



COVID-19 Lockdown Briefing

01 September 2021

Food Security

Prior to Level 4

It has been around 18-months since words like lockdown and food insecurity became common household terms for many New Zealanders. The latest national Level 4 lockdown began on 17 August 2021 and since then questions around food security for people and whānau, particularly for those who are in vulnerable situations, emerge once again.

Since the first national level 4 lockdown in March 2020, there have been major changes in how we address food insecurity issues. These include the significant expansion of Ka Ora, Ka Ako healthy school lunches programme, and the government funding of three national partner organisations: the New Zealand Food Network, Kore Hiakai Zero Hunger Collective, and the Aotearoa Food Rescue Alliance.

What's Happening Now?

Despite these important changes, critical food insecurity issues for people and whānau persist. The number of food parcels distributed can be a measurement of the hardships people are facing.

The shock of the Covid lockdowns in 2020, particularly the economic and employment impacts, led to massive surges in food parcel provision. The Salvation Army distributed over 37,000 food parcels nationally in the original 8 weeks of levels 3 and 4 lockdowns in 2020. Those numbers have settled

since then. But in the week ending 28 August 2021, there was an 84 percent increase in the number of food parcels distributed nationally compared with the previous week, as shown in **Figure 1**. Most of this spike is due to a significant increase in food parcels being distributed in Auckland in the last week, particularly in Salvation Army centres in South Auckland. This marked rise in food-related challenges is also illustrated in the enquiries to our 0800 helpline.

Figure 1: Food parcels distributed nationally by The Salvation Army

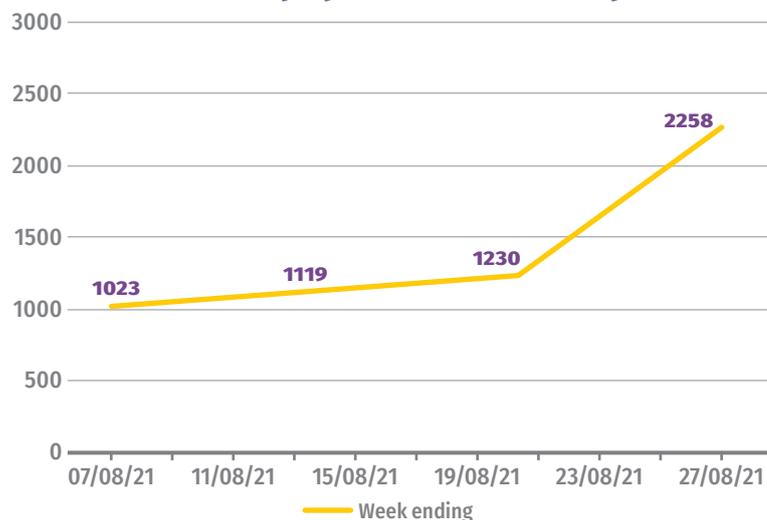
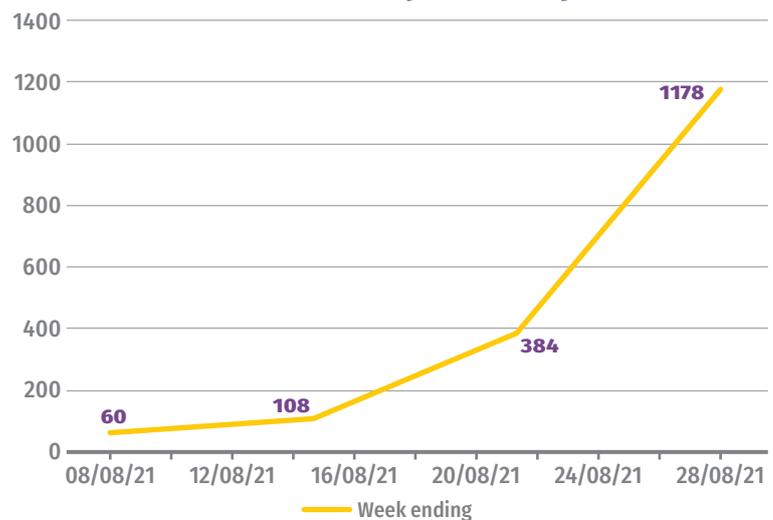


Figure 2 shows the massive surge in food parcel enquires since this new lockdown began. Clearly food insecurity and food-related challenges are substantial and rising in our communities.

Also, there continues to be a steady flow of people seeking help for our addictions treatment support, housing assistance and financial mentoring help in this lockdown. In our experience, food hardship is always a symptom of other issues facing that person or whānau. Providing food parcels is a window into other challenges and hardship for that person or whānau. In discussions, over the first two weeks of this lockdown,

with seven Salvation Army Foodbanks across the country, some key insights were raised from our frontline experts about the wider issues this food insecurity was revealing.

Figure 2: Food Parcels Enquiries to The Salvation Army 0800 Helpline



- Food Hardship** All our Foodbanks reported steady or significant increases in food parcels across the country, particularly in South Auckland. Concerns were raised around the sustainability of this provision if tighter lockdown restrictions continue and people face increased hardship. National and our internal systems seem to be working well at this stage. This indicates it is not a food crisis yet as there is enough to meet the demands. But this could quickly change. Other issues include families losing access to ‘food in schools’ initiatives which increases pressure at home; also, access issues for many vulnerable people because of travel costs, lack of vehicles, or single parents unable to shop because their children cannot accompany them.
- Employment** Major concerns were raised by our people about workers on casual contracts, migrant workers not able to access support, self-employed challenges and people in unstable jobs. This includes the Wage Subsidy not ‘kicking in’ yet or being insufficient to meet expenses.
- Family Harm** Reports of increased provision of food parcels for police to distribute to family violence and harm situations.
- Digital Access** Many people are still unable to access support online because they don’t have enough data/credit or are not familiar with online platforms.
- Self-care of our Staff** Many of our centres have split into smaller teams where possible for safety and to ensure staff can be rotated. There is an acute awareness of ensuring our staff are well and safe during this new lockdown.

Moving Forward—Responses Urgently Needed

- Improve access to food for specific groups of people unable, or too fearful, to shop in supermarkets, including increasing delivery efforts from supermarkets for these groups; increased support for social service providers to enable food parcel deliveries; and more support for single parents and their children, for example, specific supermarket shopping time slots for single parents and children.
- Ensure the Ministry of Education is connected and supporting families who usually receive the healthy school lunches programme. The funding has already been allocated to food support and should be used for these families. If not, it is likely they will put more pressure on social service providers.

- Strongly question the rationale for treating alcohol delivery as an essential service during the lockdown, especially since food deliveries by social service providers are currently difficult.
- Since the Manaaki Manuhiri programme has ended, ensure that migrant workers have full entitlement to the Emergency Benefit with MSD.

Housing

Prior to Level 4

House prices continue to increase at unsustainable and unaffordable rates despite record levels of building consents for new housing. New rental laws are in force to improve rental housing quality and increase security of tenure for renters, but rents are rising faster than earnings, especially for those on lower incomes.

There are 3600 more households in public housing than before Covid-19 began—from 68,100 to 71,700, according to Ministry of Housing and Urban Development Public Housing Quarterly Reports. The number of Māori/iwi housing is also increasing, including 902 housing units transferred to Te Āhuru Mōwai, in Porirua, in October 2020.

Transitional housing places have also increased by 50 percent, from just over 3000 in March 2020 to 4430 by June 2021. But housing need, as measured by the public housing register, is growing faster—up by 8200 since March 2020 (16,300) to just under 24,500 in June 2021, a 50 percent increase. Half of those on the housing register are Māori and 12 percent are Pasifika.

The number of emergency housing grants paid out by MSD is still significantly higher than those issued pre-Covid, but people relying on welfare benefits are only marginally any better off. The Winter Energy Payment has been reduced this winter and the July benefit increases (allowing for inflation) barely compensate for this.

What's Happening Now?

The implementation of the Level 4 lockdown had to be responded to quickly. For Salvation Army services, the challenge is to keep everyone safe, both residents and the support staff working with them.

There is limited ability to take on new clients into supported or transitional housing, and Kainga Ora has stopped accepting people into new rentals. Some people faced difficult decisions about staying in hostel-style accommodations supported accommodation, with some clients deciding to go elsewhere.

There was an immediate, although small, increase in calls through to our 0800-number after the lockdown was announced from people needing housing support. One support worker commented, 'I know this is a small thing, but having an 0800 number also works, as some of our whānau don't have credit to call/text'.

Initial reports are that people in Salvation Army housing are getting on with it and doing their best to comply with the Level 4 restrictions. It is hardest for those in motel housing with limited space and facilities. There is real concern for those in the community in private rentals and those living in poor quality and crowded housing. This particularly affects Pasifika families, who tend to have larger households with more close living, and fear and anxiety are high.

Gaining access to food is crucial as is getting tested or vaccinated for Covid-19, but it is difficult for those without their own transport, particularly if they cannot use taxis or be transported by those outside their bubble.

The digital divide is being magnified in lockdown. Reasonable internet access is an important issue for many of those housed with The Salvation Army, as well as others in the community—people cannot get internet via their mobile phones or because they do not have good internet into their homes. But some clients have access through MSD support to more affordable internet access via mobile phone.

Levels of anxiety are high and mental health issues are expected to grow as the lockdown extends for many people in the community. There is genuine concern that domestic violence will increase and those struggling with addictions will relapse, especially as alcohol is delivered directly into homes under Level 4 restrictions, but addictions support services cannot visit people in person.

In some places The Salvation Army can act as an agent with Work and Income for clients, making it easier for them to access help. People need to be able to have top-ups on food voucher cards and access to special needs grants, especially for food and housing.

Moving Forward—Responses Urgently Needed

- Bring forward the implementation of the April 2022 benefit increases with immediate effect.
- Immediate assistance to help families meet rents, such as through increased thresholds for housing special needs grants.
- Provide assistance to access affordable mobile phone and internet plans.
- Implement a freeze on rent increases, at least for Auckland for the duration of Levels 3 and 4 and beyond.
- Urgently progress work on regulations that were due by July 2021 to enable tenants experiencing family violence to terminate a tenancy without financial penalty.
- Explore ways to help those with limited ability to leave their homes to get vaccinated.

We welcome your comments on this Lockdown Briefing.
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