

THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 LEVEL 4 LOCKDOWN ON FOOD SECURITY AMONG WHĀNAU OF DECILE 1 SCHOOLS

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Abstract

Interviews with stakeholders in deprived Hawke's Bay schools early in the COVID-19 lockdown documented exacerbated food insecurity among school whānau. Our enquiry highlights the support role played by well-informed teacher aides and school-whānau networks, which were easily and inexpensively resourced, intuitive, proactive and collaborative, ensuring whānau access to appropriate support according to need. We expect our findings to further inform such initiatives in any further lockdown. Additionally, we posit that such school-based operations could become the nexus of a primary food-security hub, alongside the Lunches in Schools programme, working in a tailor-made fashion bespoke to whānau without a charity or welfare label. Given the recent well-resourced COVID-19-related investment into the business world and the ongoing lack of progress in the reduction of child poverty, in the post-COVID-19-lockdown environment, simple structural rearrangements for the chronically food insecure are likely to become politically acceptable to the nation.

Keywords

food security, food insecurity, COVID-19, deprivation, food in schools, school whānau

Background

Food insecurity for children in New Zealand has been well documented. Utter et al. (2017) reported increasing food insecurity among young people over the past eight years, particularly in low socio-economic neighbourhoods and Māori and Pasifika households. Media reports during the COVID-19 lockdown have highlighted an exponentially increased demand on food banks and Ministry of Social Development food grants nationally (Robson, 2020), as well as the emerging socio-economic crisis pushing normally food-secure families into poverty (Carey et al., 2020).

In March 2020 when New Zealand went into level 4 lockdown because of COVID-19, the Nourishing Hawke's Bay: He wairua tō te kai research project had just completed an initial round of stakeholder interviews of an enquiry into increasing obesity among Hawke's Bay children funded by the National Science Challenges. These interviews gave major insights into the magnitude and impact of food insecurity for predominantly Māori and Pasifika students of decile 1 (low socio-economic) schools, with some principals mentioning the role of the Friday cook-up as students had limited access to food over the

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weekend. Therefore, on the announcement of the lockdown, it was instantly obvious that food insecurity would be exacerbated with the closure of schools. We expedited another round of enquiry in these schools to understand the specific impact of food insecurity for children during the lockdown.

The aim of this project was to assess the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown and the subsequent, almost immediate, closure of schools on the lives of the children and whānau for whom food security was already an issue. Approval was granted by the Eastern Institute of Technology Research Ethics and Approvals Committee (Ref 20/03) for the original project and this variation during the COVID-19 level 4 period.

Method

We conducted one-on-one interviews with five key stakeholders with whom we had an established relationship from the Nourishing Hawke's Bay: He wairua tō te kai research project. Participants were the four principals of decile 1 primary schools in high deprivation Hawke's Bay suburbs, and a community organiser involved in setting up a school lunch programme in a decile 1 primary and secondary school.

We probed the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on (a) the role of the school in food security for their students, (b) likely access to food at home by the students' whānau (c) the exacerbation of existing socio-economic pressure on these whānau and (d) the psychological state of students and their whānau.

Interviews were undertaken via Zoom in the second week of the level 4 lockdown. They were audio-recorded, and comprehensive notes were taken at the time. Thematic analysis of these notes was undertaken independently by both authors and then collated.

Findings

Three major themes emerged from the interviews: exacerbation of food insecurity by lockdown, shortcomings of the COVID-19 response, and the role that some school networks were able to play regarding food security in the lockdown response. These themes were common across the interviews with school principals and those with the community organiser.

The lockdown period and reduction of opportunities for paid work, the closure of schools and school food provision, and the limiting of social connections laid bare the high level of deprivation in these communities.

Some households were reported to comprise

15–20 people in three-bedroom houses. School principals observed that many whānau had no economic or other reserves—no credit, limited or no phone data, and high debt. The level of students' internet connectivity in the home was not high, and access to internet-connected devices was very poor. For some, the COVID-19 lockdown was an intensification of their usual situation. For others, this situation was new.

School principals also highlighted the risks of isolating children in home situations that were not always ideal, and sometimes not safe. Outside of the lockdown, school was considered a welcome freedom to many children in such situations and isolation at home was stressful for them. Households where essential workers still had to go to work were now likely to have children at home who were less than adequately cared for.

Food insecurity was a major concern and was the focus of several of the subsequent aid systems put into place. Prior to lockdown, many of these children were reported to have 10 out of their 21 weekly meals provided at school through a variety of mostly charity-based programmes, such as KidsCan, Fonterra Milk for Schools, the interagency Fruit in Schools, and a school- or government-initiated school lunch programme. With these meals no longer available, gaining adequate access to food was said to be difficult and, more pointedly, accessing food had caused many whānau to breach social distancing regulations and to break their bubble by visiting whānau (usually grandparents) or friends and neighbours to obtain food. While these practices were common and even usual before lockdown, the need to respect social distancing and stay within household bubbles made these practices unsafe.

Interviews highlighted both the need for, but also the inadequacies of, the present emergency response organisations.

Half of our interviewees reported that response agencies were currently offering a one-size-fits-all response that was not targeted to provide appropriate support where required. They reported that agencies lacked detailed knowledge of the varied needs of whānau, were preparing support packs centrally, and were short of staff because their pool of volunteers were often older people or those with chronic conditions who were now in isolation. Further, these generic helping agencies were considered poorly coordinated at this early stage of level 4 lockdown and have significant response lag time. These principals, acutely aware of what was being supplied to whānau, felt strongly that their own school networks provided better visibility

into needs at a whānau level; for instance, a particularly common and pressing need in families was sanitary products.

The final and particularly promising theme to emerge was the potential for schools to be an organising resource.

Principals reported that they had well-developed networks built up over years during which teachers and teacher aides had been looking out for the welfare of their students. Outside of food security in crises like this, other regular welfare needs serviced include healthy exercise, cultural support, access to health care and even trauma counselling for students and whānau. In general, with regular face-to-face contact between students and teachers, the teachers have been able to scan children for potential issues—but the lockdown precluded this.

During the lockdown, around half of the participants had been involved in or with the Tīhei Mauri Ora (the Ngāti Kahungunu Iwi/Hawke's Bay District Health Board) response to COVID-19. Their schools, however, were able to complement the Tīhei Mauri Ora approach and, with prior intelligence, respond rapidly by activating their lines of communication to whānau through whānau coordinators and/or social media platforms. Food-security needs were addressed alongside students' lockdown educational needs; wellbeing was prioritised and social needs were assessed on an ongoing basis. Dedicated coordinators or teachers rang whānau in their homes, and if there were concerns, school principals even reported that whānau coordinators, maintaining social distancing, would drive to the students' houses to check on them and to deliver supplies as needed.

Another aspect of school support of this type in such an unprecedented civil emergency is that school-based networks were considered by informants to support whānau in maintaining their own rangatiratanga. For these whānau whose vulnerability had been exposed by the COVID-19 lockdown, principals felt that school support was welcomed and easily accepted without any sense of having received a hand-out and that school-based support was not considered charity or social welfare. Rather, it was accepted as a continuation and extension of the existing support from schools for student wellbeing.

Discussion

Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child (1989), ratified by New Zealand in 1993, stipulates that all children have a right to nutritious food, but food-security issues are

reported by 40% of secondary students in this country (Utter et al., 2017). The relationship of poverty to food insecurity in Hawke's Bay school communities is therefore not unique to this region, and an exacerbation of food insecurity by the COVID-19 lockdown was predictable. This was confirmed by the participant interviews of this study. Young people with food-security concerns are also more likely to report poor indicators of health and wellbeing (Utter et al., 2017), and the advent and the recent extension of the free Lunches in Schools programme in this region evidences this need in Hawke's Bay.

There is evidence of ongoing interest in schools acting as community hubs in areas of poverty (Cleveland et al., 2020; Haig, 2014), and the primary theme emerging from these interviews is the key role that decile 1 schools were able to play in supporting whānau during the COVID-19 lockdown and with relatively little resourcing. In addition, we see that this was because their school networks stretch into family groups, understand the complexities of and the presenting needs of whānau, and create support structures in which whānau already participate. The stories gathered in these interviews also show that networks such as these might also service a wide range of needs among students and whānau outside of public health crisis situations as well.

The primary recommendation is that such schools be recognised as sites from which to coordinate emergency responses that are likely to reach whānau in need in a highly effective fashion. In addition, we conclude that an additional sustainable resource targeted at developing networks of teacher aides and similar roles (which are a by-product of the school seeking best outcomes for students in usual times) would purposefully support longer-term food security alongside the aims of the government's Ka Ora Ka Ako Lunches in Schools programme.

Conclusions

The insights from this situation report are central to understanding how to better support whānau in any further iterations of lockdown, or indeed, in the long-term picture of socio-economic, welfare or wellbeing assistance in high deprivation communities. Such whānau assistance can be best deployed in a tailor-made, bespoke fashion for the whānau concerned. The closest and most consistent community connections that many whānau have are the schools that their children attend. The decile 1 schools in this study are active in developing trusting relationships with their students and

their whānau and have the most effective communication networks in those communities.

The investment required to robustly effect change across schools in low socio-economic communities by enhancing networking and support is relatively small, demanding neither specialist workers nor new infrastructure. Given the generous COVID-19-related investment into the business world and stark lack of progress in the reduction of child poverty, we speculate that in the post-COVID-19 environment, rearrangement of affairs for the chronically deprived is likely to become politically acceptable to the nation. Linking a school's special knowledge of the needs of its children and their whānau into this is critical.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the participants who gave their time to be interviewed for this project, the organiser of the charitable trust and our colleagues from Nourishing Hawke's Bay: He wairua tō te kai for their ongoing discussions. Ngā mihi nui ki a koutou katoa.

Glossary

He wairua tō te kai	There is more to food than nutrition
rangatiratanga	sense of independence and agency
whānau	family/extended family

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