



COVID-19 Lockdown Briefing

16 September 2021

This second Covid-19 Lockdown Briefing includes a particular focus on Auckland. The two weeks since our first Covid-19 Lockdown Briefing has seen the rest of the country move down from Alert Level 3 to Level 2, on Wednesday 8 September, while Auckland remains at Level 4 until at least 21 September. This has been accompanied by a noticeable reduction in need for food and other assistance over most of the rest of the country, but need remains high in Auckland.

AUCKLAND—Facing Tough Weeks Ahead

Food Hardship

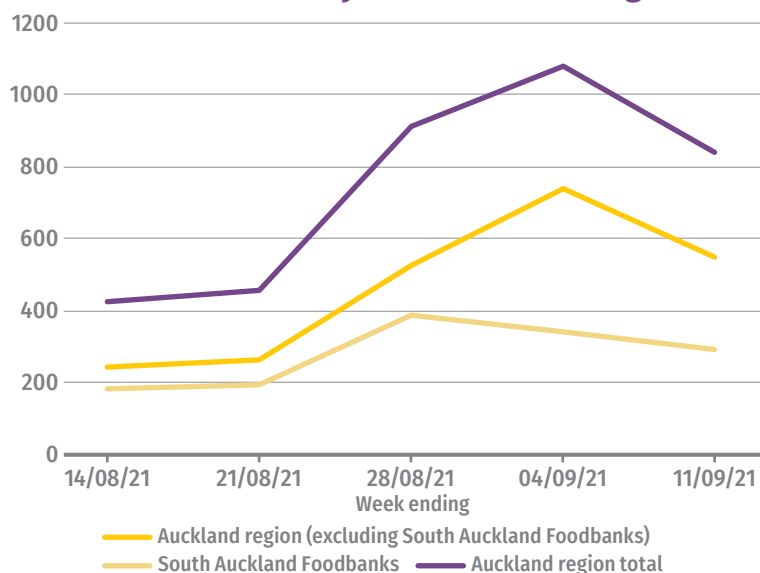
Prior to Current Level 4

The national changes to address food insecurity issues have been rolled out throughout the Auckland region over the last 18 months. Auckland has now been in Level 4 lockdown for over 4 weeks, while the rest of the nation has shifted lockdown levels. Therefore, the key question is: are these significant changes introduced to reduce food insecurity working? Some parts of this new national food security system are working well, but other challenges remain. Our first Lockdown Briefing raised significant concerns around the Ka Ora, Ka Ako healthy school lunches programme and the spike in our Salvation Army food parcel provision nationally in the first fortnight of this current Level 4 lockdown.

What’s Happening Now?

What immediately jumps out in **Figure 1** is the decline in food parcels distributed last week across Auckland. However, caution is needed here for two reasons. First, The Salvation Army phone system experienced some problems in the week ending 4 September, causing disruption to our food parcel provision in some areas, including Auckland. This has created a backlog of requests for food parcels which we are quickly working through, especially in Auckland. The numbers for the week ending 11 September are still unusually high

Figure 1: Food parcels distributed by The Salvation Army in the Auckland region



compared with pre-lockdown levels, indicating the increased hardship that surges with these Covid-19 lockdowns since 2020. The Salvation Army expects these numbers to remain consistently high as this lockdown drags on, but possibly not reaching the peaks of early September 2021. Secondly, the Wage Subsidy and other social and community supports have 'kicked-in' for many people and whānau and so those who previously needed assistance have other help. Still, many people are still waiting for the Wage Subsidy, and this is creating other issues.

Over 3700 food parcels have been distributed by The Salvation Army in Auckland in the last four weeks. Over 38 percent of these food parcels have been from our five South Auckland Foodbanks, with the majority being from our Manukau centre. Food-related hardship issues persist in South Auckland—including ongoing challenges with families that previously received 'food in schools' assistance, and people exhausting all their Work and Income New Zealand (WINZ) entitlements and needing urgent help. Food parcel distribution has declined slightly in our North and Central Auckland Foodbanks. But demand remains stubbornly high, particularly in West and East Auckland.

Other critical food insecurity-related issues observed in Auckland include:

- Many families applying for assistance who do not have New Zealand residency or citizenship. These families are not going to WINZ for help, because of their immigration status. Many of these families moved in with other families causing over-crowding.
- More larger Pasifika and Filipino families requesting food assistance. More requests for halal meat or food parcels with no meat.
- People who have exhausted or moved into 'negative' entitlement balances with WINZ and are being referred to community foodbanks.
- Kids at home needing more food. Reports from across Auckland that families who were previously using 'food in schools' programmes are left struggling to fill the gaps.
- The recent West Auckland floods have led to ongoing food challenges in that area.
- Our Foodbanks are still receiving people and whānau who have never used our services before, or who used our services for the first time in the 2020 lockdowns.
- Our frontline Auckland staff are coping, but the workloads are still massive. The supply chains with our partners are working, but there are still challenges with requests for deliveries for isolated people, or those unable to shop because of children, age, health issues or disabilities.
- Reports of people and whānau using multiple foodbanks.

Financial Hardship

Food deprivation that The Salvation Army is seeing is symptomatic of financial hardship and income inadequacy. The Wage Subsidy for many clients only covers a fraction of their normal wages and, therefore, leaves insufficient income to meet their daily living costs. Many clients are also dependent on overtime hours to increase their incomes. When bills, utilities, rent or the mortgage are paid, this leaves many whānau with little to no income left for food. Furthermore, whānau receiving the Wage Subsidy are above the income thresholds and not eligible to receive support from WINZ.

Many of those receiving welfare are not able to receive further assistance during this lockdown if they have exceeded their food entitlements. There are consistent concerns from many who are still waiting for a Wage Subsidy and clients who have lost their jobs during this lockdown. In the three weeks from the beginning of Level 4 to 3 September there have been 2946 new Jobseeker Support recipients in Auckland (**Table 1**). Nationally, 7437 more people were receiving Jobseeker Support since Level 4 began—over 49,000 more than in March 2020.

Table 1: Jobseeker by Work and Income Region

Regional Council	03/09/21	13/08/21	20/03/20	Change Aug 2021	Percentage change	Change Mar 2020	Percentage change
Auckland Metro	65,334	62,388	46,455	2946	4.7%	18,879	40.6%
Northland region	11,466	11,133	9123	333	3.0%	2343	25.7%
Southern region	11,028	10,626	7707	402	3.8%	3321	43.1%
Total	194,277	186,840	145,005	7437	4.0%	49,272	34.0%

Source: MSD Weekly Income Support Update 3/09/21

Housing

The cost of housing continues to be the primary cost for families in Auckland. Salvation Army services are seeing whānau right across the housing spectrum, from homeless/rough sleeping whānau to homeowners. During the first Level 4 in 2020, the homeless were housed, but social workers now report that people are not able to access the same provision during this current Level 4.

There are growing concerns from our staff around the welfare and wellbeing of our homeless whānau and those who are sleeping rough in Auckland. Auckland represents 48 percent of people on the Social Housing Register waiting for four to five-plus bedroom homes, according to the Ministry of Social Development (MSD) Housing Register from June 2021. This is an indication of the need for bigger homes to support those waiting for social housing in Auckland.

Our services are noting concerns around overcrowding for many of the whānau we are supporting. Overcrowding and the strain of lockdown are impacting household wellbeing and dynamics. Also, the time required for each assessment for food parcels is taking longer as the lockdown continues, because we try to provide extra support for many who are struggling with isolation, fear or stress.

People in transitional and social housing will welcome the plans for mobile vaccination units, this will help with one source of stress for those who cannot get to vaccination centres.

Threefold poverty: food, power, data (as noted below), continue to be a primary concern for our whānau in Auckland, particularly in regard to access to the internet.

Addictions

The enquiries for our addiction services have declined since our last briefing. Our gambling services show a wide range of impacts of the current lockdown for those struggling with gambling. Positive outcomes are for those with families who are deterred from gambling through lack of access to venues, contrasted with others who are bored during this lockdown and have turned to online gambling. Level 4 means all gambling venues in Auckland are closed for business; however, online-gambling continues to be a concern. The overall impact of lockdown will not be evident until a later stage when venues reopen.

Rest of New Zealand

Need for food parcels peaked in the third week of lockdown when the whole country was at either Level 4 or 3, and then had declined by the end of the fourth week ending 10 September (Figure 2).

For most Salvation Army centres outside of Auckland, food parcel numbers were back close to pre-17 August levels. But there are places where there continues to be higher need. Queenstown reports higher levels of need and no sign of decline. Whangārei reported higher demand at a volume four times that before 17 August. The Northland region continues to have the highest proportion of the population on Jobseeker Support (10.6%), nearly twice Auckland (5.8%) and close to three times that of Otago (3.9%).

Phone contact enquiries seeking food assistance also peaked in the week to 3 September and fell away noticeably in the following week (Figure 3). This pattern has been reflected across other areas of need, such as accommodation and addictions with 0800 enquiries peaking in the first two weeks of lockdowns and then trending downwards to pre-17 August levels. Students returning to schools and those able to return to employment at Levels 2 and 3 may well explain some of this decrease in need.

Threefold poverty: food, power, data

The challenge communities are facing as they move into Level 2 is what was described to us as a threefold poverty: food, power, data poverty. Alongside the food insecurity challenge covered above, power (energy) poverty is real. Many lower-income households are only able access pre-paid services from the power companies, and some are reporting their power running out before they have resources to top up.

The modern reality of digital exclusion for many in our communities is what could be called 'data poverty'. Without suitable devices at home for home learning some school students will be going back to school having primarily missed out on education over this period. The question must be asked if more could have been done to make sure both devices and affordable internet are available to families who are struggling?

Figure 2: Food Parcels—National Total

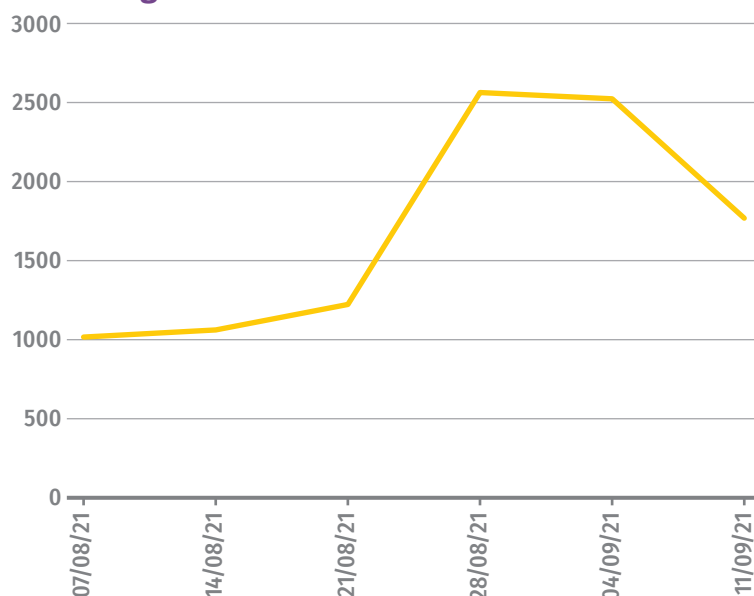
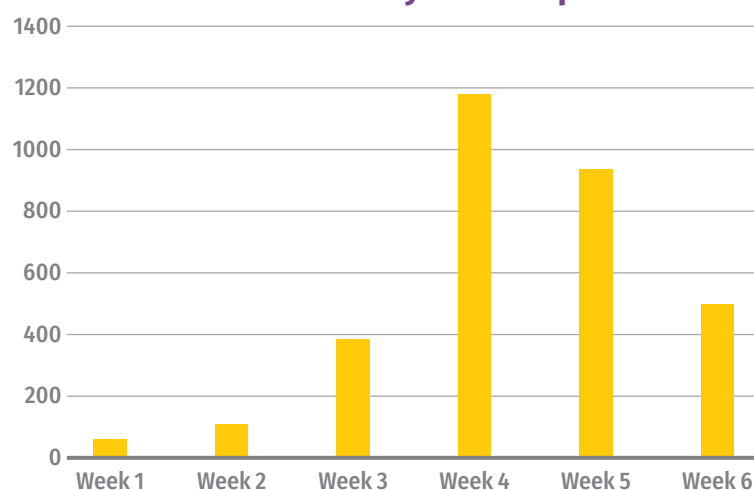


Figure 3: Food Parcels Enquiries to The Salvation Army 0800 Helpline



Similarly, accessing welfare income support, social support and counselling or job seeking is now so dominated by online approaches, that those who do not have mobile phones with sufficient data or adequate home internet service, are at high risk of missing out on much needed support.

Mental health pressures, such as high levels of anxiety and stress, feature across the whole country and are more noticeable during this lockdown compared with 2020. The uncertainty of the lockdowns with weekly extensions seems to have been harder for some people to cope with. Housing pressures are already very high, and the 'same bad' situation is not being improved by the lockdowns.

Moving Forward—Responses Urgently Needed

- Urgent connection between 'food in schools' programmes in Auckland and foodbanks helping these families to support the gaps in food provision. MSD, Ministry of Education, and Ka Ora, Ka Oka free school lunch providers must be mobilised better to support these children and families.
- Monitor families who are in the negative or exhausting their WINZ food entitlements to ensure they are receiving adequate support from WINZ and/or community groups.
- MSD to urgently increase the income thresholds for access to support people who receive the Wage Subsidy, but are unable to meet living costs in Auckland during Level 4.
- Increase support and housing for homeless and rough sleeping whānau.
- Provision of affordable and accessible internet access to help people connect with social and income support.

We welcome your comments on this Lockdown Briefing.

Please contact the authors at social.policy@salvationarmy.org.nz

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