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| **Exploring the experience of food aid users in Victoria; I’m not food insecure but…** |
| **Background and objectives** The number of Australians experiencing food insecurity is increasing, and as a result, food aid providers are facing increased demand for their services. There is little systematic research to investigate the role of food aid in addressing this need, however, that research which does exist suggest that staff and volunteers of emergency food relief report an increase in demand for their services. Cost of living pressures, changes to the welfare system, and day-to-day financial difficulties have been identified as the key reasons for this increase. Given the charitable nature of food aid in Australia, providers have also reported being consistently under-resourced, and unable to meet the needs of their clients. This study aimed to explore the experiences of those who access food aid. **Methods**Qualitative interviews with 50 individuals who were accessing, or had previously accessed, food aid from at least one provider in Victoria were conducted. Interviews lasted for approximately 45 minutes. Questions included coping strategies, referral to the service, housing, employment and welfare access. A standard food insecurity questionnaire was also included. **Results**While many participants were food insecure according to a standard measure, most did not identify themselves this way. These participants did not identify as food insecure as they have a range of strategies in place to mitigate their family’s experience of food insecurity. These strategies included having family and friends purchase groceries or meals for them, visiting multiple food banks, and limiting spending in one area of their life in order to prioritise food. While many of the participants were low income, their food insecurity status was not related to an inability to budget, but rather, low income and increased cost of living pressures were responsible for their inability to purchase sufficient foods.**Conclusion**The ability of people who visit food banks to achieve food security is limited by their low income. Those who are food insecure are finding many ways to provide food to their families, as that which is provide by emergency relief is not sufficient. **Key words:** food security; food banks; qualitative research; food insecurity |