

NEW ZEALANDERS WHO GO HUNGRY: TIME TO START INTERVENING

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The Public Health Association conference was told today it was time to come up with solutions for the up to 22 percent of New Zealand families (up to 54 percent of Pacific people) who run out of food because of lack of money.

University of Auckland research fellow Delvina Gorton outlined for the delegates at Waitangi, her review of overseas and local research into "food security", which is the assured access to sufficient food that is safe, healthful, culturally acceptable and obtained in socially acceptable ways.

Ms Gorton, of the university's Clinical Trials Research Unit, said that her review found plenty of evidence of food *insecurity*, but few answers.

"The time for investigating the causes of this phenomenon is over. We now have enough evidence to start taking action. It is time to find some solutions."

Ms Gorton said that while income was a strong determinant of whether families had enough to eat, there were many other environmental factors contributing to food insecurity.

"For instance physical factors might include inadequate kitchen facilities in a house, perhaps no fridge; it may be that there's no household vehicle and food has to be bought at the dairy which is within walking distance. Economic factors include the total debt facing the household or how the cost of housing diminishes household income.

"There are socio-cultural factors such as household size or being a solo parent. In New Zealand there are added factors for Pacific people like the obligation to send money back to their families in the Islands or church donations. Many Maori are expected to offer regular koha, at occasions like tangi. On the positive side, having strong social networks and community support can be protective against food insecurity."

But Ms Gorton said the factor that is most within the country's grasp to change, is political.

"The Government has a big role to play in the policies it forms in housing, the labour market, welfare, transport and health. To improve food security, these 'big picture' issues need to be addressed.

"This is really important. There is more than enough food to go around in New Zealand and it is a basic human right that everyone who lives here can access sufficient, nutritious food. By doing nothing, or not enough, the country is wasting some of its human resource. Children growing up without enough food don't develop to their full potential. And the flow-on effects of regular inadequate food include poor mental and physical health, which are current and future burdens on the health system."

Ms Gorton says the next stage of the project is to identify possible interventions and present a portfolio of options to the Ministry of Health and Health Research Council in June 2009.

For more information contact the conference media advisor Liz Price on 0276 957 744.