

**Project Name:** Healthy Food Basket Survey  
*A longitudinal study into the cost of a healthy diet in the Wimmera*

**Years:** 2014 - 2107

**Lead Agency:** Wimmera Food Security Working Group

**Partners:** Edenhope Hospital, Rural Northwest Health, West Wimmera Health Service, Wimmera Health Care Group, Wimmera Primary Care Partnership

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## Project Description

### **Background**

In 2013 Healthy Eating was selected as a new regional health prevention priority for the Wimmera Primary Care Partnership and its partner agencies.

As a new priority, the Wimmera PCP and its partners sought to identify and research issues around healthy eating and food security in our region to better support our health prevention work.

A Wimmera Food Security Working Group was formed comprising Wimmera PCP, Edenhope Hospital, Rural Northwest Health, West Wimmera Health Service and Wimmera Health Care Group.

**Aim** In 2014 the Wimmera Food Security Working Group commenced a Healthy Food Basket survey **to measure healthy food access, including availability and cost** across the Wimmera catchment's four Local Government Areas – Hindmarsh, Horsham, West Wimmera and Yarriambiack. Monitoring the cost and availability of a nutritious basket of food can provide useful information on economic and physical access to nutritious food.

The survey was based on Monash University's **Victorian Healthy Food Basket Survey (VHFB)** trialled state-wide between 2012 -2014 in 12 *Healthy Together Victoria* Communities. This survey looked at the cost of food for **four different families** receiving Centrelink government benefits income for a fortnight (a family of four; single parent family; female over 65 years and male 18-50 years).

*"A healthy diet costs around 30% of government benefits income. **Anything over 30% is classified as unaffordable and increases the risk of food insecurity.** The average Australian spends 20% of their income on food."*

(Dr C Palmero, Researcher - Monash University ~ Victorian Healthy Food Basket Survey)<sup>1</sup>

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## **Methods**

The Healthy Food Basket is defined as a nutritionally adequate food basket consisting of *44 core foods* (fruit, vegetables, meat and meat alternatives, milk and milk products, breads and cereals and *non core foods* (oil, margarine and sugar). Ten "*unhealthy*", discretionary foods and drinks (chips, ice-cream, biscuits, soft drink) were also included in the survey for price comparison.





Monash University ran a VHFB training session for 12 local health workers to train them in data collection using the VHFB tool to record prices for each food item. These health workers then visited supermarkets across the Wimmera region for 3 years (2014-2017) to record this data.

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<sup>1</sup> The price of a healthy diet: new study shows divide between rural and metro Victoria – Monash University/News/Articles 31 March 2016

## Data collection

- 6 seasons  **Winter 2014** >  **Summer 2017**
- 4 family groups *\*based on fortnightly basket spend for each group*
- 16 supermarkets
- 14 towns

Wimmera PCP collated the data and released ½ yearly progress reports to the group. Results were also shared with Monash University's VHFB research team.

## Findings

### The study found that:

- The average cost of a healthy food basket for a Family of 4 **exceeded 30% of government benefits in all 4 Wimmera LGA's from 2014 to 2017**
- The average cost of a healthy food basket for a Single Parent family and a Single Male **exceeded 30% of government benefits in 3 Wimmera LGA's from 2014 to 2017**
- Basket costs **increased** in the majority of regional stores from **2014 to 2017**
- The cost of fruit and vegetables **varied over time and between seasons** more than meats, breads/cereals, dairy foods and non core and unhealthy foods
- The further a store was from the regional centre (Horsham) generally the higher the total cost of a healthy basket of food. Costs varied significantly by up to **\$208** across the Wimmera catchment *\*Summer 2017/8*
- Food availability was consistently **higher** in the regional centre (Horsham)
- No association was found between basket cost and the socio-economic index of the town in which the store tested was located

## Conclusion

The study has revealed new insights into the cost of food as a key determinant of health in the Wimmera. For some groups in our community access to a nutritious diet is much less affordable than for the general population. They certainly face greater risks of food insecurity and stress. People living in smaller towns also generally experience higher food costs and less access to healthy foods.

## References:

**Development of a healthy food basket for Victoria** – C Palmero and A Wilson-Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health 2007 Vol 31 No. 4

**A longitudinal study of the cost of food in Victoria influenced by geography and nutritional quality** – C Palmero, J McCartan, S Kleve, K Sinha, A Shiell – Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health 2016 Vol 40 No. 3

**Too little and too much: exploring the paradox of food insecurity and obesity in disadvantaged populations** – VicHealth Feb 2016

## Wimmera Food Security Working Group:

