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24 March 2015

New figures show Indigenous food shortages and hunger persist

Leading health organisations have called for greater efforts to overcome food insecurity, with new data showing an alarming rate of food shortages among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

More than one in five Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live in a household that had run out of food and were unable to buy more, according to [new data](#) from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS).

The data, from the ABS Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey, reveals this is six times that of non-Indigenous people.

The report shows that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in remote areas were more likely than those in non-remote areas to be living in a household that had run out of food and couldn't afford to buy more (31% compared with 20%).

Australian Red Cross, the Dietitians Association of Australia and the Public Health Association of Australia have joined forces to express deep concern at the new figures and what this means for the health and wellbeing of individuals, families and communities across Australia.

“These findings are concerning and match the growing concerns from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff in Red Cross working in partnership with their communities and as such are in touch with this growing problem. It confirms it's a complex issue that we must face together for any chance to effectively close the gap.

“Communities want to work on this and today (Tuesday March 24th) in Port Augusta the local Red Cross team are convening a community forum on food security, bringing people together to look at the issue and identify local issues, actions and solutions.

“Creating effective solutions involves local people and can make an impact and strengthen culture, health and capacity. Local communities need to work on this but all levels of government and business must also be at the table,” said Melissa Gibson, Manager of Youth, Families and Communities with Australian Red Cross.

Claire Hewat, CEO of the Dietitians Association of Australia (DAA), said the differences in food security between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous populations is worrying, as being able to access nutritious food has a huge impact on overall health.

“While this ABS data shows the average overall energy, or kilojoule, intake for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women appears to fall within normal levels, we're concerned about the diet quality.

“For instance, this data shows that fruit and vegetable intake is lower in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and discretionary foods and drinks – those with very little nutritional value – make up 41 per cent of total energy intake,” said Ms Hewat.



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PHAA CEO Michael Moore said: "Food is a basic human right for everyone, yet the ABS data shows that food insecurity is dependent on where you live in Australia. We know that food costs more in rural, regional and remote communities, and healthy food - such as fresh fruit and vegetables - is particularly expensive compared to in major Australian cities.

"This is staggering evidence of food inequity in Australia. Australians who are most likely to suffer food insecurity are low income earners, the underemployed, less educated and people living in remote areas. In a country as rich as Australia these results are unacceptable.

"The evidence also shows that Indigenous Australians are disproportionately affected. Traditionally, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people got their food from local and sustainable sources that were extremely high in nutritional value. This was then significantly disrupted by white settlement and continues to be, with unacceptable results that contribute to the gap in health, social and other outcomes."

Australian Red Cross, DAA and PHAA are committed to working together to help address the complex issue of food security for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The organisations current responses include, but are not limited to:

- Emergency food relief programs
- School breakfast programs
- Nutrition, cooking and budgeting programs
- Child and maternal health projects
- Professional development opportunities for Aboriginal Health Workers and students
- Social policy statements
- Advocacy and awareness campaigns with policy makers.

The peak bodies are calling on government, businesses and community members to play their part in acknowledging that more work needs to be done to close the gap at this most basic level – access to food.

They say improvements in food security and nutrition are essential to improving life expectancy in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and urgently require further resourcing to address the food insecurity issues highlighted in these latest survey results.

Background

About the ABS survey:

These results are from the first ABS survey to collect detailed nutrition information from more than 4,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. More information is available in Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey: Nutrition Results - Food and Nutrients (cat. no. 4727.0.55.005) available for free download from the ABS website <http://www.abs.gov.au>

About food insecurity among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people:

Food insecurity includes periods of prolonged hunger, or anxiety about getting food or having to rely on food relief. The joint '[Food Security for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples](#)' policy (Red Cross, Dietitians Association and Public Health Association) highlights:

- The unacceptable health gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians, related to food insecurity.



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- Government needs to take the primary role in developing targeted food and nutrition security policies and actions. A whole of government approach, linking in with relevant agencies and partners, is needed.
- Mapping and reporting is needed on food and nutrition security in Australia, with a focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- Future policies and policy actions to help achieve food and nutrition security need to involve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

http://www.redcross.org.au/files/Joint_Food_Security_for_Aboriginal_and_Torres_Strait_Islander_Peoples_Policy.pdf

For further information/comment:

Red Cross: For interviews with Melissa Gibson, please contact Susan Cullinan, Red Cross media advisor 0448 326 335 and scullinan@redcross.org.au

Dietitians Association of Australia: For interviews with Claire Hewat, please contact Jess Turner, Dietitians Association of Australia, on 0409 661 920.

Public Health Association of Australia: For interviews with Michael Moore, please phone 0417 249 731.