

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on emergency food relief providers across Sydney

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Key Insights

- The COVID-19 pandemic led to an increased demand for food relief in Sydney.
- Food relief providers are precariously funded, dependent upon volunteer labour and donations of food and money.
- 9 out of 13 providers noted a change in the kinds of people seeking food relief with an increase in the number of families and unemployed people accessing food relief services.
- Results show a shift away from requiring proof of eligibility to receive food relief.
- Nearly two thirds (61.54%) of participants believed that allowing individuals to choose the food they were provided was either important or very important.
- Half of the participants shifted where they sourced food from during the pandemic as less food was available from regular suppliers.
- The majority of food relief organisations could meet the demand for food most of the time.
- Providers reported a wide variety of barriers to providing food relief during the COVID-19 pandemic, including issues around staffing, maintaining social connection, supplying food, retaining volunteers, obtaining fresh food and providing culturally appropriate food.

Introduction

Australia has a hidden but growing problem with household food insecurity. Disruptions to employment and livelihoods due to pandemic lockdowns have exacerbated food insecurity as revealed in Food Bank Hunger Reports (2021) and recent analysis by the Melbourne Institute (Botha and Payne, 2022).

Increasing demand for food relief was observed even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, but demand for food relief increased in 2020-2022 (Food Bank, 2021; McKay et al 2019; McKay et al 2021). Those in remote and rural areas, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations, low-income earners, linguistically diverse groups, refugees, single parents, younger adults, the elderly, the homeless and those with a disability are more likely to experience food insecurity (Louie et al., 2022).

Food relief is provided by food banks, food pantries and soup kitchens, amongst other initiatives, who are visible actors addressing growing levels of hunger in Sydney (Williams and Tait, 2022). Previous work documenting the landscape of food relief in Sydney in 2019 found there were 210 locations where people could access food relief, which is by no means complete (Williams and Tait, 2022).

This briefing note provides insights into the experiences of 13 food relief providers located in Greater Sydney who participated in an online questionnaire in March-April 2022. Two of these initiatives provide food relief to over 500 people per week and operate at multiple locations across Sydney.

Please note:

This Briefing Note is part of the 'Community food provisioning in metropolitan Sydney' project led by Dr Miriam Williams at Macquarie University. The publication of this briefing note does not preclude Dr Williams subsequently publishing this data in scholarly journals, books or reports.

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Food relief in Sydney

Food relief organisations across Greater Sydney provide food in a variety of forms (*Figure 1*). Food hampers make up the majority of food relief offerings (46%), with groceries, meals and other, comprising 15% each of the food types provided by the organisations surveyed.

More than Food

Organisations offering food relief across Greater Sydney often provide additional services including financial services (13%) and a space for socialising (33%). These spaces of socialising were impacted by social distancing measures. 53% of organisations provided other services, including:

- Youth support and youth/ child activities
- Food pantry
- Provision of hygiene, sanitary and personal care items
- Providing warm/ low-cost clothing and bedding
- Referral service for community members

Food relief goals, values and priorities

The goals of food relief initiatives are many and varied and include:

- “Ensuring people have meals/food to eat children aren’t going without meals”
- “To provide a warm meal, drink and dessert, a friendly face without judgment or question to anyone in need”

- “To help ease the pressure on families and individuals who are experiencing food insecurity which is a major concern within the community”
- “To provide food and toiletries to people to get them through until their next payment”
- “Addressing immediate need and underlying food insecurity while providing community connection and capability building”

Figure 2 provides an overview of these goals which connects also to their organizational structure and funding. Many food relief providers in Sydney are run by small scale or large faith-based organisations such as Anglicare, which operates over 40 food pantries, or The Dish in Hornsby, which runs a single mobile soup kitchen twice a week (see Williams and Tait, 2022).

Nearly two thirds (61.54%) of participants believed that allowing individuals to choose the food they were provided was either important or very important, and no organisation thought that this was not at all important. Despite this, most food relief is in the form of hampers where choice is reduced. 93% of participant agreed that the food they provide cares for the customers or members and 54% thought it important that the food provided was healthy.

Figure 1: Type of food relief provided



Figure 2: Word cloud of the goals of the food relief organisations



Food relief organisations have different days they operate, with the majority of organisations open daily or weekly. Many organisations are volunteer-run and reliant upon donations of food, money or grant funding as shown in Figure 3. Redistributed food, donations of money by individuals and payment for food were also common ways of resourcing organisations.

Interestingly there has been a shift over time for many organisations to move beyond requiring customers/clients to prove their eligibility status in order to receive assistance as shown in Figure 4. Being referred as part of a casework assessment, by Lifeline and living in particular Local Government Areas were additional eligibility requirements.

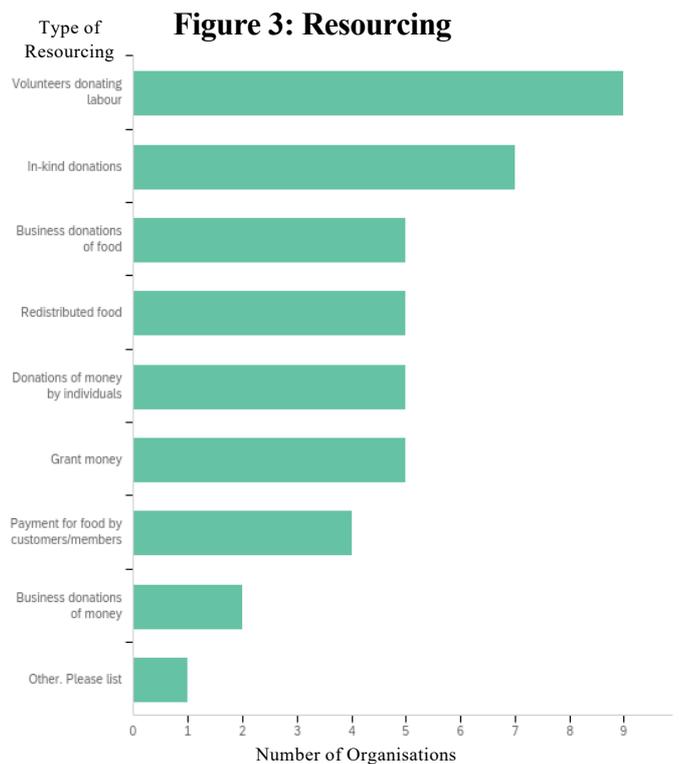


Figure 4: Eligibility requirements



Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the demand for food relief

The COVID-19 pandemic led to an increased demand for food relief

92% of organisations noted an increase in demand for food relief during the COVID-19 pandemic. 100% of respondents were able to source enough food to meet this increased food demand “most of the time” rather than *always*.

There is varying ability for organisations to meet the current demand for food relief in general, even in this sample size, with:

- 11 *most of the time* able to meet demand
- 1 *always* able to meet demand
- 1 only *sometimes* able to meet demand.

Qualitative observations about the changes in demand for food relief during the COVID-19 pandemic included:

- “More people had to isolate and referrals increased”
- “More vulnerable people needing more food and hygiene and food pantry supplies, less social interaction difficult for many”
- “We had more demand for food and not being able to be opened for a period of time made it very difficult. We were able to refer to other agencies where we could. When we did make up the food parcels it was a lot more expensive as we needed to buy from Coles and Woolworths and sometimes they didn't have what we needed.”
- “Requests for food increased 400 fold. We got a lot of individual donations of food during COVID, had some storage issues. The numbers have stabilised now but donations have dropped a lot too.”
- “People who otherwise wouldn't ask for help are now asking!”

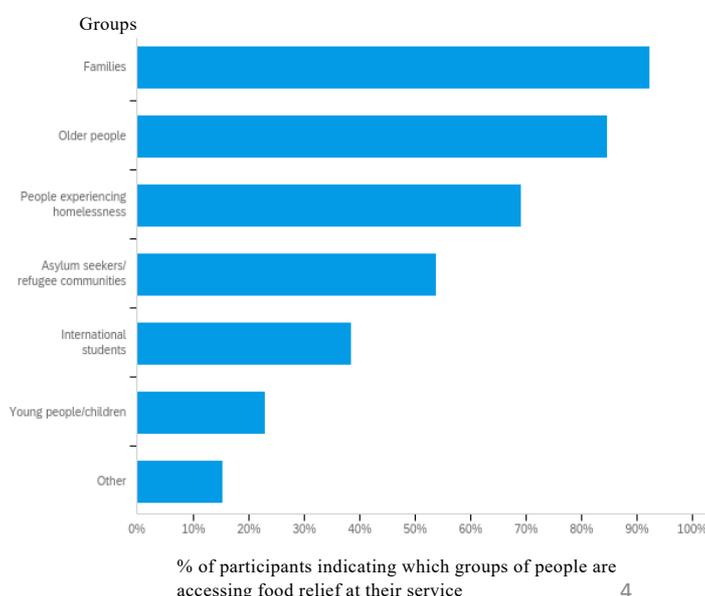
The COVID-19 pandemic changed the groups of people accessing food relief

Participants were divided as to the impact the temporary increase to jobseeker and introduction of job keeper made on demand. 9 out of 13 organisations noted a change in the kinds of people seeking food relief. Respondents noted that:

- “More people who had lost employment temporarily”
- “Young people who lost jobs”
- “More at risk families and older people”
- “Significant increase in people previously self-sufficient but with reduced/no work due to COVID”
- “We had more unemployed attend. Or those who earned too much for a concession card, but still had trouble making ends meet.”
- “More families requiring help”

Figure 5 shows the different proportions of people accessing food relief providers.

Figure 5: Groups of people accessing food relief



Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on food supply

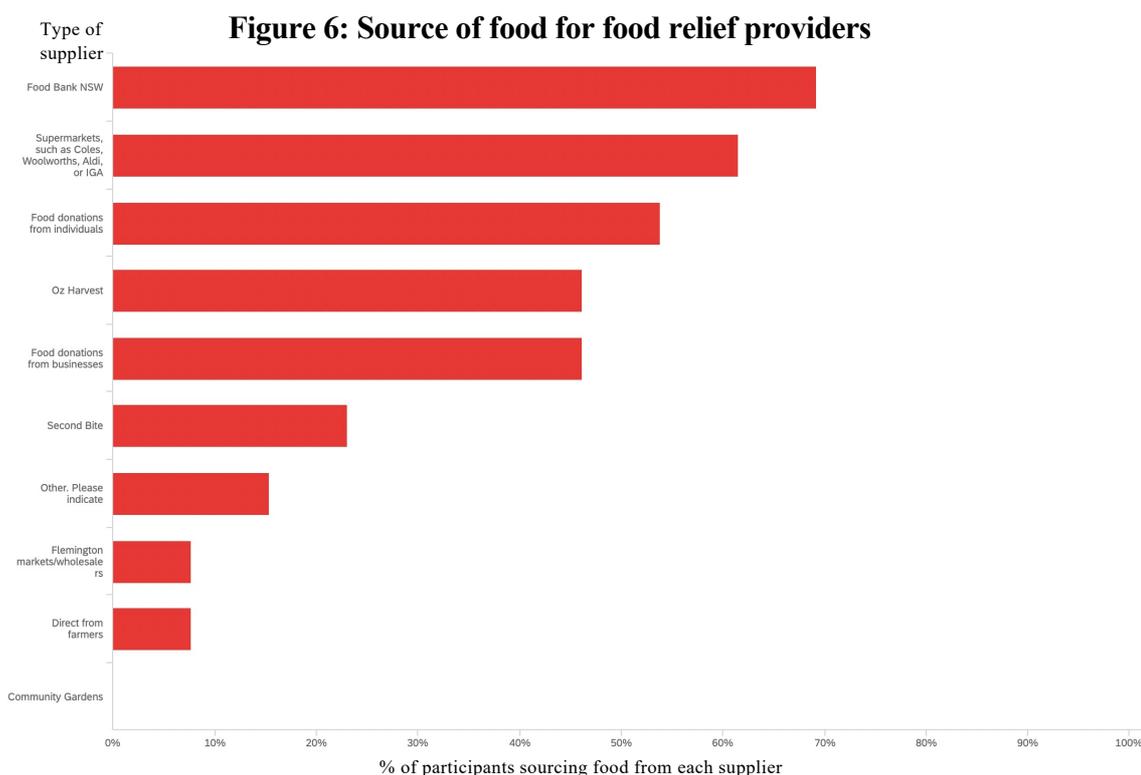
Food available at food relief organisations is sourced from a variety of locations, as shown in Figure 6. FoodBank (70%) and supermarkets (60%) being the most common sources followed by donations of food from individuals (55%). In addition to those listed, organisations also explained that they “purchased as needed” and receive “food donations from churches and schools”. No organisations surveyed sourced food from community gardens.

Half of the food relief providers shifted where they sourced food from during the pandemic.

Explanations of how their source of food changed included:

- “Needs of some cultural communities had specific food types to be obtained”
- “Not many volunteers so we sourced our food from FoodBank and purchased from supermarkets from available funds”
- “Had to change who donated to us”
- “Not as much food available from Foodbank and we had to use Coles and Woolworths which is more expensive”

“Not being able to access a lot of necessity foods from Foodbank and having to buy from normal retail shops. Distributing the food parcels was difficult so we would phone and give a time to pick up and place the food parcel outside for them to pick up. Sometimes we would deliver the food parcels and leave them on the verandah. At least this way we had no contact.”
 (Questionnaire response on the biggest barriers faced during the pandemic)



Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on resourcing

Health measures put in place to limit the spread of COVID-19 impacted food relief providers who had to adapt operations in order to respond. 77% of initiatives were impacted by social distancing measures. One food relief initiative who regularly offered a community lunch had to close. A common response was to shift to delivering hampers or providing takeaway for meal services.

Initiatives reported the following impacts:

- “We had to deliver hampers as clients could not travel and/or had to isolate”
- “Less interaction with people, less opportunities to provide meals and social supports, harder to get food and deliveries of food”
- “Community lunch gatherings ceased reducing connection and was replaced with contactless hampers”
- “A lot of staff were working from home so put a stress on this initiatives staff to run the workplace. Needed a lot of help to deliver food to peoples homes who were not able to leave their area or house. PPE [Personal Protective Equipment], asking people to wait outside rather than come into the office”
- “We had few volunteers, fewer people making more food, social distancing and the alteration of dinner services to take away - less communication with the needy”
- “Changed policies and procedures, PPE [Personal Protective Equipment], introduced home delivery and closed indoor/office settings, some services closed/changed model, frequent changes and communication required”
- “We had to close for a period of time and when we were opened it was difficult to distribute the food parcels with the restrictions in place”

Impact on volunteering and staffing

Most organisations reported a decrease in the number of people volunteering (69%) whilst 23% noted an increase. Retaining volunteers is a key concern for food relief providers.

Biggest barriers faced by initiative during the pandemic

A wide variety of barriers were reported by organisations including issues around staffing, maintaining social connection, supplying food, retaining volunteers, obtaining fresh food and providing culturally appropriate food. Qualitative comments included:

- “Volunteers were reluctant to help at times and also restricted from helping, staffing was a challenge and overcoming the social reluctances of people who need assistance to ask or come for help”
- “Getting fresh food”
- “Obtaining food and resources, fewer people doing more... more food and sundry supplies handed out, more \$[money] spent for the vulnerable...trying to keep in touch with the vulnerable”
- “Clients needing food because they were isolating and giving them culturally appropriate food, sometimes we used vouchers to purchase food from local supermarkets and delivered them”
- “Community. We tried to speak to everyone outside as they collected their meals”
- “Where the food was coming from”

Food relief organisations are heavily reliant upon volunteers and food donations to operate. The questionnaire comments indicate both the barriers and the innovations made by organisations to meet the increased need.

Conclusions

Food relief providers across Sydney provide more than just food and play a vital role in providing additional services and a space for socialising. The COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns, inflationary pressures, increased rates of unemployment and supply-chain shocks led to an increased demand for food relief and a shift in the types of groups accessing food relief across Sydney. A growing number of families and people who were unemployed were accessing food relief services.

Half of the food relief providers shifted where they sourced food from during the pandemic as less food was available from regular suppliers. Many organisations were able to adapt to the changes in circumstances, continuing to be able to meet the demand for food most of the time.

The COVID-19 pandemic public health orders also impacted upon the ways food relief was provided with organisations having to temporarily shift to providing take away, food hampers or deliver food, and in one instance cease operating. The majority of organisations surveyed saw a reduction in the number of volunteers.

Due to the reliance of governments on the food relief sector in caring for growing numbers of people experiencing food insecurity, consistent grant funding to support the work of these initiatives would assist in addressing resourcing concerns.

There is need for governments to address the ongoing household food insecurity crisis facing Australians through exploring longer term solutions beyond emergency food relief such as raising the rate of job seeker payments and developing a comprehensive food plan to ensure all people have access to healthy, affordable, sustainable and culturally appropriate food.

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