



Growing Up in New Zealand

Now We Are Twelve

Life in early adolescence

Snapshot 3 of 9
April 2023

Food insecurity

Indicators of food insecurity and access to food assistance in the Growing Up in New Zealand cohort

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Key findings on food insecurity from the 12-year interviews

- Most 12-year-olds lived in food secure households (83%), but 15% lived in moderately food insecure households, and 2% experienced severe food insecurity.
- Food insecurity was strongly associated with ethnicity and socioeconomic position. Pacific young people, rangatahi Māori, and young people that lived in neighbourhoods with high deprivation were most likely to be food insecure at 12 years.
- All indicators of food insecurity had decreased over the past four years, from 8- to 12-years of age, except the use of special food grants and food banks, which increased. Some families moved from being food secure to insecure and vice versa.
- Children experiencing food insecurity at 8-years of age in households that received government financial assistance (main benefits of Working For Families tax credits) were twice as likely to be food secure at 12-years, compared to those that did not receive assistance.
- One in four 12-year-olds were receiving food from a school-based programme most or every school day, with 20% receiving Ka Ora, Ka Ako the Government's healthy school lunch programme.
- Some children who needed a free, healthy school lunch did not receive one. Half of the young people living in moderately food insecure households, and a third of those living in severely food insecure households, did not receive Ka Ora, Ka Ako in the past year.



Is there anything you are worried about in the next few years?

That I won't have enough money to live happily with the price of everything going up.

What's the best thing about being you?

I get to catch and eat my own food

Introduction

What do we know about food insecurity?

A person is considered “food secure” when they have the 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 (as defined by the United Nations Committee on World Food Security). Food insecurity is defined in New Zealand as a limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, or limited ability to acquire personally acceptable foods that meet cultural needs in a socially acceptable way (1, 2). Food insecurity is related to low disposable household income and material deprivation and is currently used as a child poverty related indicator to monitor progress due to the Child Poverty Reduction Act (3). There is a decreasing trend since 2012/13 in the proportion of children living in households where food runs out often or sometimes (3).

Children living in households with moderate to severe food insecurity are less likely to receive the nutrition they need for healthy development (4). Compared to children in food secure households, children with food insecurity have lower fruit and vegetable intake, are less likely to eat breakfast at home before school and have more fast food and more fizzy drinks because these are cheap, filling alternatives (2). Research indicates that reducing food insecurity for children and young people through a school lunch programme improves diet quality and academic achievement (5).

Government support to mitigate food insecurity

There are currently three school food programmes that receive Government funding (KickStart Breakfast, Ka Ora, Ka Ako healthy school lunches, Fruit in Schools) and many charitable community or corporate initiatives that also provide food through schools and kura. Fruit in Schools is available to low decile (high equity index) primary and intermediate schools, giving a piece of fruit or vegetable to each child on school days. It is largely a nutrition education programme, but principals in the evaluation reported that the programme’s main benefit was providing food for hungry children (6). In 2019, the Government introduced a healthy school lunches pilot in three regions of New Zealand.

The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated existing food insecurity in New Zealand and demand for food banks and food grants rapidly increased (7,8). In 2020, the Ministry of Social Development created a Food Secure Communities team to support the increasing demand on community food providers who distribute food to whānau experiencing food insecurity. This programme was then pivoted to provide food welfare support to people self-isolating with Covid-19. The Covid-19 Response and Recovery Fund was used for a major expansion of the school lunch programme, renamed Ka Ora, Ka Ako Healthy school lunch programme. Ka Ora, Ka Ako can be understood as “to be healthy and well in order to be in a good place to learn”. This has resulted in approximately 25% of Year 1–13 students across New Zealand receiving a free school lunch (9).



What can *Growing Up in New Zealand* add?

This report examines the proportions of young people in the *Growing Up in New Zealand* cohort that lived in households experiencing food insecurity. We focused on change in household food security status between 8- and 12-years of age, and receipt of government support for families with food insecurity, including school food programmes.

Household food security status was measured using an 8-item questionnaire (10) and was calculated with the same method and cut-points as used in the New Zealand Health Survey. This allows for comparisons between the *Growing Up in New Zealand* cohort and the age-specific nationally representative data in the New Zealand Health Survey (11). The method for creating the food insecurity index to classify households as food secure, moderately food insecure or severely food insecure is detailed in the [Supplementary material](#).

Mothers were asked how often the following statements had been true for their household in the past year (with response categories of Never, Sometimes or Often):

- We can afford to eat properly.
- Food runs out in our household due to lack of money.
- We eat less because of lack of money.
- The variety of foods we are able to eat is limited by lack of money.
- We rely on others to provide food and/or money for food, for my/our household when we don't have enough money.
- We make use of special food grants or food banks when I/we do not have enough money for food.
- I feel stressed not having enough money for food.
- I feel stressed because I can't provide the food I want for social occasions.

Mothers were also asked the frequency that their 12-year-olds received food at school from various charitable and government-funded food programmes, and their household's receipt of WINZ special needs food grants, main benefits and tax credits. Child ethnicity and neighbourhood deprivation (NZDep2018) have been described elsewhere in the [Now We Are 12 reports](#).



Household food insecurity at 12-years of age

Four out of every five ($n = 3602$, 83.1%) young people at 12-years of age lived in households that were food secure; 14.9% ($n = 646$) lived in moderately food insecure households and the remaining 2.0% ($n = 86$) lived in households that were severely food insecure.

There were marked inequities in the experience of food insecurity by ethnicity (Figure 1). More than one-third ($n = 252$, 36.0%) of Pacific young people lived in moderately food insecure households and a further 5.4% ($n = 38$) lived in households that were severely food insecure, leaving 58.6% ($n = 410$) in food secure households. A high proportion of rangatahi Māori also lived in moderately ($n = 238$, 24.9%) or severely ($n = 36$, 3.8%) food insecure households at 12 years of age. This means that the large majority of young people experiencing food insecurity are Māori or Pacific ($n = 564$, 77.0%).

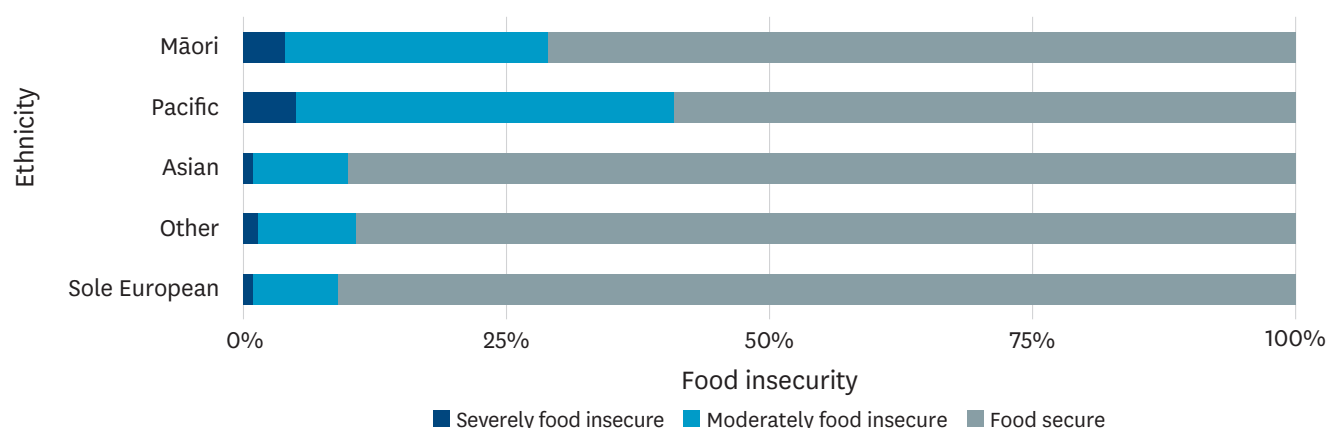


Figure 1: Household food insecurity at 12 years of age, by ethnicity

Socioeconomic inequities in the experience of food security at 12-years of age were also strongly evident (Figure 2). Three out of every five young people who lived in the poorest 20% of neighbourhoods (NZDep2018 quintile 5) were food secure, compared to 95% of young people living in the least deprived 20% of neighbourhoods. Thirty-five percent ($n = 259$) of young people living in the most deprived communities experienced moderate food insecurity and 5.8% ($n = 43$) were severely food insecure. However, even in neighbourhoods with low levels of deprivation (NZDep2018 quintile 1 and 2), some young people were experiencing food insecurity (Figure 2).

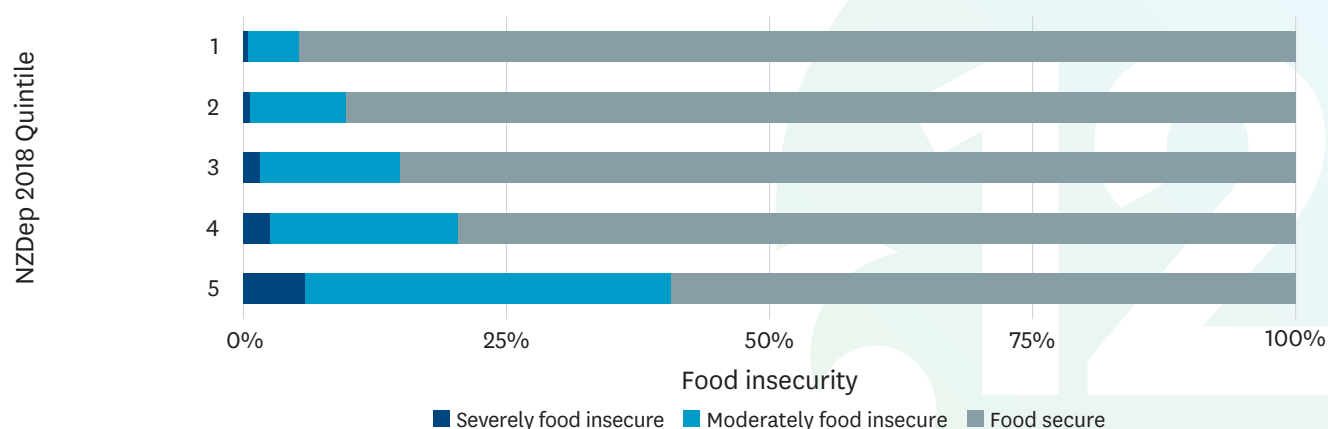


Figure 2: Household food insecurity at 12-years of age, by neighbourhood deprivation (NZDep2018 quintiles, 1 = Low deprivation, 5 = High deprivation)

Changes in household food security status since 8-years of age

The proportion of young people in the *Growing Up in New Zealand* cohort living in food secure households at 8-years and 12-years of age was similar (84.5% at 8-years of age and 83.1% at 12-years of age), with no statistically significant difference between proportions in each household food security status category at the two time points ($p = 0.082$, Table in [Supplementary material](#)).

However, there was a change in food security status for some young people, that is, household-level movement in or out of food security between these time points, and some missing data at each time point (Figure 3). One-third of young people ($n = 227$) who were food insecure at 8-years of age were food secure at 12-years, and a similar number ($n = 232$) of young people who were food secure at 8 years of age had become food insecure by 12-years of age.

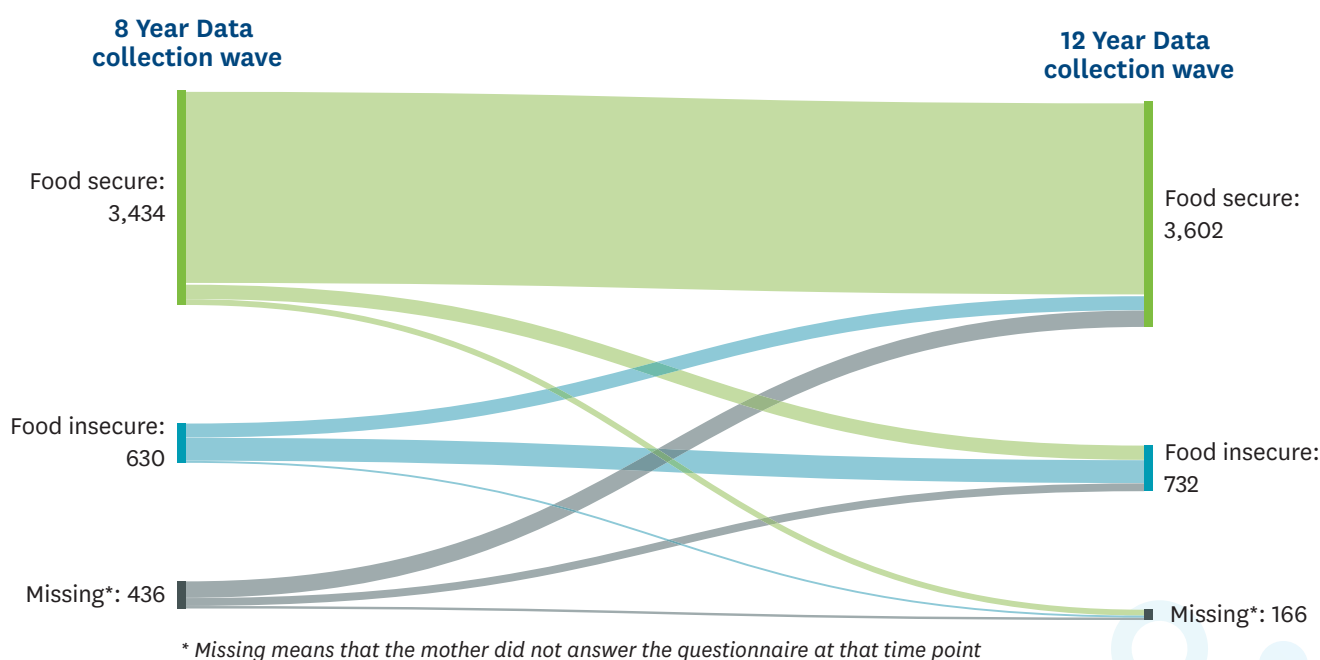


Figure 3: Change in household food security status between 8 and 12 years of age

A higher proportion of Pacific (27.2%) and Māori (16.9%) young people were persistently food insecure from 8 years to 12 years of age, compared to young people who identified only as European (Table 1). Pacific (11.1%) and Māori (10.3%) young people were also more likely to become food insecure at 12 years when they had been food secure at 8-years, compared to young people identifying only as European for whom this rarely occurred (Table 1).

Table 1: Change in household food security status between 8 and 12 years of age, by ethnicity

Ethnicity <i>n</i> (row%)	No change from FI at 8Y and 12Y	Moved from FS at 8Y to FI at 12Y	No change from FS at 8Y and 12Y	Moved from FI at 8Y to FS at 12Y
Māori (<i>n</i> = 852)	144 (16.9)	88 (10.3)	547 (64.2)	73 (8.6)
Pacific (<i>n</i> = 559)	152 (27.2)	62 (11.1)	284 (50.1)	61 (10.9)
Asian (<i>n</i> = 504)	20 (4.0)	23 (4.6)	445 (88.3)	16 (3.2)
Sole European (<i>n</i> = 2112)	103 (4.9)	78 (3.7)	1851 (87.6)	80 (3.8)

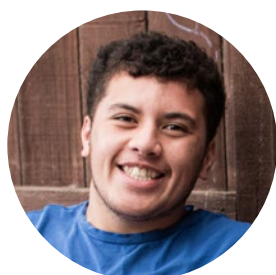
Note: FS = food secure, FI = food insecure (moderately and severely combined). This table only includes data from families that participated at both the 8Y and 12Y DCW (excludes those with missing data) for clarity. MELAA and Other groups not shown due to small numbers.

A higher proportion of children living in areas of high deprivation (NZDep2018 quintile 5) (25.7%) were persistently food insecure from 8 years to 12 years of age, compared to those living in less deprived neighbourhoods (quintiles 1 to 4) (Table 2). Similar proportions of young people within each quintile moved in and out of food insecurity between ages 8 and 12 years, although young people living in the most deprived neighbourhoods were the most likely to move from a food secure household at 8 years to being food insecure at 12 years (Table 2).

Table 2: Change in household food security status between 8 and 12 years of age, by neighbourhood deprivation

Neighbourhood deprivation n (row%)	No change from FI at 8Y and 12Y	Moved from FS at 8Y to FI at 12Y	No change from FS at 8Y and 12Y	Moved from FI at 8Y to FS at 12Y
Quintile 1 Low (n = 970)	31 (3.2)	19 (2.0)	900 (92.8)	20 (2.1)
Quintile 2 (n = 899)	43 (4.8)	42 (4.7)	770 (85.7)	44 (4.9)
Quintile 3 (n = 774)	62 (8.0)	51 (6.6)	615 (79.5)	46 (5.9)
Quintile 4 (n = 621)	72 (11.6)	42 (6.8)	457 (73.6)	50 (8.1)
Quintile 5 High (n = 607)	156 (25.7)	74 (12.2)	311 (51.2)	66 (10.9)

Note: FS = food secure, FI = food insecure (moderately and severely combined). This table only includes data from families that participated at both the 8Y and 12Y DCW (excludes those with missing data) for clarity.



Different indicators of food insecurity

The most common indicator of food insecurity experienced by young people at both 8 and 12 years of age was a limited variety of food in the house because of a lack of money (Table 3). Mothers also commonly reported feeling stressed about not having enough food and feeling stressed because they could not provide food for special occasions. The next most common indicators of food insecurity were the family eating less and food running out in the household because of a lack of money. Less commonly, mothers reported using special food grants or food banks and having to rely on others to provide food or money for food (Table 3). All indicators of food insecurity have decreased among the *Growing Up in New Zealand* families in the past four years, except for an increase in the proportion using special food grants or food banks (Table 3). The relative order of prevalence for these indicators was the same by ethnicity (data not shown).

Table 3: Mother-reported indicators of food insecurity at 8 and 12 years of age, ordered by prevalence of sometimes and often responses.

Indicator of food insecurity experienced in past 12 months n (%)	8 years			12 years			Trend in Sometimes/ Often
	Never	Sometimes	Often	Never	Sometimes	Often	
The variety of foods we are able to eat is limited by lack of money	2806 (69.3)	1068 (26.4)	173 (4.3)	3091 (71.7)	1026 (23.8)	193 (4.5)	↓
I feel stressed not having enough money for food	3124 (77.2)	735 (18.2)	188 (4.6)	3335 (77.3)	795 (18.4)	182 (4.2)	↓
I feel stressed because I can't provide the food I want for social occasions	3156 (78.3)	769 (19.1)	106 (2.6)	3366 (78.5)	814 (19.0)	108 (2.5)	↓
We eat less because of lack of money	3434 (84.8)	555 (13.7)	59 (1.5)	3709 (86.0)	544 (12.6)	58 (1.4)	↓
Food runs out in our household due to a lack of money	3439 (85.0)	510 (12.6)	96 (2.4)	3751 (87.0)	478 (11.1)	81 (1.9)	↓
We make use of special food grants or food banks	3785 (93.6)	217 (5.4)	40 (1.0)	3876 (90.1)	370 (8.6)	58 (1.4)	↑
We rely on others to provide food and/or money for food	3712 (91.7)	278 (6.9)	56 (1.4)	3941 (91.6)	313 (7.3)	48 (1.1)	↓

Footnotes: N = 4045 at 8Y and N = 4310 at 12Y.

Please see the [Supplementary material](#) for a comparison of the responses to three food insecurity indicators that were included in the *Growing Up in New Zealand* 12-year DCW and the New Zealand Health Survey during the same time period.

Government financial assistance to help mitigate food insecurity

Young people that lived in households receiving government financial assistance (main benefits or Working For Families tax credits) were more likely to be persistently food insecure or to move into food insecurity from the ages of 8 to 12 years compared to other young people (Table 4); with over half of main benefit recipients characterised as food insecure at both time points. A relatively high proportion of young people whose household received a main benefit (17.5%) went from being food secure at 8-years to being food insecure by 12 years (Table 4). However, the proportion of young people in households that changed from food insecure at 8-years of age to food secure at 12-years was around double if their family received any form of government financial assistance, compared with food insecure households that did not receive government assistance (final column, Table 4).

Table 4: Change in household food security status between 8 and 12 years of age, by receipt of government assistance

Receipt of government assistance in past 12 months, n (row %)		No change from FI at 8Y and 12Y	Moved from FS at 8Y to FI at 12Y	No change from FS at 8Y and 12Y	Moved from FI at 8Y to FS at 12Y
Main benefit*	Yes (n = 361)	147 (40.7)	63 (17.5)	114 (31.6)	37 (10.3)
	No (n = 3542)	215 (6.1)	165 (4.7)	2973 (83.9)	189 (5.3)
Working for Families tax credit	Yes (n = 744)	168 (22.6)	101 (13.6)	401 (53.9)	74 (10.0)
	No (n = 3134)	191 (6.1)	125 (4.0)	2673 (85.3)	145 (4.6)
WINZ Special needs food grant	Yes (n = 209)	119 (56.9)	47 (22.5)	25 (12.0)	18 (8.6)
	No (n = 3684)	244 (6.6)	179 (4.9)	3054 (82.9)	207 (5.6)
Ka Ora, Ka Ako school lunch#	Yes (n = 849)	177 (20.9)	80 (9.4)	506 (59.6)	86 (10.1)
	No (n = 2924)	158 (5.4)	132 (4.5)	2509 (85.8)	125 (4.3)

Footnotes: *Main benefit = Jobseeker Support, Sole Parent Support or Supported Living Payments in the past 12 months, *Yes = Irregular users of Ka Ora Ka Ako (n = 100) have been combined with those receiving Ka Ora Ka Ako most or every school day (n = 749).

One in 15 (n = 290, 6.8%) young people's mothers reported that they needed a Work and Income New Zealand (WINZ) special needs food grant in the past year; almost all of whom lived in households with moderate to severe food insecurity (only n = 53, 2.1% lived in food secure households). Of those needing a WINZ food grant, 86.9% (n = 252) reported that they received one in the past 12 months. The main reasons given by mothers who did not receive a food grant when they needed it were: "We weren't eligible" (n = 55), "Covid-19/Lockdown" (n = 23) and "The amount was not enough [or similar]" (n = 15).



School food programmes to help mitigate food insecurity for children

One in four ($n = 1090$, 26.0%) 12-year-olds received food at school most or every day in the past year, and a further 5.8% ($n = 244$) irregularly received food at school (Table 5). Ka Ora, Ka Ako, the Government's Healthy School Lunches Programme, was the largest provider of food to young people in schools, with one in five ($n = 868$, 21.1%) 12-year-olds receiving lunch every day through the programme. Fruit in Schools was the second largest programme, despite some 12-year olds in *Growing Up in New Zealand* not being eligible to receive the programme as they attend intermediate schools rather than primary schools.

Table 5: Mother-reported frequency of use of school food programmes in the past 12 months at 12 years of age

School food programme <i>n</i> (row %)	Never	Irregularly (once a term/ month/week)	Most or every school day
Breakfast programme ($n = 4054$)	3738 (92.2)	155 (3.8)	161 (4.0)
Fruit in Schools ($n = 3968$)	3243 (81.7)	129 (3.3)	596 (15.0)
Milk in Schools ($n = 3872$)	3392 (87.6)	143 (3.7)	337 (8.7)
Ka Ora, Ka Ako (Government School Lunch Programme) ($n = 4122$)	3141 (76.2)	113 (2.7)	868 (21.1)
Other charitable food programme ($n = 3952$)	3757 (95.1)	62 (1.6)	133 (3.4)
Any school food programme ($n = 4188$)	2854 (68.2)	244 (5.8)	1090 (26.0)

Most school food programmes are only available in low advantage (low decile) schools, but young people experiencing food insecurity at 12-years of age did not only attend low advantage schools (Figure 4).

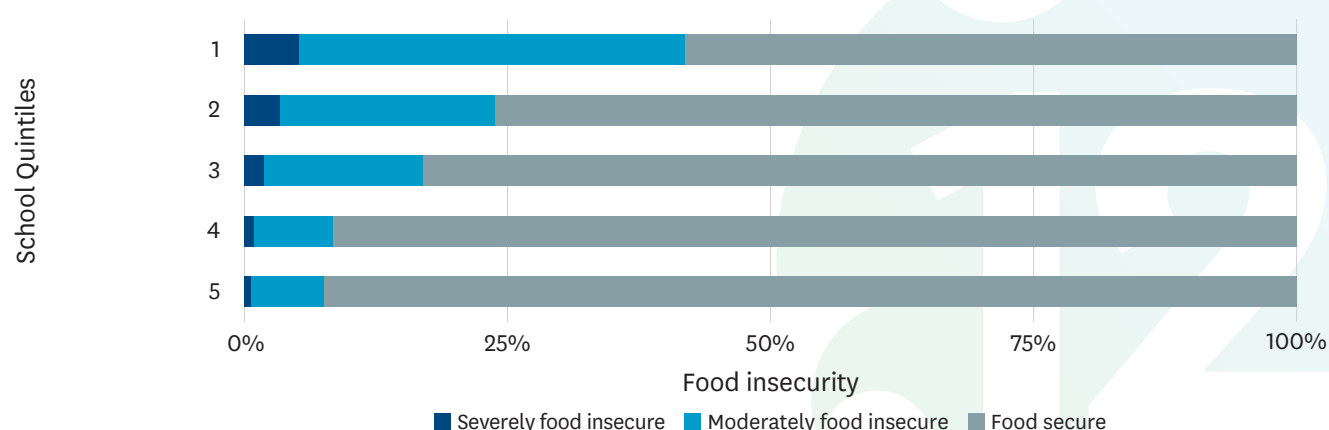


Figure 4: Household food insecurity at 12-years of age, by school decile (grouped as quintiles, 1=Low advantage/school decile 1 and 2, 5=High advantage/school decile 9 and 10)

Focusing only on the government school lunch programme (Ka Ora, Ka Ako), those living in moderately (43.4%) and severely (58.1%) food insecure households were more likely to have received Ka Ora, Ka Ako most or every day, compared to those young people living in food secure households (16.5%) (Table 6). However, more than two in every five young people living in severely food insecure households had never received Ka Ora, Ka Ako lunches, and over half of young people living in moderately food insecure households had never received the healthy school lunches (Table 6).

Table 6: Frequency of receiving Ka Ora, Ka Ako school lunches in past 12 months, by household food security status, at 12-years of age

Household food security status at 12-years <i>n</i> (row %)	Received Ka Ora, Ka Ako school lunches in past 12 months		
	Never	Irregularly	Most or every school day
Food secure (<i>n</i> = 3465)	2807 (81.0)	85 (2.5)	573 (16.5)
Moderately food insecure (<i>n</i> = 581)	303 (52.2)	26 (4.5)	252 (43.4)
Severely food insecure (<i>n</i> = 74)	29 (39.2)	<10	43 (58.1)
Total (<i>n</i> = 4120)	3139 (76.2)	113 (2.7)	868 (21.1)

The young people who lived in food insecure households but did not receive Ka Ora, Ka Ako (*n* = 352) were more likely to be from schools in the more advantaged deciles: deciles 9-10 (*n* = 80, 94%), deciles 7-8 (*n* = 81, 98.8%) and deciles 5-6 (*n* = 88, 72.1%), compared with decile 3-4 (*n* = 49, 36.9%) and decile 1-2 (*n* = 17, 8.3%).

We also examined whether young people who went without lunch at school at 8-years of age were more likely to receive Ka Ora, Ka Ako at 12-years, to see if the introduction of a healthy lunch programme had reached them. There was an increased chance of receiving Ka Ora, Ka Ako at 12-years if you had gone without lunch at school at 8-years (chi-square $p < 0.001$). However, over half (53.0%) of young people who went without lunch at 8-years were not receiving Ka Ora, Ka Ako at 12-years (Table 7).

Table 7: Frequency of receiving Ka Ora, Ka Ako school lunches in past 12 months, by frequency of going without lunch at school at 8-years of age (mother reported)

How often does [name] go without lunch at school (at 8-years of age)? <i>n</i> (row %)	Received Ka Ora, Ka Ako school lunches in past 12 months		
	Never	Irregularly	Most or every school day
Never (<i>n</i> = 3644)	2850 (78.2)	100 (2.7)	694 (19.1)
Sometimes or more often (<i>n</i> = 73)	44 (60.3)	<10	28 (38.4)
Total (<i>n</i> = 3717)	2894 (77.9)	101 (2.7)	722 (19.4)

Relevance for policy and practice

Household food security changes over time and is a precarious situation for many families

Food insecurity continues to be a pressing issue for about one in six young people growing up in New Zealand. Additionally, our longitudinal research has established that it is not always the same one in six young people affected at different time points. Cumulatively, there are many more children exposed to food insecurity at some stage during their development than at one age or timepoint. This, together with the fact that children across the spectrum of diverse neighbourhoods and communities may experience food insecurity, confirms other recent research showing that the targeting of policy responses to certain groups, schools or areas is counterproductive as it misses a large number of those affected (12).



Government financial assistance helps families in need but is not currently enough

Our research supports the Welfare Expert Advisory Group's finding that household incomes are inadequate to provide a basic standard of living for many children (13) (with over half of households receiving main benefits classified as food insecure), but shows government assistance can make a difference. Households experiencing food insecurity and receiving a main benefit or WFF tax credits were twice as likely to move to being food secure four years later, compared to those in the same position that did not receive government financial assistance. The recent (April 2022) increases to main benefits and Working for Families tax credits will have further improved the finances of eligible families but they may not be sufficient, given that over half of households receiving main benefits were food insecure. Additionally, to ensure support for other families facing food insecurity, abatement thresholds and eligibility for tax credits and food grants should be reassessed. With the inequitably high proportion of Māori and Pacific families and whānau affected by this issue, policy responses must be tailored and directed toward Māori and Pacific communities, with their voices and values central in the development of food security policy (14).



The healthy school lunch programme, Ka Ora, Ka Ako, should be expanded to reach more hungry children

The consistently high number of young people living in food insecure households provides a clear policy justification for Ka Ora, Ka Ako, the Government's healthy school lunch programme. However, the targeting of Ka Ora, Ka Ako to approximately 25% of schools and kura using the Equity Index has meant that up to half of young people living in food insecure households do not have access to this food assistance programme. Charitable and other food programmes in schools appear to be minor contributors (except for Fruit in Schools) and do not meet the need for daily food provision. It is likely that many young people in New Zealand continue to be hungry during their school day. To improve Ka Ora, Ka Ako's reach, policy makers should consider increasing the number of schools in the programme, as also recommended by Health Coalition Aotearoa. The value of Ka Ora, Ka Ako extends beyond its primary aim of feeding hungry children, with the potential to improve the nutritional status and eating behaviours of the whole child population, particularly given the revised nutrition standards for the programme implemented from Term 1 2023 (9). The effect of the programme on children's dietary patterns and educational outcomes could be investigated using future *Growing Up in New Zealand* data collections.

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Further Details

Supplementary material for this snapshot is available to download.

The introduction to the 12-year data collection wave and the methodology used to analyse the 12-year data can be downloaded as a PDF.

About the *Growing Up in New Zealand Now We Are Twelve* snapshot series

The Now We Are 12 Snapshots are accessible summaries of policy-relevant research findings from *Growing Up in New Zealand*, this country's largest longitudinal study of child health and wellbeing. Other snapshots in this series can be found [here](#). An **introduction** to the 12-year data collection wave and the **methodology** used to analyse the 12-year data can be downloaded as a PDF.

Supplementary material for this snapshot can also be downloaded.

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