



# How do we resource the continued increasing need for food assistance in Aotearoa?

Currently in Aotearoa between 15-20% of our people in Aotearoa New Zealand experience moderate to severe food insecurity in an ongoing way.<sup>1</sup> This means they cannot access enough food to feed their whānau or themselves in a way that enables them to carry out their daily activities.<sup>2</sup>

During the COVID pandemic government stood up and recognised that amidst a health crisis they could not let people go hungry.<sup>3</sup> Lockdowns took away all the tools whānau use to survive: food in schools, community meals, community gardens, foraging, eating with friends and whanau. As we move away from the parameters of the pandemic, many of those supports that had been stepped up to ensure people were fed are now being removed – even though right now more people are consistently turning up for food assistance than at any other point in our history.

Drawing on the wisdom of people and organisations at the frontline, we outline in this paper the increase in the baseline number of food parcels being distributed by community food organisations over the last five years. It has almost doubled. This indicates that we are not addressing the root causes of food-related poverty.

Food related poverty is driven by systems, largely our economic system, but experienced by our people and our planet. No data is comprehensively collected across Aotearoa to tell us the exact number of people accessing food assistance, or the exact number of food parcels distributed. However, through those who contribute their data through the [Aotearoa Standard Food Parcel Measure](#), between 70-75 foodbank sites across Aotearoa, we can see trends and understand need.

**Number of food parcels distributed by the contributing foodbanks for the month of July 2019–2023<sup>2</sup>**

July 2019	6520	Data provided by Auckland City Mission, Christchurch City Mission, Salvation Army, South Kaipara Good Food, VisionWest, St Vincent de Paul Auckland, Mohua Social Services Takaka, Community Networks Wānaka, Kairos Connection Trust Kerikeri. <b>Note</b> that some groups did not operate pre pandemic, some shut down or changed their practice during the pandemic. Since 1 July many have capped the number of food parcels they are distributing due to reduction in government funding. We have not collected data on the number of whānau who have been eligible but have been turned away due to foodbanks not having enough food to distribute.
July 2010	11527	
July 2021	11625	
July 2022	12619	
July 2023	13772	

It is time to encourage a conversation across the community and across the political spectrum about how we realistically meet this current immediate need for food assistance within our communities while also inviting a whole population approach to move towards food security as the longer-term solution. Food insecurity was present in Aotearoa long before the pandemic came to our shores. The forces that drive food insecurity, including colonisation, racism, gender inequality, low wages, high costs of living, and a broken food system remain ever present. While we, as a society, still strive to meet the hunger experienced within our communities, our lack of ability to address the root causes is seeing a steady increase in those going hungry.

**Where to next?** Community food organisations appreciate the government intervention during COVID and recent weather events, to enable organisations to meet the immediate need during times of crisis. At its worst we saw distribution levels quadruple momentarily in certain parts of the country. But in all parts of the country the level of need now sits at twice what it was prior to the pandemic. At the same time the cost of supplying food for foodbanks is sitting at twice what it was prior to March 2020 due to the cost of food and transport increasing, alongside the attempt to meet the increase in need.

**Change of MSD funding since 1 July and its impact on foodbanks.** From 1 July, in line with the government budget 2023 allocations, MSD has reduced its funding to foodbanks considerably. Organisations are trying to continue to meet the need experienced within their communities with funding that will now only cover around 30–50% of the current levels of need. MSD have advised foodbanks to utilise the food rescue sector to assist with food supply, whilst many food rescue organisations have also seen a reduction of MSD funding. Some rural food organisations have shared that their ability to access food rescue can be very limited in their areas. In order to adjust their practice to accommodate MSD funding cuts, community food organisations have spoken of having to cap the number of food parcels they can distribute.

**Impact of capping food assistance.** This is the first time in memory this is being used as a long-term solution to lack of resources for foodbanks. The current levels of need within their communities are constantly exhausting their supply and financial resources. This leaves those on the frontline in the uncomfortable position of turning away people who are desperate for assistance. Increasingly this is met with aggression, leaving those assisting at foodbanks deal with the impact of this reduced funding.

While government has raised benefit levels and Working for Families support, these increases have not matched housing and cost of living increases enough to enable access to affordable, healthy kai. MSD's benefit factsheets report that Special Needs Grants for food hit a 5-year peak in four regions in Q1 2023, confirming the insights that levels of need have not dropped since the pandemic. Our research indicates that the same families that seek Special Needs Grants for Food from MSD also come for food assistance from foodbanks when they have exhausted their allocated number of Special Needs Grants. This indicates that their incomes are not adequate to cover the basic weekly costs of their whānau.<sup>4</sup>

**Beyond the foodbank.** Foodbanks should not need to exist in a food producing country that is prosperous and cares for its population. Foodbanks long for the day that our current level of food assistance in Aotearoa is no longer needed. However, the reality is that it will take focused time, effort and resource from all sectors to make this a reality.

Food security for Aotearoa is not about whether there is enough food in Aotearoa. There is plenty. Food security is about ensuring those on low incomes, in predominantly single parent families, of Māori and Pasifika descent do not struggle to access enough affordable nutritious, sustainably source, culturally appropriate food. A food secure Aotearoa is possible.

**As Aotearoa New Zealand wrestle with many important issues in the lead up to the 2023 general election Kore Haikai would like to pose a few questions to potential parliamentary candidates:**

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**1. *What responses would your party implement to meet the immediate need for food assistance with low income whānau?***

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**2. *Acknowledging at the root causes of food insecurity in Aotearoa being systemic – about our economic system and our food system, what would your party implement to begin working towards a food secure Aotearoa New Zealand?***

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*We hope this paper and questions can be a resource during the pre-election period as you engage in conversations with candidates and community.*

<sup>1</sup> [Now we are Twelve: The Growing Up in New Zealand research report](#) notes that food insecurity is strongly associated with ethnicity and socioeconomic position. [The 2023 Child Poverty Related Indicators report](#) notes that, while rates have improved substantially overall from 2019 to 2022, Tamariki Māori (at 22%) and Pacific children (38%) face rates of insecurity far higher than Pakeha (9%).

<sup>2</sup> The [UN definition from the World Food Summit, 1996](#) says "Food security exists when all people at all times have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life."

<sup>3</sup> [MSD has invested more](#) than \$150m in the community food sector since 2021. This has supported community food providers to meet the increased demand for food from the impacts of COVID-19.

<sup>4</sup> See more detail in [Exploring the Ongoing Need for Food Assistance](#), a Kore Hiakai research paper, undertaken in March 2022.