Wellington Primary Care Partnership

The Cost and Availability of Healthy Food in Wellington – May 2010

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ABSTRACT

Introduction

Irregular access to safe, nutritionally adequate, culturally acceptable food from non-emergency sources is known as ‘food insecurity’. Food insecurity can have a detrimental impact on physical, mental and social wellbeing. In 2007, 4.1% of people in Wellington were found to be food insecure, that is, in the previous 12 months they had run out of food and had not been able to afford to buy more. The aim of this study was to investigate the cost and availability of healthy food in the local government area (LGA) of Wellington in order to inform future health promotion work addressing food security.

Method

During May 2010, a Victorian Healthy Food Basket (VHFB) survey was conducted in 21 stores across 15 towns located in Wellington. The VHFB is designed to meet the nutritional requirements of four different family types for a fortnight and can be employed to assess the cost and availability of food.

Results

Eleven stores in Wellington had all 44 items in the VHFB; while at least 80% of the VHFB items were available in 14 of the stores surveyed. The median cost to purchase the VHFB for a family of two adults and two children in Wellington in May 2010 was $444.79. This is equivalent to 34.59% of a family’s income if on unemployment benefits. The VHFB was found to be cheaper in towns with a large chain supermarket and more than one store. These towns were also more likely to have a full basket of food available.

Conclusion

There are many small towns in Wellington where a full VHFB is not available. The purchase healthy food in Wellington can cost up to 37% of an unemployed family’s income. This is considerably higher than the Victorian household average of 17% and may be unaffordable for many people. These findings are consistent with similar studies in rural Victoria. The results of this study will assist in identifying interventions for specific communities, populations or stores that may increase access to healthy and affordable food in Wellington.
Introduction

Access to adequate and nutritious food is essential to good health and is a basic human right (VicHealth 2010). Unfortunately, large numbers of Australians do not have regular access to affordable healthy foods (VicHealth 2010). Irregular access to safe, nutritionally adequate, culturally acceptable food from non-emergency sources is known as ‘food insecurity’ (VicHealth 2010).

Food insecurity can have a detrimental impact on physical, mental and social wellbeing (VicHealth 2010). People can experience food insecurity in their lifetime for various reasons such as lack of income, an inability to walk, drive and carry shopping home, or inadequate food storage and cooking facilities (VicHealth 2010).

In 2007, 4.1% of people in Wellington were found to be food insecure, that is, in the previous 12 months they had run out of food and had not been able to afford to buy more (CIV 2007). This compares to 6% in Gippsland and 6.2% in Victoria (CIV 2007).

The Victorian Healthy Food Basket (VHFB) tool was recently developed to measure the cost of food for people living in Victoria in relation to family composition, food choices and food accessibility (Palermo, Claire & Wilson 2007). The VHFB tool calculates the cost of the basket of food for four different reference families with varying nutritional needs: two adults and two children; a single mother with two children; a single adult male; and a single elderly female (Palermo, Claire & Wilson 2007). The VHFB survey tool also determines the percentage of the maximum fortnightly government unemployment benefit received by each family required to purchase the basket (Palermo, Claire & Wilson 2007).

The average Australian household spends 17% of their income on food (ABS 2005). For families reliant on government unemployment benefits however, this proportion is substantially higher. Data from previous surveys indicates that the cost of the VHFB for a family of two adults and two children can account for anywhere between 35% and 45% of unemployment benefits (Bradley & Angarane 2009; OEHCSA 2009; Palermo, C et al. 2008).

The aim of this study was to investigate the cost and availability of healthy food in the local government area (LGA) of Wellington for a range of different family types receiving government benefits. The findings of this study will help to identify areas in Wellington where future health promotion initiatives addressing food security are needed.
Method

Using the VHFB tool, a cross-sectional survey of the cost and availability of healthy food was conducted in supermarkets and general stores across Wellington during May 2010. The VHFB consists of 44 items, selected according to the Australian Guide to Healthy Eating, plus two extra foods, a soft drink (Coca Cola) and a chocolate bar (Mars Bar), selected to allow a price and availability comparison between healthy and unhealthy food (Palermo, Claire & Wilson 2007). The VHFB was designed to meet the nutritional requirements of four different family types, based on current Nutrient Reference Values (NRV) for Australia and New Zealand, for a fortnight: ‘family’ (44 year old male and female, 18 year old female, 8 year old male); ‘single mother’ (44 year old female, 18 year old female, 8 year old male); ‘elderly woman’ (71 year old female); and ‘single man’ (male >31 years of age). These four family types were selected as they are considered to be most at risk of food insecurity.

The cost of the basket was then compared with the fortnightly government unemployment benefits received by each different family type. This income was determined using government Centrelink data from May 2010, with the assumption that no family members were employed and that each family was receiving the maximum rate of rent assistance: family, $1286.06; single mother, $951.36; elderly woman, $814.50; and single man, $576.20.

All supermarkets and general stores registered in Wellington were considered eligible. General stores in towns with more than two supermarkets were not included unless located more than 2 km from the nearest supermarket. Twenty-four stores were identified however data was not available for three. Store managers were sent a letter of notification prior to the VHFB survey being undertaken.

The VHFB data was collected on a standardized collection sheet with accompanying detailed instructions. Ethics approval was not required to access this public data. Prices of the cheapest, non-generic brands were recorded in the specific package size. If the specified size was not available, the price of the next smaller size was recorded and quantities adjusted accordingly. No discounted or special prices were recorded. Where items were not available, the cost of the item from the median priced store in the area was used to calculate a comparative total basket cost.
Results

Store Distribution

In total, 21 stores across 15 towns in Wellington were surveyed. Stores types included chain supermarkets, independent supermarkets and general stores. The largest town in Wellington had two chain supermarkets and two independent supermarkets. Three towns had two stores; a chain and an independent supermarket, two independent supermarkets, or an independent supermarket and a general store. The remaining 11 towns had only one store. Two of these 11 lone stores were independent supermarkets with the remainder being general stores. Of the 2 chain supermarkets represented in Wellington, neither were located as a lone store in a town.

Availability

Of the 21 stores across 15 towns in Wellington surveyed, 11 (52%) stores across 6 (40%) towns had all 44 VHFB items available. In contrast, the soft drink and chocolate bar were available in all 21 (100%) stores surveyed.

Fourteen (67%) out of the 21 stores surveyed could supply ≥80% of VHFB items. Of these 14 stores, 3 were chain supermarkets, 8 were independent supermarkets and 3 were general stores (Figure 1.). Four of these 14 stores were the only store located within the town.

Figure 1. Number of Stores in Wellington stocking ≥80% of VHFB Items
**Cost**

The median cost of the VHFB in Wellington during May 2010 was $444.79 for a family; $302.83 for a single mother; $106.63 for an elderly woman; and $134.80 for a single man (Figure 2.). For all of the reference families, the VHFB cost the most when purchased from a general store in a lone store town; and cost the least when purchased from a chain supermarket in the largest town.

*Figure 2. Cost to Purchase VHFB in Wellington during May 2010*

When the average cost of the VHFB is determined relative to store type, chain supermarkets tend to be cheaper, while general stores tend to be more expensive (Figure 3.).

*Figure 3. Cost to Purchase VHFB in Wellington during May 2010 According to Store Type*
Percentage of Unemployment Benefit

The median percentage of unemployment benefit required to purchase the VHFB in Wellington during May 2010 was 34.59% for a family; 31.83% for a single mother; 13.10% for an elderly woman; and 23.40% for a single man (Figure 4.). For a family, the percentage of unemployment benefit required to purchase the VHFB ranged from 31.88% in a chain supermarket in the largest town to 37.62% in a general store in a lone store town (Figure 4.).

Figure 4. Percentage of Unemployment Benefit Required to Purchase VHFB in Wellington during May 2010

Discussion

This study provides important insight into the cost and availability of healthy food in the LGA of Wellington for family types most vulnerable to food insecurity.

In Wellington during May 2010, a full VHFB was more likely to be available in a chain supermarket or an independent supermarket and in towns where there was more than one store (Figure 1.). In towns where there was only one store, access to a full VHFB was less likely. There are also a number of towns in Wellington that have no store. Families living in these towns are required to travel up to 33km to the nearest town with a full VHFB available. In the nearest town where a full VHFB was available a family would still require 31.88% of their unemployment benefit to purchase the VHFB.
The findings from this study also show substantial variation in the cost of the VHFB in different store types across Wellington (Figure 3.). The VHFB cost the most to purchase from a general store in a lone store town; and cost the least to purchase from chain supermarket in a town where there was a choice of stores in which to shop.

The results of this study indicate that in Wellington, a family of two adults and two children may need to spend up to 37% of their unemployment benefits to purchase the VHFB (Figure 4). These findings are consistent with previous surveys which have shown that the cost of a VHFB for a family can account for anywhere between 35% and 45% of unemployment benefits which is substantially higher than the Australian household average, 17% (ABS 2005; Bradley & Angarane 2009; OEHCSA 2009; Palermo, C et al. 2008). Taking into consideration indispensable household expenses, it has been proposed that food should account for no more than 30% of income in order to remain affordable (Williams, James & Kwan 2004).

The elderly woman’s expenditure on a VHFB, 13%, was in line with the estimated average income expenditure on food, 17%, providing evidence that single pensioners in Wellington have good economic food access (ABS 2005). However, other work has reported that due to physical issues such as mobility, disability, illness and transport, the elderly are still vulnerable to food insecurity (Booth & Smith 2001).

This study has several limitations. For instance, the VHFB records the price of the most inexpensive brand of product. Using non-generic products means the basket is not the cheapest available but ensures quality and reliability of the tool. If generic brands were chosen, it is anticipated that the total cost of the basket may have been reduced, providing a different picture of the cost of food relative to income. Also, the VHFB is based on a limited food culture and does not take into account the diverse food cultures that exist in Wellington.

Purchase of healthy food in Wellington requires a considerable proportion of the lowest income and thus may be unaffordable for some residents. People on low incomes and all people living in Wellington’s isolated communities without a car, money to run a car, access to public transport or the physical ability to go to larger areas to shop are at risk of food insecurity. Connections have been made between similar isolation and a high burden of disease (Burns et al. 2004). The universal ability to purchase soft drink and a chocolate bar at all stores in Wellington further compounds this health risk.
The VHFB is a suitable tool to indicate areas of need relating to food cost and availability in Wellington. The results of this study combined with further consultation with community members will assist in identifying interventions acceptable to specific communities, populations or stores that may increase access to healthy and affordable food in Wellington.

Conclusion

This study investigated the cost of the VHFB across 21 stores in Wellington LGA during May 2010. The VHFB was significantly cheaper when purchased from chain supermarket in a town where there was a choice of stores in which to shop. The cost of the VHFB in Wellington appears to be most expensive and potentially unaffordable for a typical and single-parent family, and for a single man. This study demonstrated the ability of the VHFB to assess food security for family types in Wellington, providing evidence to support the development of food and nutrition policies that improve access to healthy food.
References


