

The impact of food insecurity on mental well being and social inclusion

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Food insecurity is the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or the limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially accepted ways (Andersen 1990). Recent data indicates that 4.6% of Australians living in Victoria are food insecure (VPHS 2006). Amongst single parented households with children one in four Victorian households are food insecure. Food insecurity is known to impact on both physical and mental well, being particularly amongst women. In the current study we wished to examine the experience of food insecurity in single parent families with particular emphasis on psychological and social impact. This study is part of a multi-methods research project aimed to determine the relationship between poverty, food insecurity and obesity. In the current study, a photo assisted food taxonomy was used within an in depth interview to examine how available financial resources shape access to, preparation of, social meaning and psychological role of food. Participants were recruited through an existing research project which sought to explore the experiences of single parents on welfare. The final number of participants was determined by data saturation. The qualitative data was analysed inductively using ethnographic analysis techniques including structural, componential and contrast analyses (Spradley, 1979). In addition, the data was analysed critically (Carspecken, 1997). Preliminary data from 20 subjects indicated that families develop many coping mechanisms to deal with food insecurity but that the experience of food insecurity is stressful and marginalises adults and children socially. The purchase of

many 'nutritionally poor' foods was determined by economic need and feelings associated with social exclusion though it was apparent that many householders were nutritionally literate. The impact of food insecurity on social and mental well being must be factored into any public health interventions, economic or social policies directed at improving either nutritional or mental health.