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Food where it matters most

Mapping food provision in early childhood education and care

November 2026



Acknowledgment of Country

Social Ventures Australia acknowledges and pays respect to the
past and present traditional custodians and elders of this country on which we work.

‘After the Rains’ by Richard Seden for Saltwater People 2024

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Glossary

Communities/areas: These terms are used interchangeably throughout the report to refer to Statistical Areas Level 2 (SA2) as defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS).

Early childhood education and care (ECEC): In this report, ECEC refers specifically to formal education and care for children from birth to school entry, including long day care (LDC), preschool/kindergarten (PSK) and family day care. All results in this report relate to LDC services only.

Long day care (LDC): A centre-based form of ECEC service that provides all-day or part-time care for children aged birth to six who attend on a regular basis.[i]

National Quality Framework (NQF): Australia's national system for ensuring quality in early childhood education and care. It sets consistent **National Quality Standards (NQS)** for regulation, assessment, and improvement across services.

Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA): These indexes, prepared by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, ranks areas in Australia according to relative socio-economic advantage and disadvantage. The indexes are based on information from the five-yearly Census. A key SEIFA index used in this report is the **Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage (IRSD)**.

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Executive summary

Food insecurity is a significant and growing issue for Australian children. Current data suggest that between 16% and 45% of households with children experience food insecurity, with particularly high rates among low-income and single-parent families. At the same time, more than one in six Australian children live in poverty. Food insecurity in childhood is associated with poorer health, developmental vulnerability, reduced educational outcomes, and lifelong disadvantage. Shaped by a range of complex, interconnected economic, social and food system conditions, addressing food insecurity requires action across its underlying drivers and the systems and settings that surround children and families.

Within this broader response, early childhood education and care (ECEC) is a unique and particularly important setting. Food is fundamental to children's learning and development. Children who are hungry struggle to concentrate, regulate their behaviour and participate in learning. This matters particularly in the first five years of life, when approximately 90% of brain growth occurs. By school entry, 90% of Australian children will have attended ECEC, and children can consume up to 75% of their daily nutritional intake while there. Yet provision of food by ECEC services is not required by the national law regulating ECEC, and little has been known about where food is provided and whether access aligns with patterns of disadvantage.

This report, developed by Social Ventures Australia (SVA) and the Queensland Brain Institute (QBI), presents the first national mapping of food provision in long day care (LDC) services, examining how provision varies across Australia, where gaps in provision intersect with early childhood disadvantage, and where increased food provision may matter most.

Key findings

- **There are significant gaps in food provision in long day care across Australia.** While 91% of services provide food overall, **provision falls to 58% in small rural towns and 66% in Tasmania**. Almost 1 in 10 services nationally do not provide food.
- **Access to food is shaped by service capacity rather than child need.** Centre size has the strongest association with food provision: 67% of centres with fewer than 30 places provide food, compared with 98% of centres with 100 or more places. Services providing food also generally charge higher fees, suggesting that scale, financial capacity and operating conditions substantially influence whether services can provide food.
- **Some children who could benefit most from food provision have the least reliable access.** Lower rates of food provision in rural communities and in some communities experiencing high early childhood disadvantage raises concerns about equitable access, particularly combined with evidence that food costs can present barriers to ECEC participation.

Food provision, defined here as ECEC service-provided meals, including lunch, sits outside Australia's definition of quality in ECEC. Food is not explicitly required, assessed or rewarded under the National Quality Framework. Centres with higher quality ratings under the National Quality Standard were slightly less likely to provide food, suggesting current incentives may not encourage investment in nutrition.

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We note that this study measured only whether food is provided, not its quality or nutritional adequacy. Existing research indicates that many services struggle to meet nutrition recommendations due to limited food budgets, workforce pressures and inconsistent access to nutrition support.

Implications

The findings suggest that Australia's ECEC system is not currently structured to ensure equitable access to food for children experiencing food insecurity. Instead, provision often depends on a service's financial and operational capacity. The consequence is that access is least reliable in some of Australia's most disadvantaged communities, where children may benefit most.

Food is not explicitly required, assessed or rewarded under the National Quality Framework and there is no single body accountable at the national level. A more coherent response requires clear responsibility for monitoring provision, identifying gaps, coordinating implementation support and ensuring funding and quality setting enable services to provide adequate and nutritious food.

The Australian Government has signalled a repositioning of food as essential educational infrastructure through its Early Years Strategy. The significant reforms underway to build a universal ECEC system, alongside the national Feeding Australia strategy, create a critical opportunity to recognise food as a core component of quality ECEC while connecting ECEC to a broader national response to childhood food insecurity, supported by appropriate funding, policy and regulatory settings.

This report identifies opportunities for targeted investment, improved data collection, and system reform to strengthen the contribution ECEC can make to this broader response to ensure that all children, regardless of where they live or their family's circumstances, can access adequate and nutritious food during their early years.

Summary of recommendations

Food is fundamental to children's capacity to learn, growth, participate and build relationships. Yet many children in the communities most at risk of food insecurity and developmental vulnerability continue to miss out on food in ECEC. This is a gap Australia can close: doing so will require targeted investment to test and expand food provision where need is greatest, while building towards a system in which adequate and nutritious food is recognised, funded and governed as a core component of high-quality ECEC.

Based on the findings of this research, we recommend that governments recognise access to adequate, nutritious and culturally appropriate food as a fundamental condition for children's learning, development, wellbeing and participation in ECEC.

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Recommendations for the Australian Government:

1. Recognise access to nutritionally adequate food as a core indicator of quality through its explicit inclusion within the National Quality Standards.
2. Strengthen national stewardship of food in ECEC through the establishment of an ECEC Commission.
3. Ensure reform of the ECEC funding model considers needs-based funding mechanisms adjusted to better reflect the cost of high-quality provision for high need children, families and communities.
4. Establish a targeted Food Provision in ECEC demonstration program across a range of settings.
5. Improve national measurement of childhood food insecurity, incorporating specific indicators into existing data collections and reporting mechanisms.
6. Strengthen the focus on children within Australia's food security system, including through the Feeding Australia strategy, to build a more coherent national response to childhood food insecurity.
7. With the Tasmanian Government, investigate and address barriers to food provision in Tasmanian ECEC services.

Recommendations for state and territory governments:

8. Test and evaluate provision of food within preschools and kindergartens within their jurisdictions.

Recommendations for ECEC services:

9. Consider food provision and food environments (including mealtime practices, staff and family engagement, menu and meal quality) as part of quality practice.



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Introduction

Current data suggests that between 16%[ii] and 45%[iii] of Australian households with children experience food insecurity, with higher rates among low-income households and single-parent households. More than one in six (17.1%) children in Australia live in poverty, rising to 41% among children in single-parent households.[iv] These households are more likely to struggle to access food that is sufficient in both quality and quantity to support health, development and wellbeing. The consequences are profound. Childhood food insecurity affects physical and mental health, cognitive and emotional development,[v] educational attainment, and long-term life outcomes with impacts that persist across the life course.[vi]

Food is fundamental to children's learning and development. Children who are hungry cannot learn, concentrate or regulate their behaviour effectively. Food is core educational infrastructure, providing a foundation that enables children to benefit from learning and development opportunities offered through early childhood education and care (ECEC). This is particularly critical in the first five years of life, when approximately 90% of brain growth occurs and neuroplasticity is at its highest.[vii] ECEC presents a critical intervention point, and powerful opportunity to support children's access to adequate nutrition, particularly in areas where there are high rates of disadvantage. By school entry, 90% of Australian children will attend an ECEC service,[viii] and children can consume up to 75% of their daily nutritional requirements during the ECEC day.[ix]

Yet, ECEC services are not required to provide food, and many do not.[x] Where food is provided, significant inequities remain. Some services offer high-quality meals that meet children's daily nutritional needs, while others, particularly in areas experiencing high levels of disadvantage, provide food that is lower in nutritional quality and insufficient in energy content to consistently meet children's needs.[xi] Barriers to food provision (and provision of adequate, high-quality food) include cost, limited space for food preparation and lack of access to staff training. Importantly, neither the adequacy nor quality of food is explicitly regulated under the National Quality Framework.

This represents a significant missed opportunity. ECEC is one of the few universal systems with the reach and frequency of contact, and trusted relationships needed to support children's nutrition at scale. However, little is currently known about where food is provided (and what food is provided), where the greatest gaps exist and how food provision aligns with patterns of disadvantage across Australia.

To address this research gap, SVA and Queensland Brain Institute (QBI) at the University of Queensland collaborated on this national data mapping report. This research overlays data on food provision in long day care (LDC) services with geographical distribution of early childhood disadvantage. We were not able to include preschool and kindergarten (PSK) services in the analysis due to lack of adequate data. However, with a high proportion of PSKs relying on families to provide lunch, PSK remains an important setting for future research and reform, including consideration of how food provision could be better supported within services.

The purpose is to map food provision in ECEC services and to identify the areas across Australia where increasing the provision of food in ECEC could support children at risk of developmental vulnerability. While the findings indicate whether food is provided, they do not assess nutritional adequacy, an important area for future research.

This report strengthens the evidence base on food provision in ECEC, and childhood food insecurity. It identifies opportunities for policy, investment and systems reform to ensure all young children and their families in Australia have access to sufficient, safe, nutritious and appropriate food regardless of where they live or the circumstances into which they are born.

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Childhood food insecurity in Australia

Childhood food and nutrition security exists when children and their caregivers have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.[xii] In Australia, there is no consistent, national system for measuring and monitoring childhood food insecurity.[xiii] Instead, estimates rely on data collected from sample populations (see box). The lack of regularly collected data limits understanding of the scale, severity and geographic distribution of childhood food insecurity, constraining the development of effective policies, investment decisions and interventions.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises access to food and a standard of living adequate for physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development as fundamental rights.[xiv] This right is embedded within Australia's The Nest Wellbeing Framework, which identifies six broad and inter-related domains of child and youth wellbeing.[xv] Under The Nest, basic material needs, including food security, are specified as a critical element for children to thrive, and enablers of the other five domains.

How food insecurity affects children

Food and nutrition insecurity have profound impacts at any age, but are particularly harmful during childhood, a critical period of growth and development. Food security affects children's brain development, physical growth and wellbeing. It can also have significant emotional and psychological impacts, with children experiencing the effects of family stress, shame and stigma associated with not having enough food.[xvi] Children exposed to food insecurity in Australia are also more likely to experience other forms of disadvantage including poverty, financial stress, housing insecurity, and developmental vulnerability.[xvii]

Food insecurity is strongly associated with reduced ECEC attendance, cognitive and developmental delay, behavioural problems, poorer school readiness and lower academic achievement, impacting life outcomes.[xviii] Even when children experiencing food insecurity *do* attend ECEC services, they are less able to make the most of learning opportunities compared to their food-secure peers. Hungry and food-insecure children see decreased happiness, irritability, tantrums, hyperactivity, misbehaviour at home and at in learning environments, and increased lethargy.[xix] In the school system, Australian teachers report students coming to school hungry or without having eaten breakfast and estimate that these students lose more than two hours a day in learning.[xxxxi]

Food insecurity also impacts children's ability to play, relax and build positive relationships with family, friends and ECEC educators.[xxii] Research shows that children as young as six are aware of the impact of food insecurity on their family. These children speak about eating mouldy bread, or feeling guilt at being picky with food when they knew what was being offered was the only option available. Children are also aware of the strategies their families adopted in the face of food insecurity, such as skipping meals and going to food banks. Parents likewise experience stress and stigma. Some report feeling ashamed when they cannot provide food from home for school or ECEC. Parents may also fear judgement and intervention as a result of their children turning up to ECEC or school without a lunchbox.[xxiii]

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Current sources of childhood food security data in Australia

Foodbank Australia

Foodbank Australia's annual Hunger Report (published since 2013) uses the United States Department of Agriculture 18-item Household Food Security Survey Module (HFSSM) to measure the prevalence of household food insecurity. The survey includes questions about the food security of children living in the household. The 2026 survey (latest available at time of publication) surveyed 5,880 Australians aged 18 years or older.[xxiv] The sample was nationally representative with interlocking quotas by age, gender and location. It found that in the last 12 months:

- one in three Australian households (33%) had experienced food insecurity
- 45% of households with children experienced food insecurity (60% of single-parent households with children and 41% of non-single-parent households, compared to 28% of households without children)
- more than half (53%) of low-income households (earning under $33,799) had experienced food insecurity.

Australian Bureau of Statistics

In 2025, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) released its latest national data on household food insecurity which was collected over 2023-24 as part of the National Nutrition and Physical Activity Survey (NNPAS).[xxv] It had a sample size of approximately 8,800 households. Household food security was assessed through a face-to-face interview using the 10-item Adult Food Security Survey Module (AFSSM), a sub-set of the HFSSM. The report found that during the previous 12 months:

- 13.2% of Australian households experienced food insecurity
- 16.0% of households with dependent children experienced food insecurity
- 34% of single parent households with dependent children experienced food insecurity.

The ABS data also shows that households in areas of most disadvantage (those in the lowest quintile of the Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage) were more likely to experience food insecurity (20.6%) than those in areas of least disadvantage (in the highest quintile of the IRSD) (6.8%).

Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO)

The FAO measures and monitors access to food and dietary energy and food consumption patterns across population groups across the world. It uses the eight-item Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES), an experience-based metric of food insecurity severity, which is used to estimate the percentage of a population that faces difficulties in accessing enough safe and nutritious food for normal growth and development and an active and healthy life.

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The FAO's interactive Hunger Map provides three-year average food insecurity prevalence data by country (the proportion of the total population experiencing food insecurity). Data for Australia is based on a sample of around 1,000 participants aged fifteen years and above. The Hunger Map shows that for 2023-25, 15.1% of the Australian population experienced food insecurity, an increase from 12.8% for 2022-24 and the highest rate since the data for Australia was first published for the period 2014-2016 (also the lowest rate at 10.4%).[xxvi]

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The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey

HILDA has been following a group of people living in Australia since 2001, with around 17,000 respondents surveyed in the most recent report. Food insecurity was measured by the HILDA Survey in 2020 and 2024.[xxvii] In 2024, 17.9% of respondents reported experiencing at least one indicator of food insecurity, up from 13.7% in 2020. In 2024, 9.8% of respondents reported being unable to eat healthy and nutritious food, and 8.9% reported eating less than they thought they should. The survey also found that single-parent families were the most at risk of food insecurity, with those with low income, disability or poor health also facing an elevated risk. The survey only includes respondents aged 15 and older, so childhood food insecurity is not measured.



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Key drivers of food insecurity in Australia

In Australia, food insecurity is driven by interacting economic, social and food system factors. At its core is material hardship: when household resources are insufficient to meet the cost of food alongside housing, healthcare, transport, education and other essentials.[xxviii] Research demonstrates a strong association between financial stress and food insecurity,[xxix] with 53% of households earning less than $33,799 experiencing food insecurity.[xxx] The rising costs of living intensify this pressure. More than four in five (80%) food-insecure households report that high or increased living expenses have made it difficult to access adequate nutritious food. Many worry about food running out before being able to buy more, and 93% say they are unable to afford balanced meals.[xxxi] As a result many families face impossible trade-offs between food and other essentials, while increased reliance on credit cards and buy-now-pay-later services, can further lock households into cycles of debt and poverty.[xxxii]

For many families, however, food insecurity is not just a function of income. It is produced and intensified by the interaction between a range of factors and in particular broader structural and social inequalities including: housing instability,[xxxiii] insecure or casual employment, disability and health issues, family violence, family stress, household chaos and adverse experiences,[xxxiv] and challenges living in regional, rural and remote communities.[xxxv] This creates a substantially greater risk of exposure for some families and communities experiencing one or more of these issues, for example single-parent households and Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander communities.

The food system itself also shapes families' ability to access healthy food. Food prices have risen sharply since 2021.[xxxvi] Price increases have been observed across almost all food categories, with many nutrient dense foods such as lean meat, fresh fruit and vegetables experiencing price increases at almost twice the rate of discretionary, less nutritionally dense foods.[xxxvii] For some communities, particularly regional, rural, remote and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, affordability intersects with availability, accessibility and quality of food. Structural barriers in remote food supply chains include distance, road access, logistics costs, refrigerated freight, seasonal disruptions due to flooding and cyclones and limited retail competition. These can increase prices and reduce reliable access to quality healthy food.[xxxviii] Healthy food in remote communities, for example, is often more than 50% more expensive, inconsistently available and of lower quality than in urban or regional centres.[xxxix]

Food insecurity then is not an isolated food issue, but rather the product of interconnected economic, social, relational and food system conditions that constrain families' capacity to consistently access adequate, nutritious food.

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Responses to childhood food insecurity

Given these intersecting drivers, addressing childhood food insecurity requires action at multiple levels. Policies relating to income and social security, housing and homelessness, food, family and domestic violence, health and mental health, employment and other forms of family support all have an important role in addressing the circumstances that contribute to food insecurity. However, these responses each have their challenges and limitations and largely sit across separate policy and service systems. Australia also has limited policy infrastructure focused specifically on food insecurity and even less focused on the particular experiences and needs of children. These systems are fragmented, with childhood food security falling between portfolios and levels of government, with no part of the system clearly being held accountable for it.

Where families are experiencing food insecurity, the primary direct response in Australia has been charitable food relief. Food relief organisations redistribute food from donors (such as supermarkets and food producers) to where it is needed by communities. These organisations play an essential role in addressing immediate need, however they cannot address the underlying structural causes of food insecurity, and largely operate as a downstream response to underlying inequalities.[xl] Furthermore, food charities often experience demand for food that outstrips what they can supply, and the food relief system as a whole only reaches around half of current need.[xli] Access may be constrained by location and hours of provision, eligibility uncertainty, stigma associated with using food relief, and whether the food available meets cultural and/or dietary needs.[xlii]

Trusted settings where children and families participate, such as ECEC, schools, health services, community centres and Child and Family Hubs see children regularly, build relationships over time and often see food insecurity as it emerges. But responses depend on individual champions and informal relationships rather than a coordinated system of support. These settings are rarely funded, equipped or connected as part of a coherent response to childhood food insecurity.

There are emerging national policy opportunities to strengthen this approach. The Australian Government's Early Years Strategy 2024-2034 has a vision that all children in Australia thrive in their early years. It commits to improving children's health, development and wellbeing and strengthening the systems and supports surrounding children and families. It defines meeting children's basic needs as one of eight national early years outcomes, with access to adequate food and nutrition a measure to track progress. This provides broader policy architecture within which access to adequate food and nutrition should be understood as fundamental to children's health, development, learning and wellbeing.

Australia is also currently developing its first national food security strategy, Feeding Australia, which aims to establish a vision for a sustainable, resilient and secure food system that serves all Australians, from producers to consumers.

Together Feeding Australia and the Early Years Strategy create an important opportunity to bring a stronger child lens to food security policy and to connect food system reform with the systems and settings that support children and families. For young children, ECEC is an important setting. Particularly with the Australian Government's commitment to universal learning, there is an opportunity and an imperative to consider how ECEC can contribute to a broader system for identifying, responding to and preventing childhood food insecurity.

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Research methodology

Food provision in ECEC services

This research develops a new national dataset of the provision of food in ECEC services. Here, we define 'provision of food' as ECEC service-provided meals, including lunch. The reason for this definition is to capture where food is being provided systematically, regularly and substantially. Lunch is typically the most substantial meal provided in ECEC services, while, morning tea, afternoon tea, and snacks generally comprise lighter meals.[xliii]

QBI led the collection of information about each long day care service from two publicly available websites: Kindicare and Starting Blocks (the Australian Government's ECEC information service). The starting point was the national register of 18,207 approved education and care services (ACECQA national register, Quarter 1 2026 extract). For each service, automated programs retrieved the information published on the relevant website, without requiring a login. Requests were spaced out over time to avoid placing undue demand on either website.

Kindicare was searched using each service's name and state. Where several listings were returned, the closest candidate was selected by comparing the service name, suburb and postcode, and a listing was accepted only if it was a sufficiently close match. In total, 16,858 services (92.6%) were matched to a Kindicare listing. From each matched listing we recorded the meal and nutrition information provided by the service and the published National Quality Standard ratings. These ratings were then compared with those in the government register; all seven quality areas agreed for 15,578 of the 15,705 services where a comparison was possible (99.2%), which supports the reliability of the matching approach.

We retained data relating to long day care (LDC) services only. Family Day Care (FDC) services were excluded from analyses due to the distinct home-based nature of the service model and associated differences in food provision practices, which limited comparability with centre-based ECEC services. Out Of School Hours (OOSH) centres were also excluded, as these cater to children up to 12 years old, outside of the focus on the early years.

Whilst we initially intended to include preschool and kindergarten (PSK) services in the analysis, these services were excluded because available data did not provide sufficient information to reliably classify or compare food provision practices across state-run PSK settings. Fees were also not comparable with LDC due to the difference in funding mechanisms (such as state and territory funding versus Commonwealth Childcare Subsidy funding).

Daily fee information for remaining LDC services was taken from Starting Blocks, the official government source, which shows a last-updated date for each service's fee information. Each service's Starting Blocks page was located by matching its name against the website's published list of service pages, and any page showing a different government approval number from the register was discarded. For long day care services, the full-day fee was recorded for three age groups (0 to 12 months, 13 to 24 months and 25 to 36 months; where no rate was published for the third group, the rate for the next age group up was used), together with the most recent update date shown for that service's fees. Where a Starting Blocks fee was available it replaced the Kindicare fee; Kindicare fees were retained only where Starting Blocks had none. A dated Starting Blocks fee entry was found for 8,774 of the 9,685 long day care services on the register (91%). After the two sources were combined, a daily fee was available for 8,665, 8,833 and 9,314 of these services (89.5%, 91.2% and

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96.2%) for the three age groups respectively, and for 9,324 services (96.3%) in at least one age group. Fee analyses in this report use each centre's lowest advertised full-day fee across the three age groups, before Child Care Subsidy. Fees are centre-weighted (each service counts once) and medians are reported alongside means.

A first matching pass was followed by a second pass that corrected how ampersands and apostrophes in service names were handled, which reduced the number of services that could not be matched to a Starting Blocks page from 1,993 to 475 (2.6% of the register). Of these 475, no page with a corresponding name was found for 187, and for 288 the page found showed a different approval number and was therefore excluded.

Emails and telephone calls were made to services where data on food provision and/or fees was missing. Following these final manual checks, food provision data was available for 9,212 LDC services, an estimated 95% of all LDC services on the ACECQA register. Fee data was available for 9,324 LDC services (96%), and both food provision and fee data for 8,937 (92%). Each analysis uses all centres with available data for that measure: food provision analyses use the 9,212 centres with food data, fee analyses the 9,324 centres with fee data, and comparisons of fees by food provision the 8,937 centres with both.

Where this report compares like with like ('matched' comparisons), the comparison group was reweighted so that its mix of centre size, remoteness and provider type matched that of the reference group. Matched figures show how much of a difference remains once these characteristics are taken into account. They describe associations and are not causal estimates.

Early childhood disadvantage dataset

SVA provided data on early childhood disadvantage, which draws on the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) and the Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA):

- The AEDC is data collected on developmental vulnerability in children starting their first year of full-time school. It assesses children's level of vulnerability across five domains: physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills, communication skills and general knowledge. DV2 is a key measure from AEDC. It reports the number and percentage of children in a region, where those children are identified as developmentally vulnerable in two or more domains. This report uses 2024 data.
- SEIFA is a series of indexes that are measured for areas, that provide insight on the socio-economic attributes of an area. This analysis focuses on Index of Relative Socioeconomic Disadvantage (IRSD), which is standardised so that the national average is 1,000; lower scores indicate greater relative disadvantage. This report uses IRSD deciles (Decile 1 is the 10% of areas with the most disadvantage). This report uses 2021 data.

Communities[1] were defined as having high early childhood disadvantage if they had more than 10% of children developmentally vulnerable on two or more AEDC domains (DV2) and were in IRSD deciles 1 to 4 (the areas with the most disadvantage). This created a shortlist of 783 communities across Australia. SVA also collected Australian Census data on culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities. These indicators were identified in consultation with SSI.

[1] This analysis has been constructed using the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Statistical Areas Level 2 (SA2). For simplicity, SA2s are referred to as 'areas' or 'communities' throughout this report.

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Data overlay

Services were geographically assigned to SA2s based on coordinates included in the ACECQA register. SA2 measures were calculated based on centres assigned to that SA2 which have food and/or fees data. Centre-weighted and place-weighted food provision rates and average fees were calculated. Centre-weighted assigns equal weight to each centre in an SA2. Place-weighted assigns weight to centres based on their number of approved places.

To create priority lists of SA2s, we ranked all SA2s experiencing high early childhood disadvantage (defined as being in IRSD decile 1-4 and at least 10% of children in 2024 AEDC being identified as vulnerable on two or more AEDC domains) by food provision rates (centre-weighted).

Limitations

The analysis was based on the data available at the time of collection. Some data points, such as whether food is provided, relies on self-reporting by ECEC services. We did not manually confirm that centres claiming to provide meals actually do so. Furthermore, this research considers only *whether* food is provided in an ECEC service and makes no claims regarding the quality, suitability, and sufficiency of food provided in these locations.

We note that many ECEC services did not have up-to-date Starting Blocks profiles. Many services did not publish their daily fees and/or food provision status on their website. Data on food provision was missing for 473 LDC services (5% of LDC services on the ACECQA register) and fee data for 361 (4%), even after attempts to follow up with services by email and phone call. Each analysis uses all centres with available data for that measure.

Fee data were checked for plausibility. Some fees were confirmed by phone with the service and corrected where the published figure was wrong. A small number of very low advertised fees (below $80 per day, less than 1% of centres) were retained; these may reflect sessional pricing or state subsidies. Where a service appeared more than once in the fee data it was counted once.

Data pertaining to definition of disadvantage data sensitive to threshold choices. Communities with less disadvantage than the most disadvantaged areas (e.g. IRSD Decile 1) are not necessarily ‘advantaged’; they are simply experiencing relatively lower levels of disadvantage according to the measures used.

Some states and territories such Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania and Northern Territory, are over-represented in the data on disadvantage. These states generally have more communities in rural and remote areas, and more communities with more socio-economic disadvantage. However, disadvantage within one jurisdiction may present differently to others. For example, the ACT Government argues that SEIFA captures only a small portion of the level of disadvantage within the territory.[xliv] This is because the ACT has one of the greatest proportions of highly socio-economically diverse neighbourhoods, so need may be spread across the territory rather than concentrated in certain SA2s.

It is also worth noting that families may access services that are outside the SA2 that they live in, particularly in metropolitan areas where SA2s are relatively small. Therefore, the SA2 measures should not necessarily be considered an accurate depiction of food provision, fees, or general childcare availability in an individual SA2. However, the measures have increased value when considered across SA2s in aggregate (e.g. remoteness, IRSD, and other categories).

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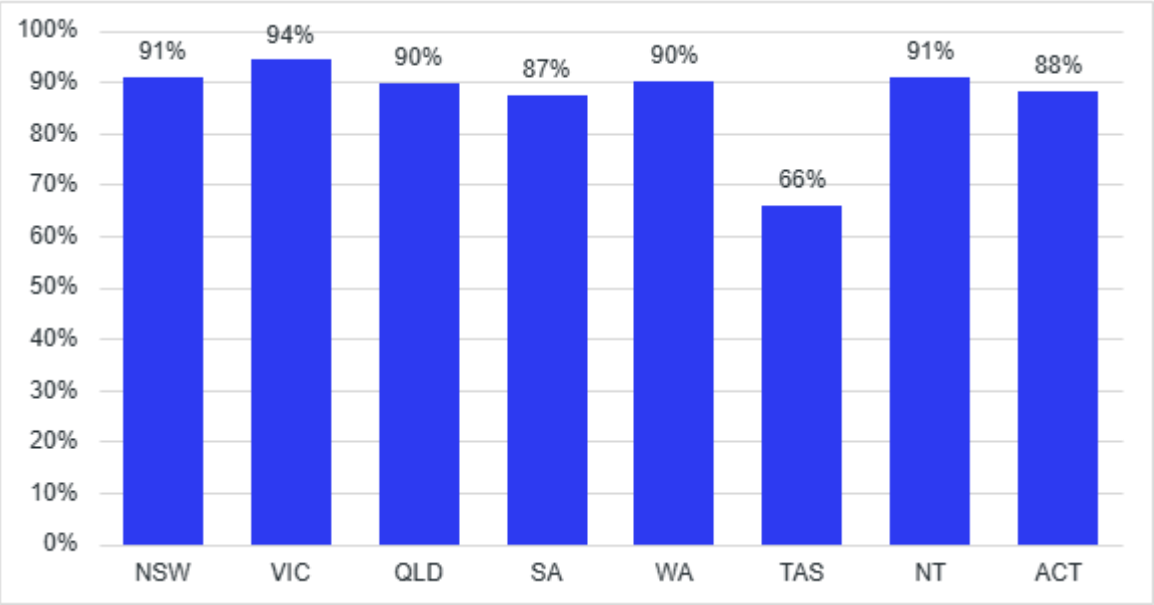
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Results

Provision of food in long day care centres across Australia

All results in this section relate to LDC services. Based on the data collected, across Australia, 90.8% of LDC centres provide food and 9.2% of centres do not (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Percentage of LDC centres providing food by state and territory



Note: This reports on 8,364 of 9,212 centres where food data was available.

We note that centres may well be providing limited daily food, such as morning tea, afternoon tea and/or snacks, or may have capacity to provide emergency meals where children turn up without a lunchbox. However, for the purposes of this study the focus is where food is being provided systematically, regularly and including at least lunch, a more substantial meal. Centres recorded as providing 'some' food (231 services, 2.5% of those with food data) were counted as providing food.

Tasmania had a substantially lower rate of food provision, with only 66% of LDC services (77 of 117) providing food, compared with 87% to 94% of other states and territories. There are several potential reasons for this. The first is that the Tasmanian LDCs charge lower daily fees, on average ($128), compared to the national average ($153) (see discussion about *Fees,* which notes the relationship between fees charged and food provision). Consistent with discussions with stakeholders in Tasmania following the analysis of this data, some other potential explanations include:

- Tasmania has no SA2s classified as metropolitan under the Modified Monash Model (see discussion on *Impact of remoteness* below)
- Tasmania has high levels of socioeconomic disadvantage generally (see discussion about *Socio-economic disadvantage of location* below)
- ECEC workforce shortages in Tasmania may be contributing to lower rates of food provision as services struggle to find enough staff to oversee the preparation and serving of food.

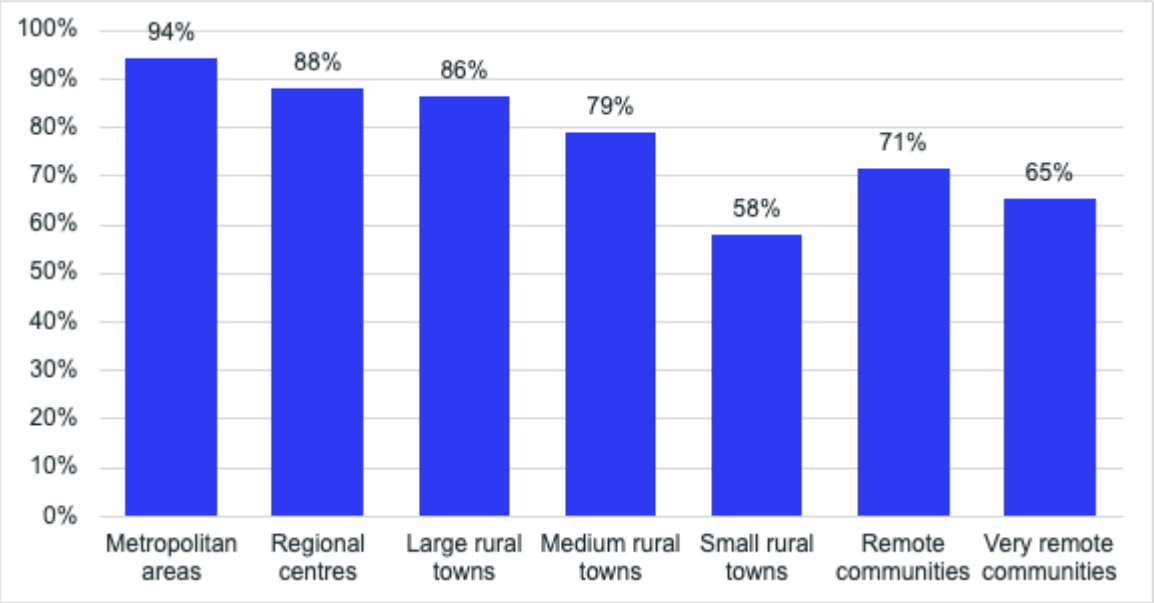
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Further research would help to identify factors underlying these findings. In particular, future studies could explore whether the physical infrastructure of ECEC services could be affecting food provision. Stakeholders report that a high number of services operate out of aging buildings where the cost for improvements to meet the code for food preparation is prohibitive.

Geography and remoteness

There is a modest relationship between remoteness and food provision, with more remote areas having lower rates of provision than metro areas. However, this relationship is non-linear, with remote and very remote communities showing higher rates of provision compared with small rural towns (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Percentage of LDC centres providing food by remoteness category

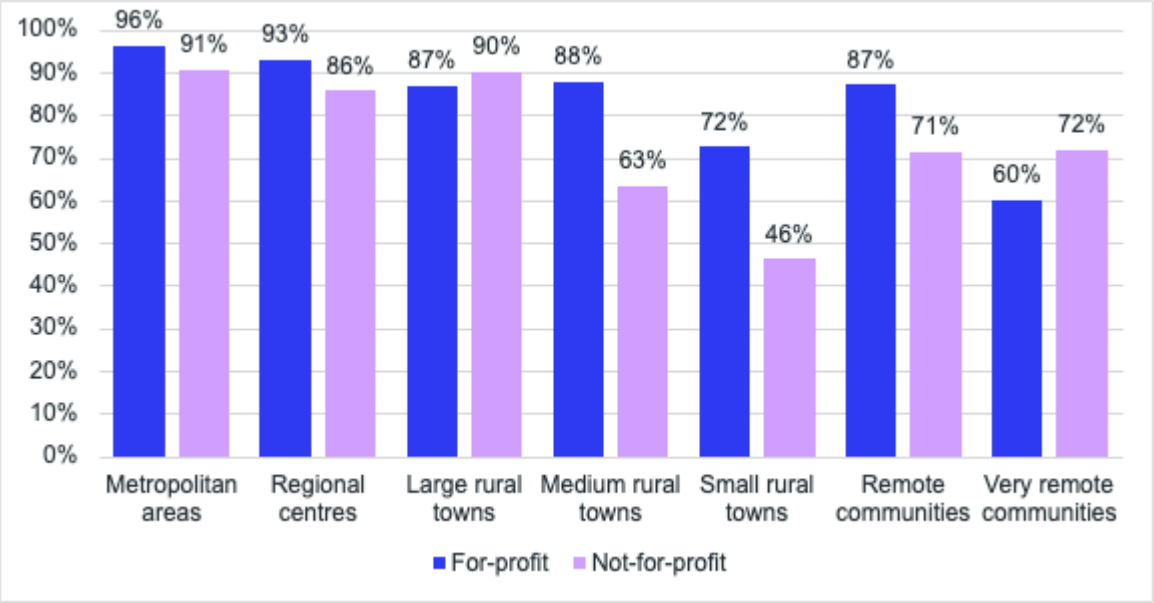


Food provision is lowest in small rural towns, with only 58% of services providing food. The dip in provision in small and medium rural towns was much deeper among not-for-profit centres. 46% of not-for-profit centres provide food in small rural towns compared with 72% for for-profit centres and 63% in medium rural towns compared with 88% for for-profits (see Figure 3).

It is unclear why remote and very remote communities have higher rates of food provision compared to small rural towns. One explanation is that additional loadings available to remote and very remote services may be supporting food provision, but we have limited evidence that this is the case (this could be supported by further research among these communities). An alternative explanation is that food provision in remote communities reflects local service responses to community need and a broader community support role ECEC plays in remote areas. At the same time, remote services face substantial operational pressures associated with workforce shortages, supply chain costs, freight expenses and financial viability, which may constrain their capacity to provide food despite additional funding supports.

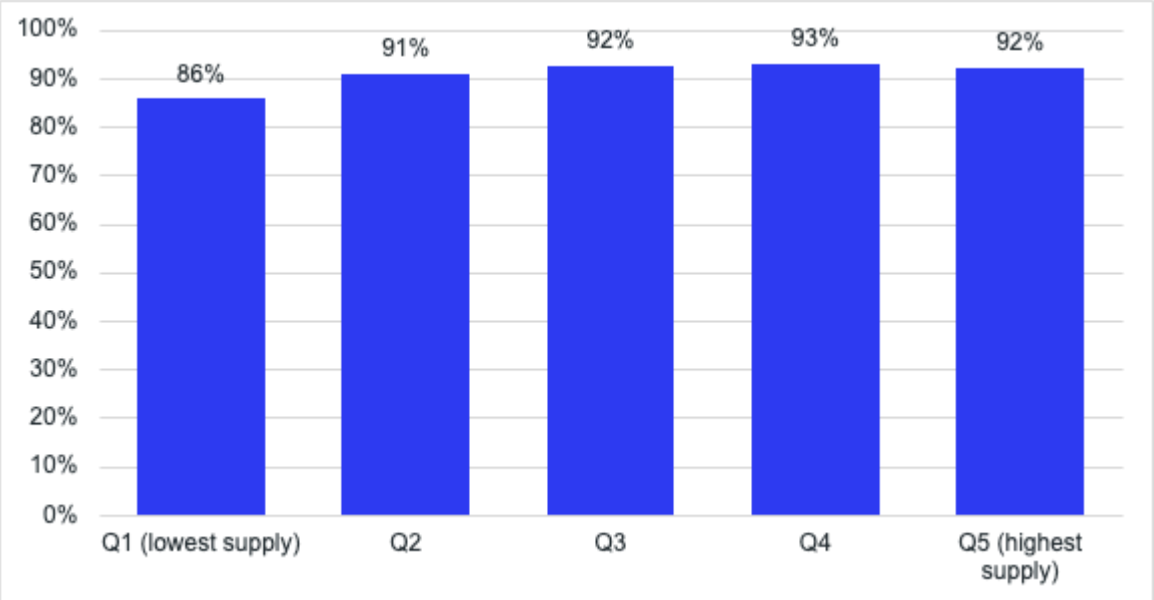
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Figure 3: Percentage of LDC centres providing food by remoteness (not-for-profit and for-profit LDC services)



ECEC services in metro areas were also more likely to charge higher fees and are generally less disadvantaged (35% of metro LDC services are in IRSD deciles 8 to 10, compared with 10% of non-metro services), which likely influences the capacity of centres to provide food. Previous work has theorised that, in metro areas in particular, food may be used in part as a way to attract families to a centre in areas of high competition.[xlv] Our analysis does not support this. Food provision was somewhat higher where the local supply of LDC places per child aged 0 to 6 was greater (86% in the fifth of areas with the lowest supply compared with 92% in the highest; see Figure 4), but this difference disappears once centre size and remoteness are taken into account. More research is needed to explore this relationship.

Figure 4: Percentage of LDC services providing food, by local supply of LDC places (all registered LDC places per child aged 0-6)



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Case study: Karumba, Carpentaria (QLD)

Carpentaria in North Queensland is one of Australia's most remote regions, encompassing vast distances and many remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Carpentaria is served by only a small number of ECEC services spread across vast distances and remote communities, creating significant challenges for equitable access to education, health and food.

Carpentaria is in IRSD Decile 1 (the areas with the most disadvantage), and 29% of children in the community were developmentally vulnerable on two or more AEDC domains in 2024. Of the three LDC centres in this community in our dataset, one provides food.

Karumba in the far North-West of Carpentaria has a single ECEC service. With only one staff member, attendance is limited to just six children at a time, while many children remain on the waitlist. The area struggles to attract more ECEC staff due to inadequate housing supply in the community. At the same time, families and workers may reconsider moving to the area due to lack of ECEC, creating a cycle of inadequate provision of services.

The centre in Karumba does not provide food because there is not enough funding for the food safety certificate required, despite having an on-site kitchen. Anecdotal reports from stakeholders in remote communities indicate that, for some highly disadvantaged families, challenges in providing food for children's lunchboxes may act as a barrier to ECEC participation. Stakeholders suggested that concerns about judgement may further discourage attendance. These issues require more detailed exploration through future research.[xlvi]

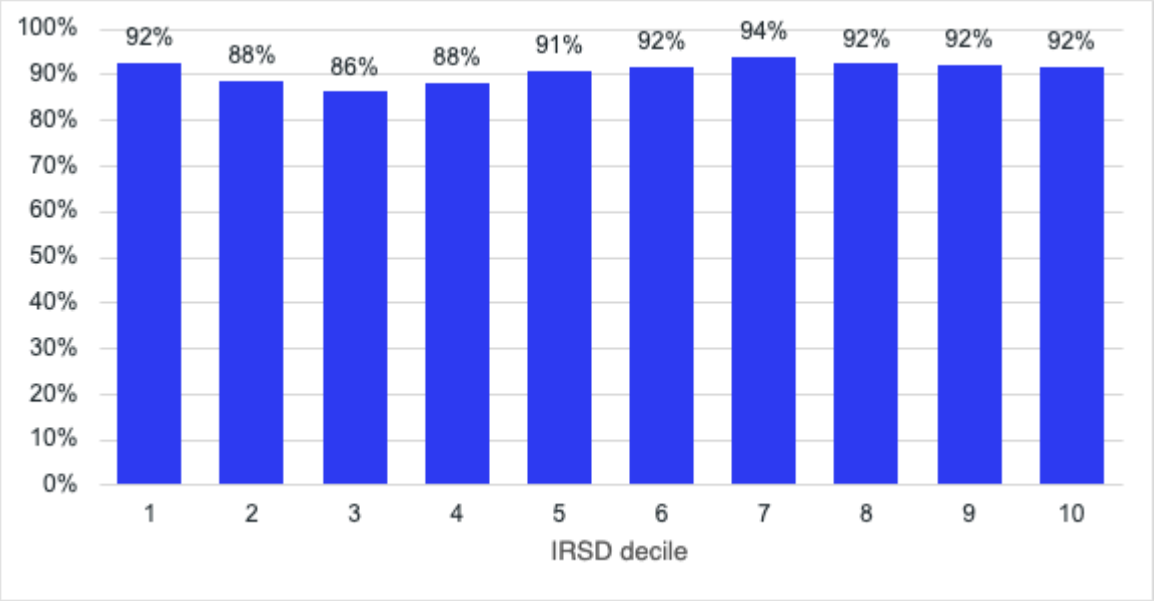


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Socio-economic disadvantage

An area's socio-economic disadvantage, measured using IRSD decile, had a very weak association with food provision. The relationship was also non-linear: ECEC services in Decile 1 (the areas with the most disadvantage) were more likely to offer food (92%) than centres in Deciles 2 to 4 (86% to 89%), but provision rose again from Decile 5 and was 92% to 94% in Deciles 6 to 10 (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Percentage of LDC centres providing food by IRSD decile (LDC services)



One possible explanation is that food provision may be driven by different mechanisms at opposite ends of the socioeconomic spectrum. In highly disadvantaged communities, food provision may reflect responses to food insecurity and community need, while in communities with the least disadvantage it may function as a valued service amenity supported by higher fees and parent demand. Services in middle socioeconomic communities may experience fewer need-based drivers and less market incentive for food provision. This interpretation is informed by broader literature on social gradients and 'missing middle'[xlvii] populations and should be considered hypothesis-generating rather than causal. Engagement with services in IRSD Decile 1 could help validate this.

Fees rose consistently as area disadvantage fell, from a mean of $139 a day in IRSD Decile 1 to $169 in Decile 10 (see Figure 6). This broadly reflects the market model: centres can charge what the local market will bear.

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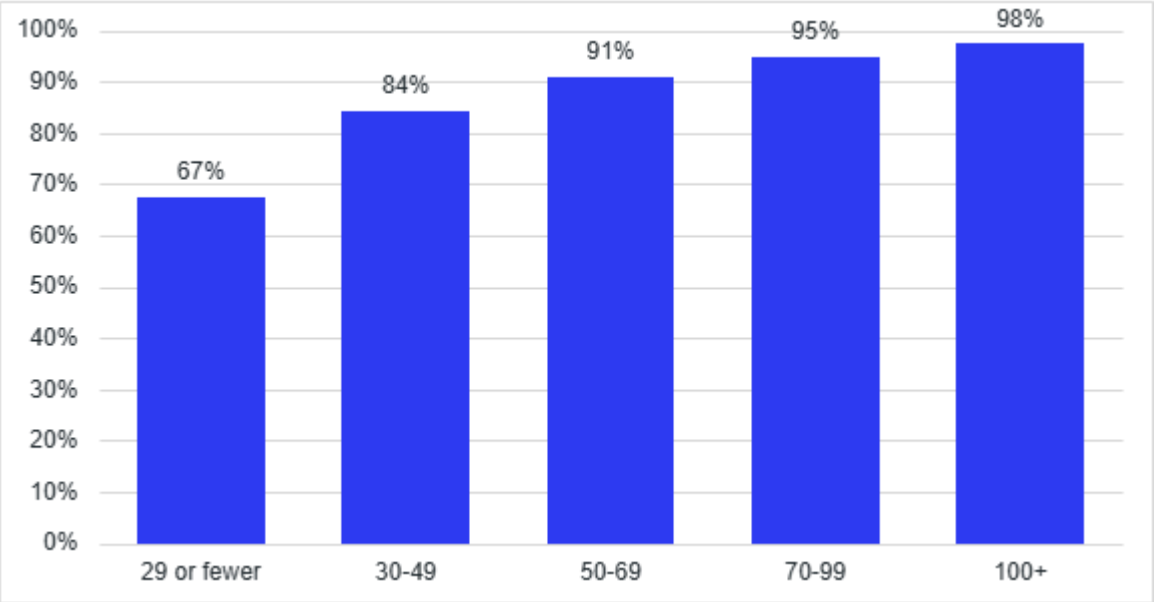
Figure 6: LDC mean daily fee by IRSD decile



Centre size

Centre size (number of approved places) had the strongest association with food provision, with larger centres more likely to provide food than smaller centres (67% of centres with 29 or fewer places compared with 98% of centres with 100 or more; see Figure 7).

Figure 7: Percentage of LDC services providing food, by approved places



This association also changed least when centres were compared with others of similar remoteness and provider type (Table 1).

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Table 1: Differences in food provision before and after matching centres on other characteristics

Comparison	*Difference in food provision (percentage points)*	*Difference after matching*	*Share of difference remaining*	*Matched on*
Centre size: 100 or more places vs 29 or fewer	*30*	*25*	*82%*	*Remoteness and provider type*
Remoteness: metropolitan vs small rural towns	*36*	*21*	*57%*	*Centre size and provider type*
Provider type: for-profit vs not-for-profit	*9*	*7*	*69%*	*Centre size, remoteness and IRSD decile band*
Local supply: highest vs lowest fifth of areas	*6*	*-1*	*n/a (reversed)*	*Centre size and remoteness*
Quality rating: Meeting vs Exceeding or Excellent	*6*	*5*	*84%*	*Centre size, remoteness and provider type*

Note: Differences are in percentage points of LDC services providing food. 'After matching' reweights the comparison group to the reference group's mix of the characteristics listed. Source: SVA analysis of Kindicare and Starting Blocks data, 2026.

Figure 7 shows that 98% of large centres (100+ places) provide food, compared to 67% of small centres (<30 places) – a difference of 30 percentage points. However, as Table 1 shows, larger centres are more often operated by for-profit providers, and more often in metropolitan regions. Because for-profit providers and metropolitan-based centres are more likely to provide food, it is possible that this difference is driven by these factors instead. Indeed, the association between size and food provision does weaken slightly when centres are compared with others or similar remoteness and provider type, however the difference remains meaningful, a 25-percentage-point difference. This suggests that the difference in food provision in larger vs smaller centres is not driven solely by remoteness or provider type.

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Larger centres were more likely to charge higher fees, which could be invested in food provision. In every state and territory with sufficient data, the largest centres charged more than the smallest. Fees rose at every step in centre size in New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland and South Australia. In Western Australia, Tasmania and the ACT the trend held overall but not at every step, and the Northern Territory had too few centres to assess. We theorise that large centres likely have economies of scale that facilitate food provision, and larger premises with infrastructure needed for food provision such as an adequately sized kitchen for food storage and preparation.



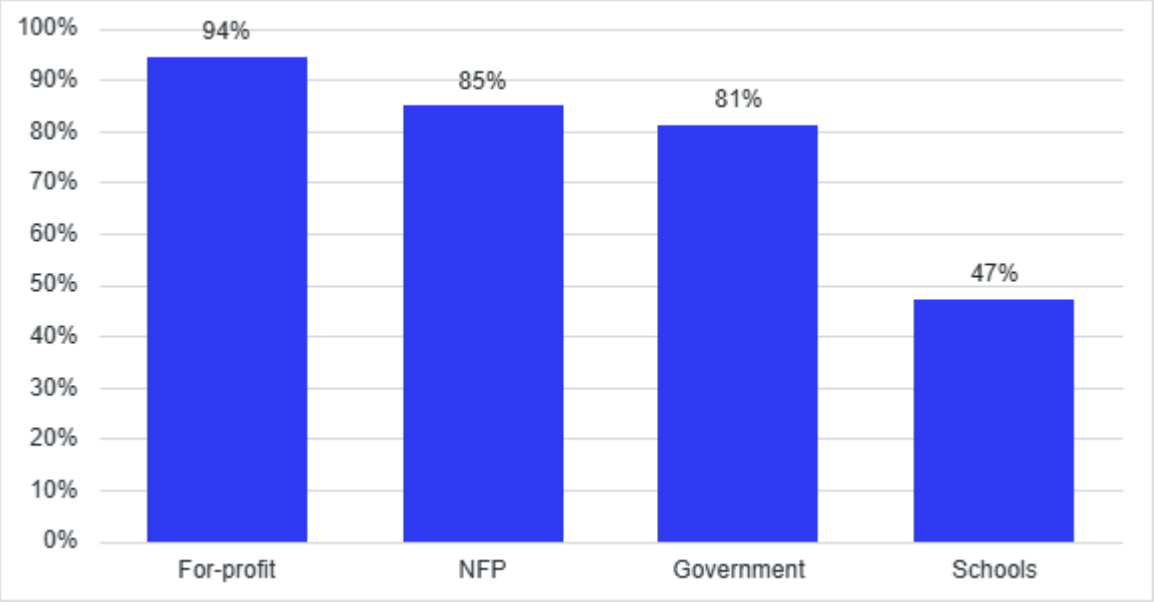
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Provider type

ECEC is provided through a range of funding models: for-profit, not-for-profit (NFP) and government owned. For-profit providers dominate ECEC provision in metro areas (76% of centres in our dataset) but are less likely to be in remote (27%) and very remote (16%) areas. In remote and very remote areas, not-for-profit centres make up around 60% of services, with government providing 8% to 16%. Across all non-metro areas combined, for-profit providers still account for 59% of centres and not-for-profits for 33%.

In our data, provider type had a modest association with food provision: 94% of for-profit centres provided food compared with 85% of not-for-profit centres (see Figure 8). The gap narrows to about 7 percentage points when centres of similar size, remoteness and area disadvantage are compared.

Figure 8: Food provision by provider type (LDC services)



Note: State/territory government schools are coded as Government, while catholic schools and independent schools are coded as Schools.

For-profit centres charged about $11 more per day than not-for-profit centres on average; comparing centres of similar size and remoteness, the gap is about $7. As a result, for-profit centres potentially have more income that can be invested into food provision compared with not-for-profit centres.

The case study below (see box) highlights how not-for-profit LDC centres in areas of high early childhood disadvantage can defy the odds to provide high-quality food to children.

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Case study: Blue Haven (NSW)

Blue Haven – San Remo, located on the Central Coast of New South Wales, is a metropolitan area that sees a range of challenges affecting the community. The community is in Decile 2 for IRSD (with 1 being the areas with the most disadvantage), and 19.11% of children in the community were developmentally vulnerable on two or more AEDC domains (DV2) in 2024. DV2 more than doubled (from 8.11%) between 2021-24.

All three LDC centres in the area offer food. One of these is Goodstart Early Learning, a not-for-profit centre offering both LDC and preschool for up to 70 children. Staff at the centre say they see high levels of disadvantage and trauma in the community, which affects the behaviours displayed by children. For example, children may come to the centre hungry in the morning, or struggle to regulate their emotions.

Blue Haven participates in the Goodstart Plus program, which aims to give children 75% of their daily nutritional needs. The program is being rolled out across 20 centres located in lower IRSD communities, where there is a greater risk of food insecurity and higher rates of developmental vulnerability. Meals include breakfast, morning tea, lunch, afternoon tea and a late snack. Additional snacks are available if children are hungry. Children are never pressured to eat if they don't want to, and food is never withheld ("you can't eat now") or used as a reward ("you can only have your snack if you eat your vegetables").

Food is prepared on-site by a cook who works with nutritionists and occupational therapists to design nutritious, sufficient and appealing meals for the children. The team has made innovations such as adding more protein earlier in the day (such as cheese, egg and Greek yogurt), and selecting wholegrain bread and brown rice to help keep children satiated for longer. As a result, staff say children's emotional regulation has improved, with calmer children and fewer complaints of hunger. Parents also report better behaviour at home.

"We know that for some children attending, this might be the most nutritional food they receive in the day," says the Centre Director. For her, food is not an added extra, but essential to child development and education: "You can't learn if you're hungry because your brain is just focusing on what's going on in your stomach."

The centre also thinks about how to engage children in the preparation of food, with the cook holding weekly cooking classes with children. She also sends recipes home to parents so they can recreate the meals their children love to eat at the centre and is creating videos of easy step-by-step recipes. A step has also been installed outside the centre's kitchen that allows children to watch the cooking, which leads to lots of conversations about which ingredients the children recognise and enjoy. The cook points out that the kitchen is modest, situated in a converted house: "If we can create quality here, you can do it anywhere.".

Mealtimes are a group activity, with children helping to set the table, serve their own food, and tidy away afterwards. The Centre Director says that when some children first arrive at the centre they struggle to sit still to eat, often walking around while eating. She says this is because often children in entrenched disadvantage are in constant "flight or fight" mode, and don't experience safe, peaceful home environments. Children also may be resistant to new foods, but staff gently encourage them to hold it, lick it and taste it. As a result, children and their families – are showing greater interest in healthy foods.

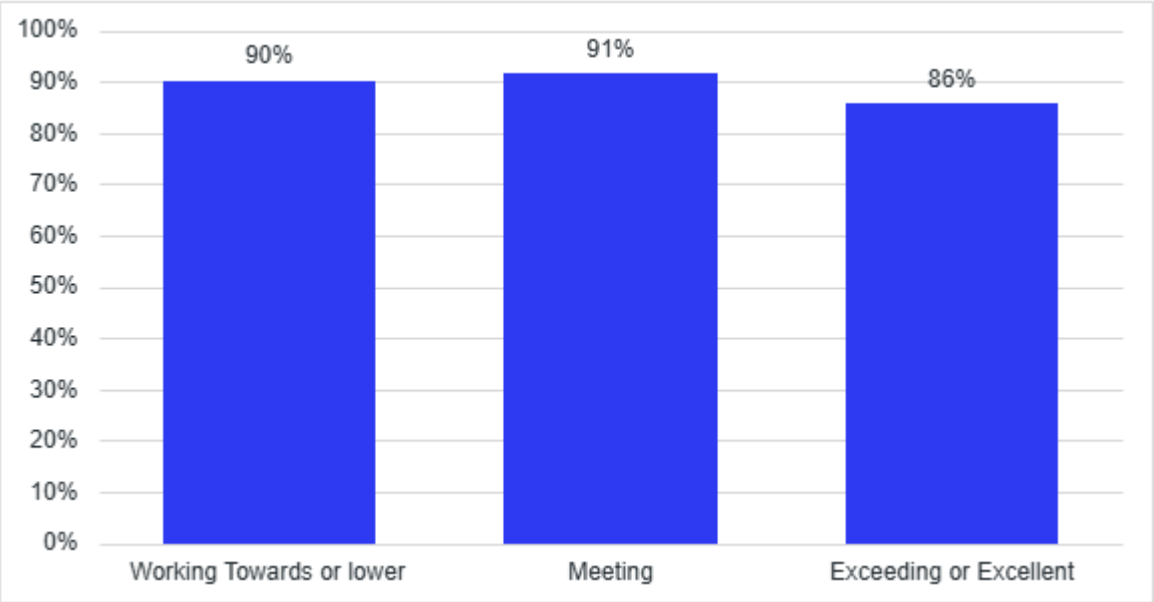
The Centre Director and cook both see feeding the children in their care as the responsibility of the centre. "The centres are open up to 12 hours a day, and children are here during the very hungry hours of the day," says the Centre Director. "Plus, the centre provides an environment where they can sit and eat calmly." The team also sees the long-term potential benefits of boosting children's nutrition in the early years: "It goes right through to their adult life, and they'll even share it with their own children one day," says the cook. "So, addressing healthy eating in childhood can create generational positivity, it's preventative for illness in adulthood, and it's also social justice because with hunger comes many other issues that impact children, like domestic violence."

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ECEC quality rating

The National Quality Standard (NQS) quality rating of an ECEC service had a weak association with food provision. However, centres rated Exceeding or Excellent were less likely to provide food (86%) than centres rated Meeting (91%) or Working Towards (90%), and this difference holds when centres of similar size, remoteness and provider type are compared (see Figure 9).

Figure 9: Food provision by NQS quality rating (LDC services)



Fees

There was significant variation in fees charged by LDC centres in our dataset, from $26 to $241 per day, with most centres (the middle 80%) charging between $119 and $182 (see Figure 10 and Table 2). Overall, centres that provided food charged higher daily fees than centres that did not. Food-providing services charged a median of $158 per day compared with $129 for non-providing centres (see Table 2). This includes a small number of centres with very low advertised fees; excluding fees below $80 per day, the median difference is about $28.

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Figure 10: Advertised daily fee by food provision (LDC services) – 10th, 25th, 57th and 90th percentiles

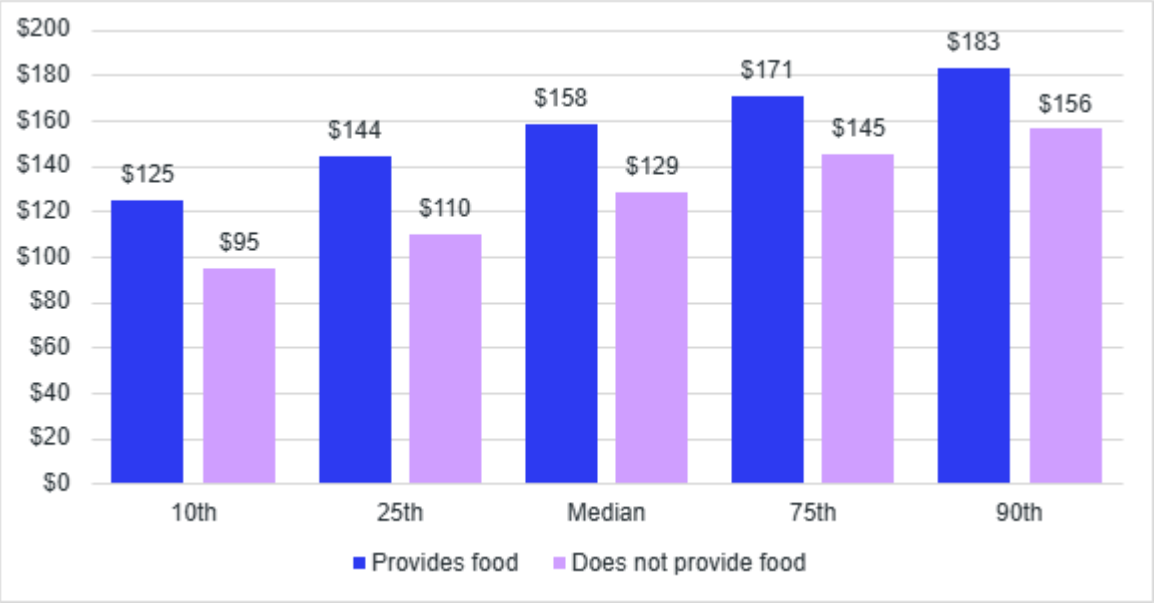


Table 2: Advertised daily fee by food provision (LDC services)

Daily fee	Number of centres	Minimum amount charged	10th percentile	Median amount charged	90th percentile	Maximum amount charged
Provides food	8,158	$42	$125	$158	$183	$241
Does not provide food	779	$33	$95	$129	$156	$206
Difference		$9	$30	$29	$27	$35

Note: Fees are each centre's lowest advertised full-day fee across three age groups, before Child Care Subsidy, from Starting Blocks and Kindicare (2026); centre-weighted. LDC services with both fee and food provision data (n = 8,937). Minimum fees reflect a small number of remote, subsidised or sessional services; 10% of food-providing centres charge less than $125 and 10% of non-providers less than $95.

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List of communities with high early childhood disadvantage and low rates of LDC food provision

In order to identify priority areas for ECEC food provision, the food provision in LDC data was overlaid with early childhood disadvantage data (defined as communities with more than 10% of children developmentally vulnerable on two or more domains, and in IRSD deciles 1-4).

Table 3 shows the 20 areas with greatest potential need for food provision in ECEC. Rank 1 indicates the highest need. Food provision rates are for LDC services with food data. SA2s with no LDC services are excluded. Communities are then ranked by food provision, based on the number of approved LDC places for which food is provided (Place-weighted).

Appendix 1 includes additional tables showing the communities with greatest potential need for food provision in ECEC in various categories (nationally, by regionality, and by state/territory). They provide an indication of where need is concentrated, and could act as a starting point for targeted strategies to expand food provision. However, it is important to note that strengthening food security will require not only provision, but also quality and sustainability of this provision. Where services are already providing food, especially food of high quality, they should be recognised and supported to continue. As such, the identified communities on the shortlist are a starting point – not an end point – for increased focus and potential investment in systems reform and early childhood services. The SVA report *The opportunities to grow*, which maps early childhood disadvantage across Australia, may be a helpful guide. Ultimately, decisions about investment should also consider existing service capacity, program quality, sustainability, and local context.

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Table 3: The 20 communities with greatest potential need for food provision in ECEC (national)

Rank	SA2	State	Remoteness (MMM)	IRSD decile	DV2+ % (2024)	LDC services in dataset	% food (place-weighted)
1	Petermann - Simpson	NT	Very remote communities	1	63%	1	0.0%
2	Invermay	TAS	Regional centres	1	43%	1	0.0%
3	Penola	SA	Small rural towns	3	35%	1	0.0%
4	West Coast (Tas.)	TAS	Remote communities	1	22%	1	0.0%
5	Leinster - Leonora	WA	Very remote communities	1	24%	1	0.0%
6	Nambucca Heads	NSW	Medium rural towns	1	21%	1	0.0%
7	Ingham	QLD	Small rural towns	2	21%	1	0.0%
8	Broken Hill	NSW	Large rural towns	2	22%	3	0.0%
9	Cobar	NSW	Remote communities	3	27%	1	0.0%
10	Millmerran	QLD	Small rural towns	2	21%	1	0.0%
11	Berriedale - Chigwell	TAS	Regional centres	2	23%	1	0.0%
12	Inglewood - Waggamba	QLD	Small rural towns	2	24%	2	0.0%
13	Southern Moreton Bay Islands	QLD	Small rural towns	1	14%	1	0.0%
14	Hay	NSW	Small rural towns	3	23%	1	0.0%
15	Burrum - Fraser	QLD	Regional centres	2	14%	1	0.0%
16	Balonne	QLD	Remote communities	2	18%	1	0.0%
17	Condobolin	NSW	Small rural towns	3	18%	4	0.0%
18	Ceduna	SA	Very remote communities	2	18%	1	0.0%
19	Brighton - Pontville	TAS	Regional centres	4	21%	1	0.0%
20	West Ulverstone	TAS	Large rural towns	1	14%	1	0.0%

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Discussion of research findings

Food provision in ECEC is not universal

Our research highlights that while food provision in long day care services is widespread in some areas, it is not universal. For example, only 58% of the centres in small rural towns were recorded as providing food, substantially below the national figure of 91%. Even after accounting for differences in centre size and provider type, food provision remains well below the national average in these communities.

This matters because an absence of food provision may represent a significant barrier to attendance, participation and learning, as well as access to adequate nutrition.

A common assumption that 'all ECEC services provide food' is not supported by the evidence. It appears to stem, in part, from a tendency for people to view individual experiences as representative of Australia as a whole. Challenging this assumption, particularly when held by policy makers, is important both to improve childhood food security and equitable access to ECEC.

Food provision in ECEC does not ensure quality or adequacy

Another common assumption is that where food is provided, regulations ensure that it is of sufficient quality and quantity. This is inaccurate. Decisions about food budgets, menu quality, and the priority given to nutrition are often made at the provider or service level, and reflect broader organisational priorities, resources and capacity.

Our research considers only whether food is provided in an ECEC centre not on the *quality* or *adequacy* of food provided. Further research is recommended on this issue. Previous research, including by QBI, indicates that even when ECEC services provide food, meals often do not meet daily recommendations for energy (kilojoules), vegetables, dairy and protein.[xlviii] A survey by United Workers Union found that food budgets in ECEC services were as low as 65 cents per child per day, creating significant stress for workers tasked with food provision.[xlix] As a result of tight budgets, 47% of educators surveyed reported that children at their centre were not provided with sufficient high-quality food. Workers also reported being encouraged to give children cheap carbohydrates such as crackers, rice and pasta, to "fill them up" and reduce the cost of meals. Research has questioned whether it is possible to deliver a healthy menu on budgets of less than $2.50 per day.[l] Further research could also explore the resources required to support high-quality food provision, including whether an evidence-based benchmark budget range per child could help services plan for and provide nutritious and adequate food.

Universal food provision is a critical foundation for improving children's equitable access to nutritious food in ECEC. Realising its full benefits, however, will require complementary measures beyond the scope of this report, including evidence-based budget benchmarks, appropriate cook qualifications and training, and implementation support for services.

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Children in areas with high levels of need struggle to access food in ECEC

As noted, there is a U-shaped relationship between areas of high disadvantage and food provision in ECEC centres: services in IRSD Decile 1 (the areas with the most disadvantage) were more likely to offer food (92%) than centres in Deciles 2 to 4 (86% to 89%), a shallow dip, with provision rising again from Decile 5 and holding at 92% to 94% in Deciles 6 to 10.

We have suggested that in highly disadvantaged communities, food provision may reflect responses to food insecurity and community need, while in communities with the least disadvantage it may function as a valued service amenity supported by higher fees and parent demand. This may create a 'missing middle' for food provision in Deciles 2 to 4, although the dip is shallow, and this remains a hypothesis.

It is also worth noting the limitations of our methodology, which uses Statistical Area 2 (SA2) as the unit of analysis. For some communities, high disadvantage in smaller pockets of the community may be obfuscated by SA2-level data and averages.

There is an opportunity for targeted programs to support food provision in areas of high need. This could include areas identified in our lists of communities with high early childhood disadvantage and low rates of LDC food provision (see Appendix 1). Evidence from the United States suggest that such approaches can be effective. The Child and Adult Food Care Food Program (CACFP) provides a subsidy towards food in ECEC for services that provide places to low-income families. CACFP has demonstrated positive outcomes including improved dietary quality among children and lower household food insecurity.[li]

A number of innovative service-led approaches have tested this in Australia:

- The Early Years Education Program (EYEP) randomised controlled trial provided 75% of a child's daily dietary requirements with significant positive results.[lii]
- Parkville Institute and ECEC service partners have also provided 75% of a child's daily dietary requirements as part of a replication of the EYEP randomised controlled trial with four services.[liii]
- Goodstart Early Learning, a not-for-profit ECEC provider is piloting its Goodstart Plus program, which diverts extra funds towards services located in disadvantaged communities, increasing staff capacity and budgets to provide food that meets 75% of a child's daily dietary requirements.[liv]

The Productivity Commission in Australia has recommended the development of a new ECEC Inclusion fund, to include funding for ECEC services to address practical barriers to ECEC access, such as providing a bus service, clothing or food, where it would enable children currently missing out to attend ECEC.[lv] While programs run by charitable organisations exist, these are typically small-scale, local and not supported by long-term, sustainable funding.

Data for the cost-benefit of nutritious ECEC meals in Australia are lacking, but analysis of meal provision in school settings estimates that for every dollar invested in school meals, there is a $3–10 return on improved health, education and productivity in adulthood.[lvi]

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The ECEC system is not currently equipped to support children experiencing food insecurity

Our findings suggest that whether children can access food through ECEC is shaped less by child need and more by the financial and operational capacity of individual services. Food provision was substantially lower in small rural towns, centre size had the strongest association with food provision, and services that provided food charged considerably higher fees. This suggests that the capacity to provide food depends on factors such as service size, local market conditions and financial viability.

Together, these findings indicate that the current ECEC system is not structured to support equitable access to food for children who may need it most. Services operating in disadvantaged communities, rural and remote areas, and other thin markets often face higher operating costs, workforce shortages and greater complexity, while having fewer opportunities to spread costs across large enrolments.[lvii] As a result, the services with the least capacity to absorb the cost of food provision may be those serving children most at risk of food insecurity. This means that the children most likely to benefit from food provision may be the least likely to have access to it.

Given the centrality of food to children's brain development, participation in learning, emotional regulation and relationships, it is critical that the funding, policy and regulatory settings of the ECEC system enable services in challenging operating environments to provide food equitably and sustainably.

The National Quality Framework does not require or incentivise food provision

Our analysis found slightly lower rates of food provision in high-quality centres, as measured by the NQF. While this may seem counter-intuitive, it may reflect the incentives embedded in the framework. Food provision and particularly the provision of adequate and nutritious food is not required, assessed or rewarded through the NQF. Consequently, services seeking to improve their quality ratings may be more likely to invest scarce resources in areas that *are* more directly recognised, such as staffing, educational programming and compliance requirements. This may mean that food provision is treated as an optional service feature rather than a core component of quality ECEC. Further research is needed to explore these relationships.

The findings in this report support the argument that food should no longer sit outside Australia's definition of quality early childhood education and care. Adequate nutrition is fundamental to children's capacity to learn, develop and participate. Therefore, the provision of adequate and nutritious food should be explicitly recognised within the quality and regulatory framework for ECEC, alongside appropriate funding and implementation support for services.

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Recommendations

Based on the findings of this research, we recommend that Australian governments recognise access to adequate, nutritious and culturally appropriate food as a fundamental condition for children's learning, development, wellbeing and participation in ECEC.

Reform should combine strengthened expectations with targeted investment and practical implementation support. Regulation alone will not address current inequities and may increase pressure on services operating in rural and remote Australia, and areas of high disadvantage.

Recommendations for the Australian Government:

1. **Recognise access to nutritionally adequate food as a core indicator of quality through its explicit inclusion within the National Quality Standards.**

   Working with state and territory governments, and ACECQA, reform should ensure that the nutritional adequacy of food provided by ECEC services is systematically monitored and assessed. This should include consideration of how food environments, mealtime practices and children's nutritional needs are reflected in the National Quality Standard (NQS) and assessment and ratings process. Implementation and funding support are critical to avoid additional pressure on already highly stretched ECEC services, potentially compromising other areas of quality.

2. **Strengthen national stewardship of food in ECEC through the establishment of an ECEC Commission.**

   The Australian Government should ensure the proposed ECEC Commission has a clear mandate to recognise food as essential educational infrastructure and a core component of quality ECEC. While responsibility for children's nutrition currently sits across multiple policy domains, no agency is responsible for ensuring that all children can access adequate, nutritious food through ECEC settings. This contributes to the invisibility of the issue and lack of accountability.

   Priority functions could include monitoring and reporting on food provision across the sector, identifying communities where low rates of food provision intersect with high levels of disadvantage, commissioning research and demonstration projects, coordinating implementation support across jurisdictions, and advising government on funding, regulatory and quality reforms. The Commonwealth Department of Education could progress this role pending the establishment of the Commission.

3. **Ensure reform of the ECEC funding model considers needs-based funding mechanisms adjusted to better reflect the cost of high-quality provision for high need children, families and communities.**

   The findings indicate that a service's capacity to provide food is influenced by centre size, geographic location and financial viability, rather than children's needs. Future ECEC funding reforms should consider needs-based funding mechanisms and adjusted funding levels to better reflect the costs and value of high-quality provision for high need children, families and communities, as recommended by the Productivity Commission.[lviii] Needs-based funding would

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direct additional resources to services supporting children and families experiencing disadvantage and food insecurity, while adjusted funding levels would recognise the higher costs faced by small, rural, remote and otherwise underserved services in providing nutritious food.

4. **Establish a targeted Food Provision in ECEC demonstration program across a range of settings.**

   A targeted demonstration program across approximately 50 services could build the evidence base on effective approaches to food provision in ECEC services and their outcomes. Focusing on communities experiencing high levels of disadvantage, food insecurity and low rates of food provision, the initiative could test delivery models, implementation requirements, costs and funding approaches across different service settings. Funding would be critical to support food costs, additional workforce costs, infrastructure and implementation requirements associated with high-quality food provision.

5. **Improve national measurement of childhood food insecurity, incorporating specific indicators into existing data collections and reporting mechanisms.**

   There are clear opportunities to incorporate validated measures of childhood food insecurity into existing national data collections to strengthen understanding of childhood food insecurity and better inform policy and investment decisions. For example, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) could adopt a validated tool to collect systematic, national data on food security including childhood food insecurity. The ABS could assess its capacity to adopt the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) 18-item Household Food Security Survey Module (HFSSM), which would allow collection of both adult and child food security measures. Child specific measures could also be added to the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey.

6. **Strengthen the focus on children within Australia's food security system, including through the Feeding Australia strategy, to build a more coherent national response to childhood food insecurity.**

   The development of Feeding Australia presents an opportunity to establish a more coherent national approach that addresses the structural drivers of food insecurity, while also strengthening the capacity of the settings and systems around children and families to prevent, identify and respond to it. The inclusion of additional members to the National Food Council to adequately represent the interests of children and families would ensure these critical voices. Alternatively, the Council could establish an expert reference group comprised of organisations and academics with expertise in areas such as child development, nutrition and ECEC. This group could support the Board's broader understanding of the systems that hold the challenge of childhood food insecurity in place for so many communities across Australia.

7. **Australian and Tasmanian governments: investigate and address barriers to food provision in Tasmanian ECEC services.**

   Work with Tasmanian ECEC services and sector partners to understand why only 66% of long day care services provide food, identifying the range of workforce, financial, infrastructure, regulatory and other barriers to provision. Use findings to identify and test targeted responses, including grants to establish or sustain food provision.

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Recommendations for state and territory governments:

8. Consider provision of food within preschools and kindergartens within their jurisdictions.

While data access issues prevented inclusion within this research, it is well known that a significant proportion of preschools and kindergartens have lunchbox policies with families required to pack food for children. We urge state and territory governments to explore how food provision could be enabled within the centres themselves and implications for future builds.

Tasmania is uniquely positioned to do this, building on the infrastructure, partnerships and operational learnings established through the Healthy School Lunch Program. The findings would provide an evidence base for future expansion within Tasmania and offer a practical model for other Australian jurisdictions seeking to strengthen food provision in the year before school.

Recommendations for ECEC services:

9. Consider food provision and food environments as part of quality practice.

ECEC services should recognise food provision and food environments as important contributors to children's learning and development. Services should consider opportunities to strengthen food-related practices through quality improvement processes, while recognising that capacity varies according to local context, resources and infrastructure. Addressing food insecurity requires broader policy and system-level support, particularly in disadvantaged, rural, remote and other underserved communities.

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Conclusion

This research provides the first national mapping of food provision across Australian long day care services. It finds that while most services provide food, access is not universal and is shaped more by service capacity than by children's needs. Provision is substantially lower in small rural towns and among smaller services, while services providing food generally charge higher fees. Critically, provision alone does not guarantee that food is nutritionally adequate, sufficient or appropriate.

These findings reveal a significant gap in Australia's early childhood system. Food is fundamental to children's learning, development, wellbeing and participation, yet it remains largely outside the funding, quality and regulatory architecture of ECEC. Responsibility is left to individual services, including those operating with the fewest resources and in the most challenging environments. The consequence is that some of Australia's most disadvantaged children miss out.

Food provision through ECEC is, however, only one part of the response required to tackle childhood food insecurity. Food insecurity is shaped by interconnected economic, social and food system conditions, including income and financial stress, housing, employment, family violence, health and the affordability and accessibility of nutritious food. Addressing it therefore requires action across these underlying drivers, alongside stronger stewardship, measurement and coordination across systems and settings that surround children and families. ECEC has an important role within this broader response because of its deep and consistent reach into children's lives during this critical period of development.

The Australian Government has signalled a repositioning of food as essential educational infrastructure through its Early Years Strategy. The significant reforms underway across ECEC, alongside the national Feeding Australia strategy, create a critical opportunity to progress this direction, and recognise food as a core component of quality ECEC, while connecting ECEC to a broader national response to childhood food insecurity. Within ECEC, this will require coordinated action across funding, regulation, stewardship and implementation support, as well as further research into food quality, PSK provision and effective delivery models.

Ensuring children are well nourished while in ECEC is a foundational investment in their capacity to participate, learn and thrive. It can play an important role in helping to ensure that all children, regardless of where they live, their family circumstances or the service they attend, have the foundations they need to benefit from early learning and start school well.

Areas for future research

To develop a more comprehensive understanding of food provision across the ECEC sector, future research could extend data collection to include preschool/kinder and outside of school hours services (OOSH).

Ongoing fieldwork is needed to assess the quality of food provided in ECEC services, and identify supports required to enable services to consistently provide adequate, nutritious, safe and appropriate food. Research into strategies that increase ECEC educators' understanding of the role of food in child development could be valuable.

The relationship between hunger, poor nutrition, and behaviour concerns is under-explored. Research in this area would strengthen the evidence-base for recognising access to quality food provision in ECEC services as a safety consideration.

Finally, there is a need for high- quality research examining how place-based and community-led food initiatives can support resilience in disadvantaged communities.

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Appendix 1: Highest priority communities for expansion of ECEC food provision

In order to identify priority areas for expansion of ECEC food provision, the food provision in LDC data was overlaid with early childhood disadvantage data (defined as communities with more than 10% of children developmentally vulnerable on two or more domains, and in IRSD deciles 1-4). The below tables show the communities of highest need in various categories (nationally, by regionality, and by state/territory[2]). They provide an indication of where need is concentrated, and could act as a starting point for investment in food provision.

For all tables, communities (SA2s) were only included if they met the definition of high early childhood disadvantage (RSD deciles 1-4 and more than 10% of children developmentally vulnerable on two or more AEDC domains, 2024). Rank 1 indicates the highest need. Food provision rates are for LDC services with food data. SA2s with no LDC services are excluded. Communities are then ranked by food provision, based on the number of approved LDC places for which food is provided (place-weighted). For example, a community with 10% in the place-weighted column has food provision in 10% of all LCD places in that SA2 (for which we were able to access data).

Table 4: The 50 communities with greatest potential need for food provision in ECEC (national, excluding SA2s with zero LDCs)

Rank	SA2	State	Remoteness (MMM)	IRSD decile	DV2+ % (2024)	LDC services in dataset	% food (place-weighted)
1	Petermann - Simpson	NT	Very remote communities	1	63%	1	0.0%
2	Invermay	TAS	Regional centres	1	43%	1	0.0%
3	Penola	SA	Small rural towns	3	35%	1	0.0%
4	West Coast (Tas.)	TAS	Remote communities	1	22%	1	0.0%
5	Leinster - Leonora	WA	Very remote communities	1	24%	1	0.0%
6	Nambucca Heads	NSW	Medium rural towns	1	21%	1	0.0%
7	Ingham	QLD	Small rural towns	2	21%	1	0.0%
8	Broken Hill	NSW	Large rural towns	2	22%	3	0.0%
9	Cobar	NSW	Remote communities	3	27%	1	0.0%
10	Millmerran	QLD	Small rural towns	2	21%	1	0.0%
11	Berriedale - Chigwell	TAS	Regional centres	2	23%	1	0.0%

[2] No SA2s in ACT met the criteria. It is important to note that the ACT Government has previously identified the averaging effects of SEIFA, including IRSD, likely chronically under-report disadvantage in the ACT. See: https://www.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0009/2793627/Detecting-Disadvantage-ACT.pdf

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12	Inglewood - Waggamba	QLD	Small rural towns	2	24%	2	0.0%
13	Southern Moreton Bay Islands	QLD	Small rural towns	1	14%	1	0.0%
14	Hay	NSW	Small rural towns	3	23%	1	0.0%
15	Burrum - Fraser	QLD	Regional centres	2	14%	1	0.0%
16	Balonne	QLD	Remote communities	2	18%	1	0.0%
17	Condobolin	NSW	Small rural towns	3	18%	4	0.0%
18	Ceduna	SA	Very remote communities	2	18%	1	0.0%
19	Brighton - Pontville	TAS	Regional centres	4	21%	1	0.0%
20	West Ulverstone	TAS	Large rural towns	1	14%	1	0.0%
21	Wakefield - Barunga West	SA	Small rural towns	2	12%	2	0.0%
22	Tumut Surrounds	NSW	Small rural towns	4	18%	1	0.0%
23	Macksville - Scotts Head	NSW	Medium rural towns	2	14%	1	0.0%
24	Peterborough - Mount Remarkable	SA	Small rural towns	2	14%	1	0.0%
25	Toodyay	WA	Small rural towns	4	21%	1	0.0%
26	Narrogin	WA	Small rural towns	3	19%	1	0.0%
27	Quirindi	NSW	Small rural towns	2	12%	1	0.0%
28	Kerang	VIC	Small rural towns	2	11%	1	0.0%
29	St Arnaud	VIC	Small rural towns	3	14%	1	0.0%
30	Narrabri Surrounds	NSW	Small rural towns	4	16%	1	0.0%
31	Deniliquin Surrounds	NSW	Small rural towns	4	16%	1	0.0%
32	Northampton - Mullewa - Greenough	WA	Remote communities	3	15%	2	0.0%
33	Merredin	WA	Small rural towns	4	11%	3	0.0%
34	Armidale Surrounds - North	NSW	Small rural towns	4	13%	1	0.0%
35	Rushworth	VIC	Small rural towns	2	11%	2	0.0%
36	Wagin	WA	Small rural towns	4	12%	2	0.0%

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37	Buloke	VIC	Small rural towns	4	10%	4	0.0%
38	Moree Surrounds	NSW	Small rural towns	4	16%	1	0.0%
39	Mukinbudin	WA	Remote communities	4	15%	2	0.0%
40	Brookton	WA	Small rural towns	3	12%	2	0.0%
41	Oberon	NSW	Small rural towns	3	11%	1	0.0%
42	Miles - Wandoan	QLD	Small rural towns	3	11%	1	0.0%
43	Parkes Surrounds	NSW	Small rural towns	3	11%	1	0.0%
44	Cygnet	TAS	Small rural towns	3	10%	1	0.0%
45	Karoonda - Lameroo	SA	Remote communities	4	12%	2	0.0%
46	Belmont South - Blacksmiths	NSW	Metropolitan areas	3	11%	2	0.0%
47	Huonville - Franklin	TAS	Small rural towns	4	11%	1	0.0%
48	Yankalilla	SA	Small rural towns	4	11%	1	0.0%
49	Babinda	QLD	Small rural towns	4	11%	1	0.0%
50	Maclean - Yamba - Iluka	NSW	Small rural towns	3	13%	5	19.2%

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Table 5: The 20 communities with greatest potential need for food provision in ECEC (national)

Rank	SA2	State	IRSD decile	DV2+ % (2024)	LDC services in dataset	% food (place-weighted)
1	Belmont South - Blacksmiths	NSW	3	11%	2	0.0%
2	Christies Beach	SA	2	24%	3	46.4%
3	Hackham West - Huntfield Heights	SA	1	32%	2	55.6%
4	Blacktown - West	NSW	3	15%	4	58.6%
5	Wollongong - West	NSW	4	14%	5	60.1%
6	Albion Park Rail	NSW	2	19%	3	64.2%
7	Morphett Vale - East	SA	3	17%	8	64.4%
8	Auburn - Central	NSW	1	14%	5	65.0%
9	Mayfield - Warabrook	NSW	4	18%	9	65.8%
10	Warnbro	WA	2	21%	6	66.0%
11	Port Adelaide	SA	2	12%	6	67.0%
12	Raymond Terrace	NSW	1	22%	7	68.5%
13	Wallsend - Elermore Vale	NSW	4	14%	7	70.9%
14	Royal Park - Hendon - Albert Park	SA	3	21%	2	74.3%
15	Woy Woy - Blackwall	NSW	3	13%	9	75.0%
16	Waterford West	QLD	1	18%	6	76.5%
17	Southport - South	QLD	3	12%	11	77.1%
18	Glenroy - East	VIC	2	24%	4	78.2%
19	The Parks	SA	1	11%	5	78.8%
20	Bundamba	QLD	2	14%	4	79.1%

Table 6: The 20 communities with greatest potential need for food provision in ECEC (national)

Rank	SA2	State	IRSD decile	DV2+ % (2024)	LDC services in dataset	% food (place-weighted)
1	Invermay	TAS	1	43%	1	0.0%
2	Berriedale - Chigwell	TAS	2	23%	1	0.0%
3	Burrum - Fraser	QLD	2	14%	1	0.0%
4	Brighton - Pontville	TAS	4	21%	1	0.0%
5	Walkervale - Avenell Heights	QLD	1	20%	4	51.6%
6	Svensson Heights - Norville	QLD	1	18%	4	52.0%
7	Karama	NT	2	21%	2	60.0%
8	White Rock	QLD	2	14%	3	62.9%
9	Hyde Park - Pimlico	QLD	2	13%	5	65.4%
10	Malak - Marrara	NT	3	26%	2	67.2%
11	Moonah	TAS	2	19%	2	68.4%
12	Bundaberg North - Gooburrum	QLD	1	24%	3	68.9%
13	Cranbrook	QLD	3	26%	5	69.6%
14	North Mackay	QLD	3	26%	3	71.1%
15	Gracemere	QLD	3	19%	5	71.7%

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16	Bundaberg East - Kalkie	QLD	2	24%	2	72.4%
17	Parkhurst - Kawana	QLD	3	15%	3	74.4%
18	Claremont (Tas.)	TAS	2	27%	2	75.8%
19	Bundaberg	QLD	1	24%	6	77.4%
20	Kirwan - East	QLD	1	22%	4	78.0%

Table 7: The 20 communities with greatest potential need for food provision in ECEC – rural towns (small, medium and large) (national)

Rank	SA2	State	Remoteness (MMM)	IRSD decile	DV2+ % (2024)	LDC services in dataset	% food (place-weighted)
1	Penola	SA	Small rural towns	3	35%	1	0.0%
2	Nambucca Heads	NSW	Medium rural towns	1	21%	1	0.0%
3	Ingham	QLD	Small rural towns	2	21%	1	0.0%
4	Broken Hill	NSW	Large rural towns	2	22%	3	0.0%
5	Millmerran	QLD	Small rural towns	2	21%	1	0.0%
6	Inglewood - Waggamba	QLD	Small rural towns	2	24%	2	0.0%
7	Southern Moreton Bay Islands	QLD	Small rural towns	1	14%	1	0.0%
8	Hay	NSW	Small rural towns	3	23%	1	0.0%
9	Condobolin	NSW	Small rural towns	3	18%	4	0.0%
10	West Ulverstone	TAS	Large rural towns	1	14%	1	0.0%
11	Wakefield - Barunga West	SA	Small rural towns	2	12%	2	0.0%
12	Tumut Surrounds	NSW	Small rural towns	4	18%	1	0.0%
13	Macksville - Scotts Head	NSW	Medium rural towns	2	14%	1	0.0%
14	Peterborough - Mount Remarkable	SA	Small rural towns	2	14%	1	0.0%
15	Toodyay	WA	Small rural towns	4	21%	1	0.0%
16	Narrogin	WA	Small rural towns	3	19%	1	0.0%
17	Quirindi	NSW	Small rural towns	2	12%	1	0.0%
18	Kerang	VIC	Small rural towns	2	11%	1	0.0%
19	St Arnaud	VIC	Small rural towns	3	14%	1	0.0%
20	Narrabri Surrounds	NSW	Small rural towns	4	16%	1	0.0%

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Table 8: The 17 communities with greatest potential need for food provision in ECEC – remote and very remote communities (national)

Rank	SA2	State	Remoteness (MMM)	IRSD decile	DV2+ % (2024)	LDC services in dataset	% food (place-weighted)
1	Petermann - Simpson	NT	Very remote communities	1	63%	1	0.0%
2	West Coast (Tas.)	TAS	Remote communities	1	22%	1	0.0%
3	Leinster - Leonora	WA	Very remote communities	1	24%	1	0.0%
4	Cobar	NSW	Remote communities	3	27%	1	0.0%
5	Balonne	QLD	Remote communities	2	18%	1	0.0%
6	Ceduna	SA	Very remote communities	2	18%	1	0.0%
7	Northampton - Mullewa - Greenough	WA	Remote communities	3	15%	2	0.0%
8	Mukinbudin	WA	Remote communities	4	15%	2	0.0%
9	Karoonda - Lameroo	SA	Remote communities	4	12%	2	0.0%
10	Barcaldine - Blackall	QLD	Very remote communities	4	24%	3	24.4%
11	Carpentaria	QLD	Very remote communities	1	29%	3	40.2%
12	Croydon - Etheridge	QLD	Very remote communities	3	20%	2	44.7%
13	Mount Isa Surrounds	QLD	Remote communities	3	29%	2	56.4%
14	Mount Isa	QLD	Remote communities	4	22%	4	75.3%
15	Northern Highlands	QLD	Very remote communities	4	13%	3	80.2%
16	Port Lincoln	SA	Remote communities	3	11%	4	82.9%
17	Kununurra	WA	Very remote communities	1	32%	4	90.6%

Note: Only 17 SA2s in Remote and Very Remote areas met the criteria for Early Childhood Disadvantage and at least one LDC centre, and less than 90% food provision.

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Table 9: The 20 communities with greatest potential need for food provision in ECEC (New South Wales)

Rank	SA2	Remoteness (MMM)	IRSD decile	DV2+ % (2024)	LDC services in dataset	% food (place-weighted)
1	Nambucca Heads	Medium rural towns	1	21%	1	0.0%
2	Broken Hill	Large rural towns	2	22%	3	0.0%
3	Cobar	Remote communities	3	27%	1	0.0%
4	Hay	Small rural towns	3	23%	1	0.0%
5	Condobolin	Small rural towns	3	18%	4	0.0%
6	Tumut Surrounds	Small rural towns	4	18%	1	0.0%
7	Macksville - Scotts Head	Medium rural towns	2	14%	1	0.0%
8	Quirindi	Small rural towns	2	12%	1	0.0%
9	Narrabri Surrounds	Small rural towns	4	16%	1	0.0%
10	Deniliquin Surrounds	Small rural towns	4	16%	1	0.0%
11	Armidale Surrounds - North	Small rural towns	4	13%	1	0.0%
12	Moree Surrounds	Small rural towns	4	16%	1	0.0%
13	Oberon	Small rural towns	3	11%	1	0.0%
14	Parkes Surrounds	Small rural towns	3	11%	1	0.0%
15	Belmont South - Blacksmiths	Metropolitan areas	3	11%	2	0.0%
16	Maclean - Yamba - Iluka	Small rural towns	3	13%	5	19.2%
17	Blayney	Small rural towns	4	13%	4	24.4%
18	Taree Surrounds	Small rural towns	3	15%	2	35.3%
19	Kempsey	Medium rural towns	1	21%	5	37.9%
20	Narooma - Bermagui	Small rural towns	4	22%	4	40.3%

Table 10: The three communities with greatest potential need for food provision in ECEC (Northern Territory)

Rank	SA2	Remoteness (MMM)	IRSD decile	DV2+ % (2024)	LDC services in dataset	% food (place-weighted)
1	Petermann - Simpson	Very remote communities	1	63%	1	0.0%
2	Karama	Regional centres	2	21%	2	60.0%
3	Malak - Marrara	Regional centres	3	26%	2	67.2%

Note: Only three SA2s in the NT met the criteria for Early Childhood Disadvantage and at least one LDC centre, and less than 90% food provision.

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Table 11: The communities with greatest potential need for food provision in ECEC (Queensland)

Rank	SA2	Remoteness (MMM)	IRSD decile	DV2+ % (2024)	LDC services in dataset	% food (place-weighted)
1	Ingham	Small rural towns	2	21%	1	0.0%
2	Millmerran	Small rural towns	2	21%	1	0.0%
3	Inglewood - Waggamba	Small rural towns	2	24%	2	0.0%
4	Southern Moreton Bay Islands	Small rural towns	1	14%	1	0.0%
5	Burrum - Fraser	Regional centres	2	14%	1	0.0%
6	Balonne	Remote communities	2	18%	1	0.0%
7	Miles - Wandoan	Small rural towns	3	11%	1	0.0%
8	Babinda	Small rural towns	4	11%	1	0.0%
9	Barcaldine - Blackall	Very remote communities	4	24%	3	24.4%
10	Carpentaria	Very remote communities	1	29%	3	40.2%
11	Goondiwindi	Medium rural towns	4	12%	3	41.7%
12	Croydon - Etheridge	Very remote communities	3	20%	2	44.7%
13	Biloela	Medium rural towns	4	14%	3	48.3%
14	Sarina	Small rural towns	4	12%	2	51.0%
15	Walkervale - Avenell Heights	Regional centres	1	20%	4	51.6%
16	Svensson Heights - Norville	Regional centres	1	18%	4	52.0%
17	Mount Isa Surrounds	Remote communities	3	29%	2	56.4%
18	White Rock	Regional centres	2	14%	3	62.9%
19	Kingaroy Surrounds - North	Small rural towns	1	32%	4	62.9%
20	Ayr	Medium rural towns	3	25%	4	65.1%

Table 12: The 20 communities with greatest potential need for food provision in ECEC (South Australia)

Rank	SA2	Remoteness (MMM)	IRSD decile	DV2+ % (2024)	LDC services in dataset	% food (place-weighted)
1	Penola	Small rural towns	3	35%	1	0.0%
2	Ceduna	Very remote communities	2	18%	1	0.0%
3	Wakefield - Barunga West	Small rural towns	2	12%	2	0.0%
4	Peterborough - Mount Remarkable	Small rural towns	2	14%	1	0.0%
5	Karoonda - Lameroo	Remote communities	4	12%	2	0.0%
6	Yankalilla	Small rural towns	4	11%	1	0.0%
7	Nuriootpa	Medium rural towns	4	21%	3	34.6%
8	Whyalla	Large rural towns	1	24%	4	41.8%
9	Christies Beach	Metropolitan areas	2	24%	3	46.4%

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10	Goolwa - Port Elliot	Large rural towns	3	15%	2	47.9%
11	Victor Harbor	Large rural towns	3	19%	4	54.2%
12	Hackham West - Huntfield Heights	Metropolitan areas	1	32%	2	55.6%
13	Morphett Vale - East	Metropolitan areas	3	17%	8	64.4%
14	Port Adelaide	Metropolitan areas	2	12%	6	67.0%
15	Royal Park - Hendon - Albert Park	Metropolitan areas	3	21%	2	74.3%
16	Murray Bridge	Large rural towns	1	29%	8	76.6%
17	Loxton	Small rural towns	3	15%	3	78.6%
18	The Parks	Metropolitan areas	1	11%	5	78.8%
19	Mitchell Park	Metropolitan areas	3	16%	5	82.1%
20	Port Lincoln	Remote communities	3	11%	4	82.9%

Table 13: The 18 communities with greatest potential need for food provision in ECEC (Tasmania)

Rank	SA2	Remoteness (MMM)	IRSD decile	DV2+ % (2024)	LDC services in dataset	% food (place-weighted)
1	Invermay	Regional centres	1	43%	1	0.0%
2	West Coast (Tas.)	Remote communities	1	22%	1	0.0%
3	Berriedale - Chigwell	Regional centres	2	23%	1	0.0%
4	Brighton - Pontville	Regional centres	4	21%	1	0.0%
5	West Ulverstone	Large rural towns	1	14%	1	0.0%
6	Cygnet	Small rural towns	3	10%	1	0.0%
7	Huonville - Franklin	Small rural towns	4	11%	1	0.0%
8	Parklands - Camdale	Large rural towns	2	18%	2	49.1%
9	Devonport	Large rural towns	1	15%	4	64.1%
10	Moonah	Regional centres	2	19%	2	68.4%
11	Geeveston - Dover	Small rural towns	2	24%	2	72.7%
12	Burnie - Wivenhoe	Large rural towns	1	27%	2	75.5%
13	Claremont (Tas.)	Regional centres	2	27%	2	75.8%
14	New Norfolk	Regional centres	1	31%	2	79.8%
15	Bridgewater - Gagebrook	Regional centres	1	29%	2	84.4%
16	Glenorchy	Regional centres	1	21%	4	84.6%
17	Rokeby	Regional centres	1	20%	3	89.6%

Note: Only 18 SA2s in Tas met the criteria for Early Childhood Disadvantage and at least one LDC centre, and less than 90% food provision.

Table 14: The 20 communities with greatest potential need for food provision in ECEC (Victoria)

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Rank	SA2	Remoteness (MMM)	IRSD decile	DV2+ % (2024)	LDC services in dataset	% food (place-weighted)
1	Kerang	Small rural towns	2	11%	1	0.0%
2	St Arnaud	Small rural towns	3	14%	1	0.0%
3	Rushworth	Small rural towns	2	11%	2	0.0%
4	Buloke	Small rural towns	4	10%	4	0.0%
5	Stawell	Medium rural towns	3	14%	2	40.8%
6	Mooroopna	Large rural towns	1	31%	4	50.4%
7	Moe - Newborough	Large rural towns	1	17%	5	62.4%
8	Wonthaggi - Inverloch	Medium rural towns	4	16%	4	63.9%
9	Sale	Medium rural towns	3	15%	6	64.1%
10	Bairnsdale	Medium rural towns	3	20%	6	65.8%
11	Cobram	Medium rural towns	2	18%	4	70.3%
12	Euroa	Small rural towns	4	13%	3	73.6%
13	Glenroy - East	Metropolitan areas	2	24%	4	78.2%
14	Rosebud - McCrae	Metropolitan areas	4	15%	6	79.4%
15	Camperdown	Small rural towns	3	21%	2	79.5%
16	Swan Hill	Medium rural towns	3	13%	6	79.9%
17	Altona North	Metropolitan areas	3	11%	6	82.1%
18	Morwell	Large rural towns	1	22%	5	83.5%
19	Cranbourne North - West	Metropolitan areas	2	14%	6	83.6%
20	Tarneit - South	Metropolitan areas	4	10%	8	85.3%

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Table 15: The 20 communities with greatest potential need for food provision in ECEC (Western Australia)

Rank	SA2	Remoteness (MMM)	IRSD decile	DV2+ % (2024)	LDC services in dataset	% food (place-weighted)
1	Leinster - Leonora	Very remote communities	1	24%	1	0.0%
2	Toodyay	Small rural towns	4	21%	1	0.0%
3	Narrogin	Small rural towns	3	19%	1	0.0%
4	Northampton - Mullewa - Greenough	Remote communities	3	15%	2	0.0%
5	Merredin	Small rural towns	4	11%	3	0.0%
6	Wagin	Small rural towns	4	12%	2	0.0%
7	Mukinbudin	Remote communities	4	15%	2	0.0%
8	Brookton	Small rural towns	3	12%	2	0.0%
9	Plantagenet	Small rural towns	3	28%	2	50.0%
10	Harvey	Small rural towns	3	11%	2	61.7%
11	Warnbro	Metropolitan areas	2	21%	6	66.0%
12	Albany	Large rural towns	4	10%	5	73.8%
13	Northam	Medium rural towns	2	16%	3	81.1%
14	Mandurah	Metropolitan areas	1	28%	6	88.8%
15	Mandurah - East	Metropolitan areas	3	11%	3	89.2%
16	Thornlie	Metropolitan areas	4	18%	8	89.4%
17	Ballajura	Metropolitan areas	3	13%	6	90.5%
18	Kununurra	Very remote communities	1	32%	4	90.6%
19	Rockingham	Metropolitan areas	2	13%	6	93.3%
20	Bentley - Wilson - St James	Metropolitan areas	4	15%	6	93.8%

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