outcasts* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2008).
- ⁱ Geoff Lewis, 'Early 2017 Throws New Curve to Bank', *Hamilton Press*, 8 March 2017.

- ⁱ Hodgetts, Chamberlain, Groot and Tankel, 'Urban Poverty'.
- ⁱ Paul Gregg, Jane Waldfogel and Elizabeth Washbrook, 'Expenditure Patterns Post-Welfare Reform in the UK: Are Low-Income Families Starting to Catch-Up?' (London: Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, 2005).
- ⁱ Julie K. Brimblecombe, Joseph McDonnell, Adam Barnes, Joanne Garnggulkpuy Dhurrkay, David P. Thomas and Ross S. Bailie, 'Impact of Income Management on Store Sales in the Northern Territory', *Medical Journal of Australia* 192 (2010): 549–54.
- ⁱ Claire Smith, Winsome R. Parnell, Rachel Clare Brown and Andrew R. Gray, 'Providing Additional Money to Food-Insecure Households and Its Effect on Food Expenditure: A Randomized Controlled Trial', *Public Health Nutrition* 16 (2013): 1507–15.
- ⁱ Ted Schrecker and Clare Bambra, *Neoliberal Epidemics: How Politics Makes Us Sick* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015).
- ⁱ Mike Goldsmith and Kellie McNeill, 'The Case for Universal Basic Income in New Zealand & Worldwide', *Pacific Ecologist* (2012): 27.
- ⁱ Guy Standing, *A precariat charter: From denizens to citizens*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014.
- ⁱ Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2014).

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⁹ Department of Human Nutrition, 'Information Package for Users of the New Zealand Estimated Food Costs 2015', in *Food Cost Survey 2015*, edited by L. A. Mainvil, Claire Smith and Winsome R. Parnell (Dunedin: University of Otago, 2015).

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¹¹ Rebekah Graham, Otilie Stolte, Darrin Hodgetts and Kerry Chamberlain, 'Nutritionism and the Construction of "Poor Choices" in Families Facing Food Insecurity', *Journal of Health Psychology*, online (Sept 28, 2016).

¹² Emily Garden, Angela Caldin, Diane Robertson, Julie Timmins, Tom Wilson and Tim Wood, 'Family 100 Research Project: Speaking for Ourselves' (Auckland: Auckland City Mission, 2014).

¹³ Smith, Parnell, Brown and Gray, 'Balancing the Diet and the Budget'.

¹⁴ Smith, Parnell and Brown, 'Family Food Environment'.

¹⁵ Carne and Mancini, 'Empty Food Baskets'.

¹⁶ Kellie McNeill, 'Talking with Their Mouths Half-Full: Food Insecurity in the Hamilton Community' (Doctoral thesis, University of Waikato, 2011).

¹⁷ Darrin Hodgetts, Kerry Chamberlain, Shiloh Groot and Yardena Tankel, 'Urban Poverty, Structural Violence and Welfare Provision for 100 Families in Auckland', *Urban Studies* 51, no.10 (2014): 2036–51.

¹⁸ Guy Standing, 'Understanding the Precariat through Labour and Work', *Development and Change* 45 (2015): 963–80.

¹⁹ Loïc Wacquant, *Urban Outcasts* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2008).

²⁰ Geoff Lewis, 'Early 2017 Throws New Curve to Bank', *Hamilton Press*, 8 March 2017.

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²² Paul Gregg, Jane Waldfogel and Elizabeth Washbrook, 'Expenditure Patterns Post-Welfare Reform in the UK: Are Low-Income Families Starting to Catch-Up?' (London: Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, 2005).

²³ Julie K. Brimblecombe, Joseph McDonnell, Adam Barnes, Joanne Garnggulkpuy Dhurrkay, David P. Thomas and Ross S. Bailie, 'Impact of Income Management on Store Sales in the Northern Territory', *Medical Journal of Australia* 192 (2010): 549–54.

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²⁵ Ted Schrecker and Clare Bamba, *Neoliberal Epidemics: How Politics Makes Us Sick* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015).

²⁶ Mike Goldsmith and Kellie McNeill, 'The Case for Universal Basic Income in New Zealand & Worldwide', *Pacific Ecologist* (2012): 27.

²⁷ Guy Standing, *A precariat charter: From denizens to citizens*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014.

²⁸ Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2014).