

11 August 2024

National Indigenous Australians Agency
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RE: National Strategy for Food Security in Remote First Nations communities

PhD candidate Caroline Deen, together with her supervisors Associate Professor Veronica Matthews, Professor Julie Brimblecombe, and Dr. Simone Sherriff welcome the opportunity to respond to the consultation on the National Strategy for Food Security in Remote First Nations communities. Together with the Remote Food Security project team, Julie Brimblecombe and Caroline Deen have contributed to a collective submission with a more detailed response to the draft strategy. This submission provides information on Caroline Deen's PhD research project that relates to the focus area Practice and Governance, specifically the action:

'Conduct a comprehensive review of the statistical collections used by Commonwealth and State and Territory Governments to measure remote food insecurity in remote communities.'

- *Identify areas for improvement and implement adjustments to enhance the reliability and comprehensiveness of remote food insecurity data; ensure data is provided in a way that meets the Closing the Gap obligations.'*

The aim of Caroline's project is to identify and co-design culturally appropriate and relevant indicators that could be adopted nationally to measure food security for First Nations peoples living in urban, regional and remote areas.

The objectives of her research are:

1. To explore how food security is currently measured for First Nations people in Canada, Australia, New Zealand and USA (CANZUS) countries with similar colonial historical contexts.
2. To explore how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples conceptualise food security/insecurity to identify key constructs for a food security assessment tool.
3. To assess the appropriateness of existing food security tools for First Nations peoples.
4. To develop food security indicators and inform the design of a tool that would more accurately and appropriately measure food security for First Nations peoples nationally.

Thank you for considering our response. For further information please contact:

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Background to food security measurement in Australia

In Australia, there has been a lack of consistent, regular monitoring and reporting of food insecurity using comprehensive, validated tools (1). The one item questionnaire previously used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) in the National Health Survey has been shown to underestimate food security in Australia (2). In 2023, the ABS responded to calls from food security experts for Australia to adopt the USDA Household Food Security Survey Measure (HFSSM) as a national food security monitoring tool (3). The USDA HFSSM has been adopted in Canada and the USA to measure food security nationally (4) and has also been used in some contexts in Australia (1, 5). Despite this tool being more comprehensive than a one item questionnaire and able to assess the level of severity of food security (2), it has been criticised for focusing solely on economic access to food, just one of the six dimensions of food security (other dimensions are availability, utilization, stability, agency, sustainability) (6). Given the complex nature of food insecurity and its multifaceted causes, relying solely on income-based measures does not adequately capture the nuanced experiences and challenges related to accessing sufficient and nutritious food, particularly for First Nations people (7). Furthermore, it perpetuates deficit discourse and is based on Euro-American food systems and experiences with limited diversity when developed in the 1990s (8). The 18 item USDA HFSSM tool, includes questions around the frequency of children going without food (9). Given the history of the Stolen Generations and the continuing high numbers of First Nations children being removed today (10), there is the potential to cause further harm (11). For this reason, the ABS chose to remove the questions about children and use a shortened version of the survey with 11-items that exclusively measures the food security experiences of adults (12). This tool was used in three national surveys; two of which target the collection of information about the health of First Nations populations (12). The survey results are expected to be made available later this year.

Identified knowledge gap

This research project came from Simone and Caroline's experience using the USDA HFSSM to measure food security with First Nations people. First Nations staff members that were a part of these projects, together with survey participants, expressed their concerns about the appropriateness of the tool and its inability to effectively capture food insecurity experiences. Our use of the tool builds on the experience of Aboriginal researcher Dr. Leisa McCarthy who used the tool as a conversational prompt with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families experiencing food insecurity in the Northern Territory (13). Primary concerns when using the tool as a survey were that it was inappropriate given the colonial context and history of children being removed from families often for reasons related to not being able to provide enough food, and secondarily that it didn't assess determinants of food security that were of value to First Nations peoples, particularly access to traditional foods and the value placed on kinship systems to share food. Concerns about the ability of the USDA HFSSM to appropriately measure food security for First Nations peoples have also been raised by researchers in Canada, New Zealand the United States (14) (8) (15). We have formed an international First Nations collaborative with Associate Professor Lisa Te Morenga at Massey University and Dr. Madeline Shelling at Auckland University in Aotearoa (New Zealand) who are also developing a new culturally responsive food security assessment tool appropriate for Māori peoples in Aotearoa (New Zealand).

Planned approach

Our research project seeks to uphold Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles through First Nations leadership across all aspects of the project and by privileging Indigenous knowledge systems to inform the design of relevant food security indicators. Indigenous Data Sovereignty is the right of First Nations peoples to exercise ownership over their data. Ownership of data can be expressed through the creation, collection, access, analysis, interpretation, management, dissemination, and reuse of Indigenous data (16, 17).

This work builds on that of other First Nation communities, health professionals and researchers, who are driving the development of survey tools that account for and are responsive to the cultures, needs and context of First Nations peoples in Australia (21)(22)(23). We will use Indigenous methodologies to establish a household food security framework for First Nations people. It will build on previous frameworks that have looked at community level food security (24),(25) and build on the qualitative research describing First Nations experiences of food security/insecurity in urban, regional and remote settings. We plan to conduct additional qualitative research in the Torres Strait Islands and other sites in Australia that have not yet had their voices heard on food security experiences to ensure the indicators developed are relevant for use nationally. Measuring food security using a tool rooted in First Nations ways of knowing, being and doing will contribute to an evidence-base for relevant policy responses that address the systemic causes of food insecurity. It will also be able to monitor and assess the effectiveness of planned and existing government strategies such as the National Strategy for Food Security in Remote First Nations Communities.

This project significantly contributes to the proposed action to *review the statistical collections used by Commonwealth and State and Territory Governments to measure remote food insecurity in remote communities and identify areas for improvement and implement adjustments to enhance the reliability and comprehensiveness of remote food insecurity data.*

It also aligns with Closing the Gap Priority reform 4; *Shared access to data and information at a regional level* and *Outcome 17 – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have access to information and services enabling participation in informed decision-making regarding their own lives.*

To support the implementation of this research project, particularly the travel required for data collection and support for the First Nations Project Advisory Group, we have applied for the 2024 MRFF Indigenous Health grant, stream 3. VACCHO, AH&MRC and NACCHO have come on board as project partners. The aim is to have a draft tool ready for external validation and testing by July 2027.

Positionality of the team

- **Caroline Deen** is a Kamilaroi woman, Accredited Practicing Dietitian and research fellow at the University of Sydney. She has completed a Bachelor of Nutrition and Dietetics (Monash University 2014) and Masters of Public Health (Monash University 2018) and am currently enrolled in a PhD with the University of Sydney (2024-present). Most recently she contributed to a Remote Food Security project co-designed by the University of Queensland,

Apunipima Cape York Health Council and Central Australian Aboriginal Congress that aimed to develop and test community led solutions to improving food security in eight remote communities in the Northern Territory and Cape York.

- **Professor Julie Brimblecombe** is a Professor of Public Health Nutrition, Monash University, Department of Nutrition, Dietetics and Food and Honorary Fellow with Menzies School of Health Research and University of Queensland. She previously held Principal Research Fellow (2017-2018) and Senior Research Fellow (2007-2016) appointments with Menzies School of Health Research and has lived in Darwin since 1999. Her career has spanned years as a public health nutrition practitioner and researcher (since 2000) with communities in remote Australia and the Solomon Islands. Her approach has centred on strengthening public health nutrition workforce capabilities and policy decision-making capacity at local, state and national levels to achieve healthy, equitable and sustainable food systems and environments with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander remote communities.
- **Dr. Simone Sherriff** is a Wotjobaluk woman and research fellow at the Poche Centre for Indigenous Health at the University of Sydney. She has completed a Graduate Diploma of Indigenous Health Promotion, a Master of Public Health and Doctor of Philosophy from the University of Sydney. She draws on Indigenous methodologies to share knowledge and first-hand experiences of food insecurity and breastfeeding among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to co-create research and support communities to develop responsive programs. Her research career is centred around her close connections and on the ground experience and knowledge of the ACCHO sector, which has spanned over 15 years. Simone is a board of director for Riverina Medical and Dental Aboriginal Corporation on Wiradjuri Country in Wagga Wagga.
- **Associate Professor Veronica Matthews** is a Quandamooka woman, passionate about health of Country and wellbeing of community. She co-leads the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Knowledges theme of the Healthy Environments and Lives (HEAL) Network, a national collaboration that brings together First Nations wisdom, public health, epidemiology, sustainable development, and data science and communication to address environmental change and its impacts on health. She co-leads the Centre for Research Excellence in Strengthening systems for Indigenous healthcare Equity (CRE-STRIDE) a multi-disciplinary quality improvement network aiming to strengthen primary health care systems and its interconnections to other sectors that impact on health and wellbeing.

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