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Early childhood food and nutrition security: Policy pathways to reduce hungerBonnie Searle¹Stephanie Chiang² *Emma Sydenham²Sharon Bessell³Ros Sambell⁴Tara Day-Williams⁵Karen Thorpe¹**Affiliations**¹ Queensland Brain Institute, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Qld 4072, Australia² Social Ventures Australia, Melbourne, Vic. 3000, Australia³ Children's Policy Centre, Crawford School of Public Policy, Australian National University, Canberra, ACT 2601, Australia⁴ School of Medical and Health Sciences, Edith Cowan University, Perth, WA 6027, Australia⁵ Foodbank Queensland, Morningside, Qld 4170, Australia**Correspondence***Ms Stephanie Chiang schiang@socialventures.org.au

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Abstract

Hunger and food insecurity in childhood have significant lasting impacts on physical and mental health, as well as cognitive and emotional development. Closely related to multidimensional poverty, food insecurity also prevents children from making the most of opportunities such as access to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and undermines their relationships both with peers and within families.

Despite being a wealthy and net-food-exporting country, an estimated 42% of Australian households with children experience food insecurity, facing reduced quality, quantity and variety of food, running out of food or being forced to skip meals. The current cost-of-living crisis is further exacerbating food insecurity among Australia's families.

ECEC settings offer a powerful intervention point: by school entry, 90% of Australian children will attend an ECEC service of some kind, presenting a critical opportunity to support children during a time of rapid brain development. However, a fragmented system means access to adequate nutrition is dependent upon postcode, with many services offering limited food or none at all. In addition, the national quality and regulatory framework largely frames food in terms of health and safety rather than a core component of quality.

This policy framing exacerbates inequities by missing critical opportunities to require and monitor the quality, adequacy and management of food provision. In the absence of system-level supports, critical opportunities to support children's development, wellbeing and relationships through food continue to be missed.

More broadly, there has been longstanding inaction on hunger and food insecurity by Australian governments – particularly as they impact young children. Australia has no existing national food security strategy, no overarching suite of law and policy to regulate the risks associated with food insecurity, no comprehensive data collection process and no clear responsibility or accountability at any level of government to facilitate equitable access to adequate food. There is also an unsustainable over-reliance on food relief services, which may alleviate immediate hunger but are unable to resolve food insecurity in the long term.

How then, can research evidence, lived experience and cross-sector expertise be brought together to inform national policy that ensures every Australian child can access the food they need to thrive? Arising from the National Early Years Policy Summit held in Brisbane, Australia in August 2025, this policy commentary draws on current research, policy settings and practice insights on food provision and nutrition and food insecurity in the early years. It identifies key system gaps and outlines policy reforms, including the opportunities presented by the Albanese Government's commitments to a National Food Security Strategy and a universal quality early learning system.

Keywords:

child rights, early childhood, early education and care, food security, hunger.

Food insecurity in the early years: Scale, consequence and policy silence

Early childhood is a critical time for learning and development. Adequate quality and quantity of nutrition affect a child's capacity to regulate emotion and learn at a critical time in brain development. Food insecurity, defined as a lack of access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food (adapted from FAO, 2003), has profound and ongoing impacts on children's health and development (Gallegos et al., 2021). These effects are explained by two key mechanisms. Firstly, adequate nutrition has *direct effects* on brain development (Cusick & Georgieff, 2016). For example, deficiencies in key nutrients (such as iron) limit cognitive development (Nyaradi et al., 2013), while poor nutrition and hunger impede social, emotional and cognitive functioning (AIFS, 2020b; Roberts et al., 2022). Secondly, food insecurity has *indirect effects* mediated through broader association with multidimensional poverty such as family stress.

Child exposure to food insecurity in Australia is widespread and associated with broader circumstances of poverty. The consequences are profound. A recent study reports that 42% of Australian households with children experience food insecurity (Foodbank Australia, 2024). Correspondingly, more than one in six (17.1%) children in Australia live in poverty, with the rate as high as 41% in single-parent households (UNICEF, 2023). Poverty has multiple detrimental impacts on children's early development, including by creating barriers to accessing early years services and supports, risking entrenchment of developmental vulnerabilities and widening of the gap in later years of schooling (Bessell & O'Sullivan, 2024). Food insecurity places strain on the close relationships that are central to children's ability to feel safe, secure and free of judgement (O'Sullivan et al., 2024). Family stress, household chaos and adverse experiences are linked to food insecurity (Thornton et al., 2014) and can adversely impact a child's development. Food insecurity is strongly associated with reduced attendance in ECEC, cognitive delay and behavioural problems, poorer school readiness and sub-optimal ongoing academic achievement, impacting life outcomes (AIFS, 2020b). A recent assessment of a suite of eighteen leverage points for change commissioned by the Early Years Catalyst identified ensuring 'all children and their families have their basic material needs met' as

having the highest potential to transform the early years system and improve early childhood development outcomes for Australian children (McKenzie et al., 2023). Access to nutritious food is an integral component of basic material needs. Unequivocally, more action is needed to address child poverty in Australia and particularly to support the material conditions that children and families need to thrive.

The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC; Australian Government, 2025) measures important areas of early childhood development: physical health and wellbeing; social competence; emotional maturity; language and cognitive skills (school-based); and communication skills and general knowledge. The 2024 results indicate that Australian children are experiencing high levels of developmental vulnerability, comparable to baseline levels first measured in 2009 (Australian Government, 2025: p. 14). Currently, almost one in four (23.5%) Australian children start school developmentally vulnerable in one or more areas. This increases to one-third (34.7%) of children living in communities experiencing the highest levels of disadvantage. Thus, children's developmental trajectories mirror the socioeconomic conditions they grow up in, with food insecurity and poverty leaving lasting imprints. The confronting data on food security and early childhood outcomes in Australia present an imperative for urgent reform. Structural investments in the socioeconomic conditions surrounding children are the most effective lever for developmental equity (Department of Social Services, 2024a). In this paper, we examine a range of reforms to deliver a child's right to adequate food, with a particular focus on the potential role of Australian ECEC services as places for intervention.

Food and nutrition security in the Australian policy context

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises access to food and a standard of living adequate for physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development as fundamental rights (United Nations 1989: Article 24 and Article 27). This right is embedded within a range of key Australian policy frameworks for assessing and supporting children's wellbeing. The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) developed The Nest Wellbeing Framework (ARACY, 2013), which identifies six broad and inter-related domains of child and youth

wellbeing. Among these, basic material needs are specified as a critical element for children to thrive. Food security is both a basic material need and an enabler of the other five domains. Future Healthy Countdown 2030 is a targeted national framework, based on The Nest Wellbeing Framework, for measuring progress on children and young people's health and wellbeing (Lycett et al., 2023). 'Nutritious food' is specified as a key component. Future Healthy identifies a corresponding policy action that calls on government to 'provide financial support to invest in families with young children and address poverty and material deprivation in the first 2,000 days of life'. Similarly, the Australian Government's Early Years Strategy 2024–2034 (Department of Social Services, 2024a) recognises the need to provide children, families and communities' 'basic needs' if they are to meet the vision that all Australian children thrive in the early years. 'Children have nutritious food' is one of three indicators for measuring progress against the 'Basic needs are met' outcome for children (Department of Social Services, 2024b).

Why ECEC matters for addressing food insecurity in the early years

The Australian Government continues to invest heavily in ECEC, promising access to at least 3 days of subsidised ECEC for every child regardless of family employment status (Department of Education, 2024a). Yet children cannot access the benefits of a high-quality ECEC system if the basic material requirement of adequate food is not met. Children can consume between 50 and 75% of their daily nutrition requirements during the ECEC day (Radcliffe et al., 2002; Robson et al., 2015), forming a considerable proportion of their overall nutritional intake. ECEC presents a unique opportunity to support children's learning, education and development outcomes, but often only if child nutrition is supported. As part of a broader long-term food strategy, ECEC provides a powerful vehicle to address hunger and food insecurity in the early years. A strategic and equitable approach to ECEC could ensure all Australian children have basic food needs met on the days they attend ECEC services.

In Australia, the majority of children access ECEC in the years before formal schooling. Current figures show that 74.9% of 3-year-olds and 89.6% of four-year-olds are enrolled in a preschool program (Productivity Commission, 2025). Moreover, large numbers of children attend ECEC services earlier in life in centre-based and family day care services. Although ECEC participation has increased in recent years (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2024), early childhood development outcomes have not (Australian Government, 2025). ECEC services present an ideal point for dignified intervention to alleviate or buffer the developmental impacts of food insecurity through food provision. However, in communities experiencing high disadvantage, many services do not provide meals (Thorpe et al., 2022), and evidence suggests that even when meals are provided, the quality is low (Searle et al., 2023). Thus, in practice, food insecurity acts as a barrier to accessing the full benefits of Australia's ECEC system and an opportunity to break the cycle of disadvantage is missed.

Current approaches to food and nutrition insecurity in Australia

A range of food security interventions are implemented at national state and local levels. However, these are fragmented, limited and inadequate to address the scale, depth and cause of food

insecurity. Currently, interventions outside the ECEC system to support child and family food security include: income support; family benefits; charitable food relief; intensive family support program; school food initiatives; nutrition education; community gardens; and place-based solutions, such as community food hubs (Bowden, 2020). System-level policy solutions are largely absent.

Food relief is an important short-term solution to food insecurity and hunger, but an over-reliance on provision from charitable organisations is reported to contribute to government inaction on food security and risks compounding stigma (Gallegos et al., 2017; McKay & Lindberg, 2019; Parliament of Western Australia, 2023). Further, the food relief system only reaches around half of current need (Foodbank Australia, 2024). Designed as an emergency response, food relief is now accessed in an ongoing way by families experiencing material hardship (AIFS, 2022a). Food relief could be enhanced by eliminating eligibility criteria, scaling alternative models such as social supermarkets and community kitchens (where people cook and eat), integrating opportunities for reciprocity to increase self-worth and independence, involving people with lived experience in service delivery, service design and governance, and setting nutrition and safety standards for the food available, ensuring it meets the needs across the life course (AIFS, 2022a).

Nutrition education has the potential to empower children to enjoy and cook nutritious food. OzHarvest's FEAST is a curriculum-aligned program designed to inspire children to make positive food choices, waste less and be changemakers in their local community (OzHarvest, 2025). Meal relief charity FareShare runs Schools in the Kitchen, which teaches students about food insecurity, food waste and food rescue (FareShare, 2025). However, nutrition education needs to be sensitively delivered to avoid stigma (McElrone et al., 2025) and should be considered as only one part of poverty-reducing and nutrition-enhancing actions (FAO, 1997). Over-reliance on individual behaviour change risks drawing attention and resources away from tackling policy-level systemic drivers of food insecurity.

Food insecurity in early childhood profoundly impacts development (AIFS 2020b). ECEC, as a foundational investment with near-universal participation, plays an important role in children's outcomes (Productivity Commission, 2024). Yet, targeted food security programs in ECEC in Australia are scarce. Australia's National Quality Standards (NQS) are consistently associated with AEDC outcomes (Rankin et al., 2024). However, this regulatory system does not require the provision of food. For services providing food, the NQS does not specify food budgets or directly monitor the quality or quantity of food provided (ACECQA, 2025; Searle et al., 2026). Food quality within ECEC, in general, remains low (Searle et al., 2023). Decisions on food quality remain at the discretion of individual ECEC services or organisations, resulting in inequitable access to nutrition crucial for growth and development. There are, however, some important innovations providing food security interventions within ECEC. The Early Years Education Program (EYEP) randomised controlled trial provided 75% of a child's daily dietary requirements with significant positive results (Jordan & Kennedy, 2019; Tseng et al., 2022). More recently, Parkville Institute and ECEC service partners have provided 75% of a child's daily dietary requirements as part of a replication of the EYEP randomised controlled trial with four services (Rogers & McKenzie, 2024). Goodstart Early Learning (a not-for-profit

provider) pilot, Goodstart Plus, diverts extra funds towards services located in disadvantaged communities, increasing staff capacity and budgets to provide food that meets 75% of a child's daily dietary requirements (Social Ventures Australia, 2025a).

The following sections consider a number of short- and longer-term levers for change discussed during the Early Years Policy Summit in Brisbane in June 2025.

Policy levers to address food insecurity in the early years

Together, current reforms in early childhood education and care, income support and food policy present a strategic opportunity to address food insecurity in the early years. This section examines the policy levers most critical to achieving this aim.

Australia's National Food Security Strategy

Australia's National Food Security Strategy, *Feeding Australia*, is currently in development (Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, 2025). Its focus has been primarily on food security as it is understood from the perspective of national security, agriculture and food production. Less attention has been given to how Australians experience hunger and food insecurity in their daily lives, and the implications of this for the wider community. The recently released discussion paper acknowledges the disproportionate impact of food insecurity within the community. Although it does not explicitly discuss food insecurity experienced by Australian children, it acknowledges the link between food security and population health, identifying both 'people' and 'health and nutrition' as whole-of-system considerations that will underpin the development of the National Food Security Strategy (Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, 2025). Appointing Federal and State Ministers for Food Security would facilitate cross-sector policy, practice and resource reforms.

The National Food Security Strategy, along with the Early Years Strategy and push for universal access to ECEC, provides an urgent and unique opportunity to address food insecurity at a systems level, through a joined-up policy approach to bring about real change for Australia's children. Partnerships across food production and manufacture, freight and logistics and not-for-profit sectors are crucial to enable innovation and impact, guided by an ambitious National Food Security Strategy and the goal that no child should be hungry in Australia.

It is our hope that the strategy development process incorporates diverse voices of children and families with lived experience of food insecurity and a broad range of stakeholders addressing hunger and food insecurity, and that the final strategy prioritises a joined-up policy approach to ensure all Australian children and families have access to affordable, nutritious food.

Income support

The primary drivers of food insecurity in Australia today are material hardship and inadequate financial resources (AIFS, 2020b). Of food-insecure households, 82% cite high or increased living expenses as a factor driving their challenge accessing adequate nutritious food – 86% in severely food-insecure households (Foodbank Australia, 2024). Of households experiencing severe food insecurity, 97% report worry about food running out before being able to buy more, and 93% say they are unable to afford balanced meals. These reports are backed up by analysis of

Consumer Price Index (CPI) data: food prices have risen sharply since 2021 and peaked in December 2022, with an average shopping basket costing 9.2% more than in 2021 (Backholer & Zorbas, 2024). Although food prices have eased since that peak, they remain significantly higher now compared with before the pandemic, and food costs in outer regional to very remote Australia can be 30–160% higher than in metropolitan areas (van Burgel et al., 2026).

Families experiencing food security often face difficult choices when allocating their limited resources between purchasing groceries or meeting other essential needs such as housing expenses or healthcare costs. In turn, increased housing stress may compromise parental mental health and reduce the money available to spend on children's food, health care and education. Households experiencing food insecurity are more likely to rely on credit cards or buy-now-pay-later services (Foodbank Australia, 2024). These strategies can further lock households into cycles of debt and poverty. Furthermore, food insecurity is associated with greater risk of housing instability (King, 2018, cited in Melbourne Institute, 2022). Recent changes to the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme, which reduces the payment made by consumers (Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme, 2025), may help to avoid impossible choices low-income families must make, for example, between essential medicines and food. However, further reforms are urgently needed.

The Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS) has repeatedly called on the Australian Government to raise income support payments like JobSeeker, Youth Allowance, Parenting Payment and other related supports (ACOSS, 2024). Evidence suggests that current rates for these supports 'fall short of all measures of adequacy, leaving people receiving them without enough money to cover food, housing, healthcare and utilities'. Australian National University modelling found that even a 10% increase in the social security budget alone would lower poverty rates for households whose main source of income is JobSeeker from 88% to 34% (Phillips & Narayanan, 2021). Income support should be raised to at least \$82 a day, matching the Age Pension. Extra payments for single parents and people with disabilities and illnesses should cover their higher living costs. Rent assistance should also be increased to help ease housing stress and better reflect actual rental prices for low-income earners (Economic Inclusion Advisory Committee, 2025). Seriously addressing food insecurity unquestionably requires a permanent and adequate increase to Australia's income support measures.

ECEC reform as a food and nutrition security intervention

Early Childhood Education and Care attendance is a key lever to attenuate the impact of food insecurity. However, there are fewer child places in areas of high disadvantage (Hurley et al., 2022), with children who experience more disadvantage (children from low-income families and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds, children with disability and from a non-English speaking background) less likely to attend (Molloy et al., 2022). The current Labour government is investing heavily in ECEC to increase participation. The Department of Education has pledged to build 160 new not-for-profit ECEC services in underserved markets, with the potential for these services to be managed by the Commonwealth (Department of Education, 2024b). Likewise, the Universal Access to ECEC scheme () aims to increase

participation in vulnerable groups by removing a work/study test to access subsidies for up to 3 days per week. While these are strong steps in the right direction, further funding and inclusion reforms are required to support increased participation of children facing adversity (Productivity Commission, 2024). Importantly, access to *quality* ECEC (including quality food), should underpin Australia's ECEC reform.

ECEC food provision and monitoring

ECEC services in Australia are not required to provide food, and many do not. Data from Queensland indicate that around 75% of services provide food, but this is less likely in highly disadvantaged communities (Thorpe et al., 2022). Meal provision is a key facilitator of ECEC participation (Molloy et al., 2022). Even when ECEC is provided free of charge, families without food may be unable to participate (Kirkegaard et al., 2024). Family-provided meals in ECEC often do not meet recommendations, especially in areas of high developmental vulnerability (Searle et al., 2023) risking poor nutrition and child hunger (Searle et al., 2024). There is an opportunity to invest in, and support, services to provide nutritious meals so that every child who attends ECEC in Australia receives high-quality food.

Even when food is provided by services, quality is often low (Grady et al., 2020; Lum et al., 2023; Sambell et al., 2014; Searle et al., 2023). The National Quality Standards for ECEC require that services provide food in line with the Australian Dietary Guidelines, but this is not regulated as a requirement and consequently is not directly monitored or assessed. Service providers set their own meal budgets, with average expenditure as low as \$2.00 per child per day in some services (Sambell et al., 2020). Various state-based interventions, resources and support for nutritious adequate menu development are available but significant gaps in access exist. Support for menu development and food environments do not, however, address the fundamental issue of food budgets, which are usually set by providers within market constraints. Many rural and remote areas face additional complexities in sourcing affordable fresh food.

To guarantee that all children receive equitable access to nutritious food during the ECEC day, we recommend amendment of the National Quality Framework to require the provision of nutritious, adequate and appropriate food in ECEC settings, and to embed a robust and regular independent monitoring mechanism, along with consistent national financial and practical support.

ECEC meal subsidies

Direct financial support of high-quality ECEC meals alleviates the impact of food insecurity on children (Ettinger de Cuba et al., 2023). Internationally, the United States Child and Adult Food Care Food Program (CACFP) provides a subsidy towards food in ECEC for services that provide places to low-income families (Chriqui & Asada, 2023). Children attending CACFP services demonstrate better dietary quality and lower family food insecurity (Andreyeva et al., 2024), improving child developmental outcomes (Gallegos et al., 2021). In the UK, the Free Early Years Meals (FEYM) policy provides funding to state-maintained nursery schools if families receive a qualifying benefit. However, FEYM support is reported to be inadequate and inaccessible to the majority of children who attend a private nursery (Cooper & Jimenez, 2024). Research into the benefits of similar UK initiatives such as Universal Infant Free School Meals (UIFSM) indicates that well-resourced feeding

programs can reduce school absence rates, support better educational outcomes at ages 5 and 7 years and reduce family household expenditure (Cooper & Jimenez, 2024).

Australia, an outlier among many high-income countries, currently lacks a national food subsidy for early childhood education and care (ECEC). Introducing such a subsidy could be a cost-effective intervention to reduce food insecurity in young children and unlock the potential of ECEC to change trajectories for some of Australia's most vulnerable children. Provision of subsidised ECEC meals in Australia could be targeted to areas in which children face high developmental vulnerability using AEDC data, Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) data and relevant Australian Bureau of Statistics data. Data for the cost-benefit of nutritious ECEC meals in Australia are lacking, but analysis of meal provision in school settings in the US estimate that for every dollar invested in school meals, there is a \$3–10 return on improved health, education and productivity in adulthood (World Food Programme, 2016). In a recent evaluation of a school meal program in Tasmania, staff noticed increased school attendance, improved social skills and school connection, as well as positive behavioural change in the classroom (Jose et al., 2024). There have been some prior proposals to provide meals. For example, State Liberal leader Matthew Guy promised a trial to provide free lunches in Victorian public schools if elected in 2022 (Ore, 2022) along with Queensland premier Steven Miles in 2024 (McKay, 2024). However, public support for free school meals is mixed. One study found that parents believed it was a family responsibility to provide food regardless of demographics, and providing school lunches would be a tax burden (Aydin et al., 2023). We note there has not been a focus on food provision in the years prior to school

Shifting mental models

Mental models, deeply held societal beliefs and assumptions, play a significant role in shaping outcomes for young children and their families by creating barriers to government investment in the early years. The Early Years Catalyst identified twenty-two prevailing mental models across four focus areas that influence the early childhood development system and outcomes in Australia today. Mental models about inequity, disadvantage, race and racism strongly influence the current system and its outcomes, affecting thinking across all focus areas. For example, consumers and service providers' beliefs about disadvantage drive a preference for market-based early childhood development systems, even when these systems fail or have high barriers to access. Further, children are framed as an individual rather than a collective societal responsibility. Such views undermine public support for government investment in preventative and social care services (Finlay-Jones et al., 2024). Shifting mental models around children, families, parenting, poverty and the role of government, including public provision of food and subsidies, is essential for driving meaningful change (Manson et al., 2024).

Early childhood hubs and place-based responses

Government policy and funding underpin reform in ECEC to alleviate food insecurity but local contexts and responses to food insecurity are valuable. There is growing interest and investment into child and family hubs, including Early Childhood Hubs (ECHs). ECHs provide family access to supports (including food), integrated, high-quality early learning services, developmental checks and child health services, family and parenting supports, allied health and other early intervention supports, as well as

providing a space where children and families can come together to build social networks (Social Ventures Australia, 2025b: p. 4). Many are operated by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs). These hubs can become a key touchpoint for young families, also forming links to primary schools so that families can remain connected as children age out of ECEC.

Hubs often work with local community organisations and local government to identify families and children at risk of food insecurity, coordinate food relief, offer nutrition education programs and provide stigma-free environments for carers of children to get additional support as needed. For example, Our Place is a backbone organisation in Victoria that supports children and families in disadvantaged communities by using schools as a universal platform for integrated services. It partners with government and community organisations to deliver evidence-based strategies tailored to local needs. In response to rising food insecurity, Our Place has collaborated with local partners to provide emergency food relief, nutrition education and fresh food boxes through its Food Pathways program in Carlton. There is sporadic coverage of ECHs across Australia, supported under different models and funding mechanisms, with significant gaps in areas experiencing high early childhood disadvantage (Social Ventures Australia, 2025b). We recommend Commonwealth Government investment in ECHs as part of the universal ECEC system, with a specific funding stream for the 'glue', meaning the resources, actions and conditions for integration. The 'glue' supports services to align and work collaboratively, holding services together with a shared purpose to reduce complexity for families and improve outcomes for children. Broader whole-of-community, place-based movements also provide essential places for families to feel safe, build relationships and access diverse supports, including to address hunger and food insecurity. Together these can provide powerful local responses to better equip and enable families to access adequate, nutritious food in a sustainable way. For example, local governments in Victoria are co-designing food hubs with communities to improve access to nutritious, locally produced food. In NSW, the Bourke Community Garden Project, linked with the Maranguka initiative, uses community-led design to grow fresh produce and support dietary health with a focus on those experiencing financial difficulty. In Queensland, the Feeding Queensland Kids initiative is a collaborative approach by Foodbank Queensland, OzHarvest and SecondBite | FareShare (supported by the Queensland Government) that is enabling place-based change in three communities. In Gununa/Mornington Island, Bundaberg and Ipswich, change to create food equity is being resourced by two grants streams – (1) practical and quick community grants of up to \$10,000 in resources (e.g. freezers, microwaves, food programs) to create immediate impact and (2) Food Solutions Grants for larger-scale collaborative change (e.g. food supplies, educational materials, equipment, transportation, program staff) to address the causes of food insecurity. Investment in place-based solutions designed to respond to local context and build on the strengths of each community will be key to creating lasting change to address the causes of food insecurity.

Improved data and measurement

Australia does not specifically track childhood food insecurity, despite the lifelong impact on children (Pollard et al., 2021). Nor does Australia have a measure of multidimensional child poverty to track child deprivation in key areas, including food (Bessell et al.,

2025). This data gap is of significant concern: for policy to be targeted, equitable and effective, regular ongoing population-level data are required to fully understand the geography and extent of food insecurity, and broader child poverty (Spencer, 2024). There are emerging efforts in Australia to strengthen the measurement of food and nutrition insecurity. Internationally, brief experiential measures such as the USDA Household Food Security Survey Module (HFSSM) and adaptations of the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES) (FAO, 2024), are increasingly used to capture severity, persistence and lived experience of food insecurity, including among households with children. Embedding similar measures consistently across Australian data collections would represent an important step forward in moving beyond proxy indicators such as income alone.

National Surveys such as The Census, National Health Survey or General Social Survey are ideal points at which to collect systematic food security data. Collection of data at the point at which families interact with services such as health practitioners or ECEC has also been suggested (National Nutrition Network – ECEC, 2023). However, there is some practitioner reluctance to talk about food insecurity (Loveday et al., 2023) so best-practice guidelines for collecting food security data would need to be established to avoid stigma and bias (Montez et al., 2023).

Local councils are well placed to understand, measure and support their region's food relief system. Councils can do this by developing a better understanding of the local system through mapping the supply chain, building an evidence base of a region's food supply and demand needs and playing a backbone role for the system's collaboration networks, processes and policies to enable better provision of food relief. For example, Social Ventures Australia's work with the City of Greater Geelong portrays how mapping the food-relief system and building an evidence base on supply and demand can lead to insights about potential system improvements (Roy, 2021). By gathering and understanding data on this complex supply chain, system stakeholders are better placed to identify where to focus resources to improve quality and quantity of food relief.

Food service provision across ECEC services is not systematically collected (National Nutrition Network – ECEC, 2023; Thorpe et al., 2022). Without understanding the range and context of food access and provision in ECEC settings, existing, emerging and future support services, programs and training run the risk of not addressing gaps and needs, duplication and burdening ECEC staff with additional tasks not suited to their role. The Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) is well placed to record this information. The National Nutrition Network – ECEC has proposed a single-field addition to existing assessment and rating data as a low-burden mechanism for capturing food provision practices nationally (National Nutrition Network – ECEC, 2023). Research indicates that some of the most disadvantaged children attend ECEC services that do not provide food, especially outside metropolitan areas (Thorpe et al., 2022). However, there is a limit to how useful this data would be as provision of meals in itself does not guarantee nutritional adequacy.

Key recommendations:

- **Early childhood education and care reform.** Building on positive steps towards a universal high quality ECEC system by reforming the ECEC funding model and inclusion support program to increase participation of children facing adversity. This should include:
 - **Amending the National Quality Framework** to require the provision of 50–75% of children's nutrition requirements in ECEC settings, supporting children's health, learning and development and helping to disrupt cycles of disadvantage.
 - **Direct monitoring of food quality in ECEC,** recognising food as a core component of quality ECEC, requiring consistent national financial and practical support to ECEC services.
 - **Government investment in a targeted national ECEC food subsidy program** in areas facing significant adversity and early development vulnerability to alleviate the impact of food insecurity on children at no additional cost to families.
- **Local solutions.**
 - **Commonwealth Government investment in Early Childhood Hubs** as part of the universal ECEC system, with a specific funding stream for the integration 'glue'.
 - **Co-ordinated investment by Commonwealth, state, territory and philanthropy** in place-based solutions that respond to local context, build on community strengths and strengthen food security for children and families.
- **Improved data and measurement.** Strengthen the evidence base to support targeted and effective policy responses by:
 - **Developing and adopting** a multidimensional child-centred measure of poverty that explicitly incorporates food insecurity.
 - **Implementing regular ongoing collection of population-level data** to better understand the geography and extent of food insecurity.
- **Shifting mental models.** Support system-wide change by:
 - **Building the capacity of policymakers, practitioners and service providers** to understand and engage with the mental models shaping responses to hunger, food insecurity and child poverty.
 - **Identifying and progressing interventions** that shift public narratives and build support for structural and policy solutions.
- **Commonwealth social policy reform.** Embed action on food insecurity across social and economic policy by:
 - Ensuring the **National Food Security Strategy prioritises children and families** with clear accountability mechanisms and whole-of-government coordination.
 - **Appointing Federal and State Ministers for Food Security** to facilitate cross-sector policy, practice and resource reforms.
 - **Permanently increasing income support payments to at least \$82 a day, aligned to the Age Pension,** with additional supplements for single parents and people with disability or chronic illness.
 - **Increasing Commonwealth Rent Assistance** to reduce housing stress and better reflect real rental costs (Economic Inclusion Advisory Committee, 2025), freeing household resources for food and nutrition investment.
 - **Embedding the voices of children and families with lived experience** of food insecurity, alongside a broad range of stakeholders, in strategy development and implementation.

Conclusion

Food insecurity in early childhood is an urgent and multifaceted issue that undermines children's health, development and long-term life outcomes. Despite Australia's wealth and food production capacity, a significant proportion of children continue to experience hunger and inadequate nutrition, closely tied to poverty, systemic inequities and fragmented policy responses. This paper has outlined the critical role of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) as a strategic intervention point and has highlighted the need for comprehensive reforms across income support, food provision, monitoring and place-based solutions.

To uphold every child's right to adequate food and nutrition, Australia must move beyond short-term relief and commit to structural change. This includes embedding food provision within the ECEC system, implementing targeted meal subsidies, improving data collection and shifting societal mental models that limit public investment in child wellbeing. The development of a National Food Security Strategy, alongside the Early Years Strategy and universal ECEC reforms, presents a unique opportunity to address food insecurity at scale.

Ensuring that no child goes hungry is not only a moral imperative – it is foundational to achieving equity, improving developmental outcomes and building a healthier, more inclusive society. Coordinated action across government, communities and sectors is essential to deliver lasting change and secure a future where all children can thrive.

A CHILD’S RIGHT TO FOOD: ENDING HUNGER AND FOOD INSECURITY IN THE EARLY YEARS



Early Childhood Matters

- A critical period for brain development, emotional regulation, and learning.
- Nutrition is important for cognitive and emotional development.
- Food insecurity leads to stress, poor school readiness, and long-term disadvantage.



Key Statistics

- 42% of Australian households with children experience food insecurity.
- 41% single-parent households live in poverty.
- 23.5% of children start school developmentally vulnerable: 34.7% in disadvantaged communities; 42.5% among First Nations children.



Barriers to Food Security

- Rising food prices: 9.2% increase since 2021.
- Families face trade-offs between food, housing, and healthcare.
- Overreliance on food relief charities risks stigma and government inaction.



Role of ECEC

- Children consume 50–75% of daily nutrition during ECEC.
- 74.9% of 3-year-olds and 89.6% of 4-year-olds attend preschool.
- ECEC is a key intervention point but many services lack food provision.
- Food in ECEC is inconsistent, often inadequate and not monitored.

Policy Recommendations

Commonwealth Social Policy

- Raise income support (JobSeeker, Youth Allowance, etc.) to at least \$82/day.
- Increase rent assistance to reduce housing stress.

ECEC Reform

- Universal access to quality ECEC with nutritious meals.
- Mandated food provision in ECEC.
- Monitored food quality.
- Targeted meal subsidies for disadvantaged areas.

National Food Security Strategy

- Appoint Federal & State Ministers for Food Security.
- Align with Early Years Strategy and ECEC reforms.

Place-Based Solutions:

- Early Childhood Hubs that offer integrated services including food support.

Data

- National tracking of childhood food insecurity.
- Data on ECEC food provision.

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Conflicts of Interest

None.

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