

Food security

"Parents that are having a hard time at work... not having enough money to get food."
Mokopuna¹

All mokopuna and their whānau have the right to have access to healthy food without missing out on other life essentials.

A healthy food environment is one where healthy food is the easiest and most accessible choice, and where mokopuna (children and young people) are free from harmful marketing and excessively processed foods. In Aotearoa New Zealand, food insecurity affects the lives of a significant number of mokopuna. On average, over one in four children are food insecure, meaning food runs out often or sometimes.² One third of mokopuna Māori live in homes where food runs out sometimes or often.² This is a breach of Crown obligations under Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Over half of Pacific mokopuna also live in homes where food runs out sometimes or often.²

Under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, all mokopuna, no matter their background, have the inherent right to an adequate standard of living.³ They should enjoy the benefits of good nutrition so they grow up healthy. This is vital to support their physical and mental health, education outcomes and lifelong development.

Rising food costs and the cost-of-living crisis are continuing to make it more difficult for low-income households to afford healthy foods, and whānau (families) in wider income brackets are also struggling with rising food costs. Incomes for many whānau are not keeping pace with these increasing costs. This has led to an increase in food insecurity among children and young people. Access to healthy food is further impacted by the widespread availability and marketing of unhealthy foods, especially in high-deprivation communities, which contributes to poor dietary intake.

Evidence shows that poor nutrition and hunger negatively impact learning by reducing the ability to concentrate at school and making it harder to self-regulate behaviours and emotions. Mokopuna with reduced nutrient intake are also more likely to face adverse health outcomes, developmental risks, and malnutrition, including obesity. Food insecurity can lead to parents and whānau having to make choices they shouldn't have to, for example, between buying health food or affording adequate heating in the home. These stresses can have negative effects on whānau dynamics, creating risks of family harm and child maltreatment.

In a small and relatively wealthy country like ours no mokopuna should be going without food. Food insecurity is avoidable, and eliminating it is an achievable goal. Improving food

security and supporting healthy eating habits early in life will boost children's physical and mental health and improve education achievement. In turn, this will enable them to reach their full potential, leading to more equitable outcomes and benefitting society as a whole.

Our calls to action

We need an all-of-government and all-of-community response to address the challenges within our food system. We call on the Government to take significant steps to address food insecurity as part of its commitment to reducing child material hardship the Child and Youth Strategy 2025-27. In particular we call on the Government to:

- **Ensure whānau have the resources they need** to provide nourishing meals, with adequate income levels and financial support that ensures healthy food is never out of reach. This includes increasing minimum wage and benefit levels, supporting policies that improve housing affordability, and resourcing community development that assists those most in need of material support.
- **Sustain multi-year investment in free and healthy school lunches.** Commit to long term, multi-year funding for free healthy school lunches for all mokopuna who need food security. This should be delivered in non-stigmatising ways, such as the whole-of-school programme Ka Ora, Ka Ako which reaches whole schools. Any school lunch programme must be informed by the views and voices of mokopuna, whānau, schools, kura and communities through regular reviews and evaluation.
- **Increase support for resilient community food networks**, including Māori-led food sovereignty initiatives.
- **Create healthier food environments** through policies, interventions, and accountability mechanisms that limit children's exposure to harmful marketing and unhealthy foods, including regulating labelling, advertising and sponsorship, and limiting product placement and price promotions of energy-dense, nutrient-poor food and beverages in supermarkets.

What mokopuna say

We have asked mokopuna about what they need for a good life, to inform the first Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy, and the refresh of this Strategy in 2024. They told us about the risks mokopuna face due to poverty.

"...When children go to school hungry or without enough warm clothing it impacts their ability to learn, communicate and participate in class. Without being able to do these basic things, it can impact their future career, and most importantly their wellbeing."

Student⁴

"Food insecurity is a problem that comes in different shapes and sizes, you don't know who is affected. People are too shy to talk about their struggles. We need to accept everyone as they are with open arms and treat everyone with respect."

Year 13, St Vinnies food bank volunteer⁵

We talked to young people who had volunteered for a community food bank during Covid-19 lockdowns and heard:

[The work is] "stressful but powerful. I had a sense of myself being moulded through being exposed to people in need. It shifts your perspective in life going forward. I can understand the mana and dignity that other people hold."

Female graduate, Vinnies school leader and volunteer⁶

"I have a busy life with study, but this is an investment in myself and leaving a legacy - you're changing the world where it's needed."

Male university student, Vinnies tuakana leader⁷

The Government has evaluated its Healthy School Lunches Programme, including the voices of mokopuna to show its value.

"Before the (healthy, free school) lunches, I was feeling horrible. I would eat deep fried food every day. I was eating lollies for lunch and fizzy drinks from the dairy. I felt yuck and less motivated. I honestly wouldn't come to school because I would feel crappy about myself."

Student⁸

Endnotes

¹ [“You need to get in early, as soon as you see people struggling.” Understanding the life-course journey.](#) Mana Mokopuna 2024.

² [New Zealand Health Survey](#) (Ministry of Health, 2024) 27% of children under age 15 miss out on food sometimes or often. This is 55% for Pacific and 34% for mokopuna Māori. Also reported in: MSD 2025 [Child Poverty Related Indicators 2023-24 - Report on the Child and Youth Strategy](#)

³ Adequate standard of living: Article 27, and benefit from social security provided by the State: Article 26. UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Te Tiriti o Waitangi provides for ngā tikanga katoa rite tahi, meaning equality and equity should be experienced by mokopuna Māori and all mokopuna.

⁴ [What Makes a Good Life?](#) Mana Mokopuna 2019

⁵ [Child Poverty Monitor 2022 Community stories](#) Mana Mokopuna

⁶ [Child Poverty Monitor 2022 Community stories](#) Mana Mokopuna

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ [Ka Ora, Ka Ako | New Zealand Healthy School Lunches Programme Impact Evaluation](#)