

Victorian Healthy Food Basket Survey

Latrobe 2019



CENTRAL WEST
GIPPSLAND
Primary Care Partnership



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Executive Summary

Food security is defined as “when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life”.¹

Sustainable and reliable access to affordable and nutritious food promotes healthy eating habits and contributes to a healthy life, and when people have limited or irregular access to affordable, safe and nutritious foods they are considered to be food insecure.² Research has identified a significant link between food insecurity and the rise in obesity; a correlation referred to as the ‘food insecurity-obesity paradox’.^{2,3} Obesity is a growing health issue that continues to aid in the development and progression of several chronic diseases, and can reduce life expectancy by many years.²

Diet is the most influential determinant to overall health and wellbeing, and also the most preventable. If all Australians had the option to access a healthy, affordable and well-balanced diet the rates of chronic diseases may decline; reducing the economic costs to both the private and public health sectors while improving the overall health and wellbeing status of the Australian population.²

Food insecurity is a growing concern throughout the Latrobe Valley, where 6.6% of the population is considered to be food insecure. This figure is significantly higher than the Victorian state average of just 3.6%.² The number of adults meeting suggested fruit and vegetable guidelines is also substantially lower than the Victorian average at just 2.4% and 3.6% respectively.²

The Victorian Healthy Food Basket Survey (VHFBS) was conducted in Latrobe to understand the cost and affordability of food throughout the region, with key findings from this research including:

- In 2019 a family of four needs to spend an average of 33% of their fortnightly income on food.
- The cost of the healthy food basket has increased an average of \$72.47 from 2008 to 2019, with the highest increase occurring in Moe (\$94.76).
- An elderly pensioner is able to spend a significantly reduced proportion of their income on food compared to other family types.
- A typical family can spend up to \$92 more when shopping at an independent store
- There are more independent stores in higher SEIFA index suburbs (Traralgon and outer Latrobe such as Glengarry and Yallourn North).

These findings will be used to guide future initiatives aimed at improving food security outcomes, and provide a snapshot of the current cost of food in relation to income for a variety of family types across Latrobe. Data will also be used to identify trends over time when compared with previous reports conducted in 2008, 2010 and 2014.

Background

The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations defines food security “when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life”.¹ Adequate fruit and vegetable intake is essential to a well-balanced diet that protects against chronic diseases such as heart disease, some cancers, diabetes and obesity.¹ Food security is recognised as an important determinant of health, however there are a variety of social and economic factors that influence people’s ability to afford, and have access to healthy foods.²

The Victorian Healthy Food Basket (VHFB) is a tool developed by Monash University to monitor the affordability, availability and accessibility of a healthy diet. The healthy food basket is made up of a variety of 44 common household groceries to meet the nutritional requirements of four family types for a period of two weeks.⁷ The basket items provide greater than 80% of the nutritional reference values (NRVs) for all essential nutrients, and at least 95% of energy requirements.⁷

The VHFB was undertaken in Latrobe in 2019 to provide a current snapshot of the affordability and availability of healthy food across the region, and contribute to previous research undertaken in 2008, 2010 and 2014 monitoring the cost over time. The City of Latrobe hosts a population of approximately 74,000 people and is located 150kms east of Melbourne. Latrobe covers a large area and contains four major centres; Traralgon, Morwell, Moe/Newborough and Churchill. A number of smaller townships are also located within Latrobe City including: Boolarra, Glengarry, Toongabbie, Tyers, Traralgon South, Yallourn North and Yinnar.¹⁵

According to the 2017 Victorian Population Health Survey (VPHS), only 2.4% of the adults in Latrobe meet fruit and vegetable guidelines, compared to the Victorian average of 3.6%.² Additionally, the proportion of Latrobe adults who were overweight/obese in 2017 (54.5%) exceeds the Victorian average (50.8%).²

Factors influencing food security

A common factor influencing food security is transport; whether or not people have access to a car or public transport substantially impacts their ability to purchase food.³ Physical access such as how long it takes to get to the store, an individual’s mobility can further impact a person’s ability to access fresh, nutritious foods.³ Many townships located outside of the four major town centres face geographical isolation, with reduced public transport options residents living in these areas often do not have access to large supermarkets and rely on smaller local shops selling a limited range of food items.¹⁶ Boolarra, Tyers, Toongabbie and Traralgon South are not represented in the 2019 VHFB as they do not have a store that provides the majority of food items on the VHFB list. This is an example of how geographical isolation acts as barrier to food security, as residents may need to commute to neighbouring towns to purchase groceries from all food groups.

Income plays a significant role in the ability to purchase nutritious foods; and with food prices continuing to grow in many areas, further strain is placed on the available food budget; particularly in low income households.⁴ As a result those who are low incomes, are underemployed or unemployed, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, and those living in rural areas face great social and economic hardships that vastly impact their ability to fresh, nutritious food that is also affordable.⁵ Factors of food insecurity are transferable to other major health issues such as obesity.

Those with low incomes struggle to afford highly priced vegetables and meats, and often purchase and consume cheap high-energy dense foods that are in abundance in rural and remote areas.³ Food is considered to be unaffordable when 30% or more of an individual or families total income is spent on food. This is particularly relevant when factoring in the increasing cost of living including; fuel, housing, healthcare and energy costs.^{13,14}

Methodology

The VHFB was conducted in 2019 to support previous research conducted in 2008, 2010 and 2014 on the cost and availability of healthy food within the Latrobe City area. Data was collected over a four week period during August 2019 to limit product variation due to seasonality and ensure data reliability and accuracy.

Letters were sent out to store managers of participating supermarkets, detailing all relevant information for the collection for VHFB data before the data collection was initiated. Data was only collected from supermarkets that met the VHFB requirements.

The VHFB requires prices for a list of 44 food items from the five food groups and identifies the total average cost of the food basket, and a percentage of what that cost represents as part of a family's income based on estimates of government assistance.⁸

Collection of data from stores that have less than 40 of the 44 items in the basket is not recommended, and therefore for the purpose of this report stores such as small general stores were not included in the data collection. Data was obtained from 16 chain and independent supermarkets in the following VHFB towns: Moe, Morwell, Newborough, Traralgon, Churchill, Glengarry and Yallourn North.

Results are presented as fortnightly, for four different family types who solely rely on government payments. The four family types are:

- Typical family (44 year old male and female, 18 year old female and 8 year old male)
- Single parent family (44 year old female, 18 year old female and 8 year old male)
- Elderly pensioner (71 year old female)
- Single adult (adult male >31 years old)

Results

Socio-economic index for areas

Socio-economic indexes for areas (SEIFA) is a tool that ranks all areas in Australia in relation to their socio-economic advantage and disadvantage. Socio-economic status is defined by "people's access to material and social resources, and their ability to participate in society".¹⁰ The lower the SEIFA ranking the more disadvantage experienced in an area. Alternatively, the higher the SEIFA ranking the less disadvantage experienced in a particular area.¹⁰ SEIFA indexes vary across the VHFB townships in Latrobe Valley (Figure 1).

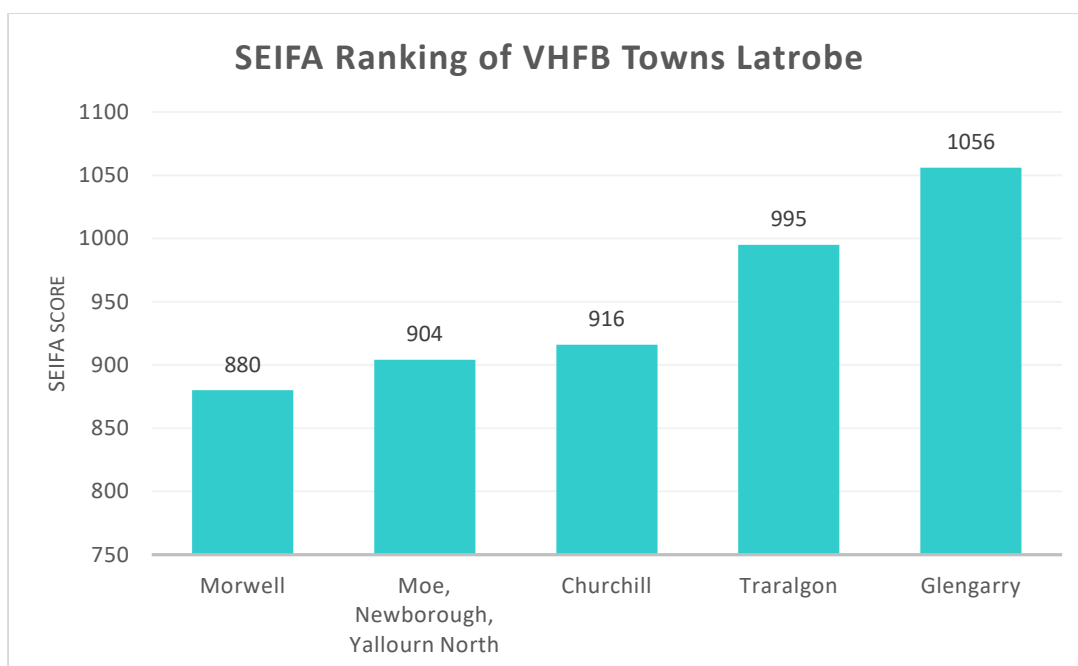


Figure 1. SEIFA ranking for VHFB towns across Latrobe.

Income

The VHFB is based on four different family types that receive government payments as their only source of income.⁹ In 2019 all four family types received an increase in government income payments from 2014, with a typical family receiving an increase of \$132.26 per fortnight; an increase of over 13% (Table 1). Single parent fortnightly income has increase over 14%, with pensioner income and a typical single adult income increasing by 9.10% and 5.37% respectively (Table 1).

The increase in government payments over the last five years has impacted the percentage of available income to purchase food in all four family types (Table 1). In 2019, typical and single parent families receiving government payments are spending less of their available income on food, 3.6% and 3.9% respectively. A single adult is also spending slightly less on food (2.9%) in 2019, with pensioners the only family type that is paying more for the VHFB when compared to 2014 data (Table 1).

Table 1. Percentage difference between income and cost for the healthy food basket, for four family types, 2014 to 2019.

Family Type	2014 Income	2019 Income	% Income Difference 2014-2019	% Income Spent on VHFB 2014 – 2019
Typical family	\$1,353.42	\$1,486.04	+13.26%	-3.6%
Single parent family	\$1,044.82	\$1,192.38	+14.76%	-3.9%
Elderly pensioner	\$751.70	\$843.60	+9.19%	+1.9%
Single adult	\$501.00	\$554.70	+5.37%	-2.9%

Store distribution, accessibility and cost

Across Latrobe City there is an uneven distribution in the availability of chain supermarkets such as Coles and Woolworths, and smaller independent food markets such as local IGA's and FoodWorks (Figure 2). The ratio of chain supermarkets to smaller independent stores remains consistent in both Churchill (1:1) and the Moe/Newborough region (2:2), with the distribution of stores in Morwell showing greater accessibility to larger chain supermarkets (2:1). This ratio varies when compared with Traralgon which supports a greater number of independent stores rather than chain supermarkets (2:3). Outer Latrobe experiences limited access to purchase the VHFB with only smaller independent stores available (Figure 2).

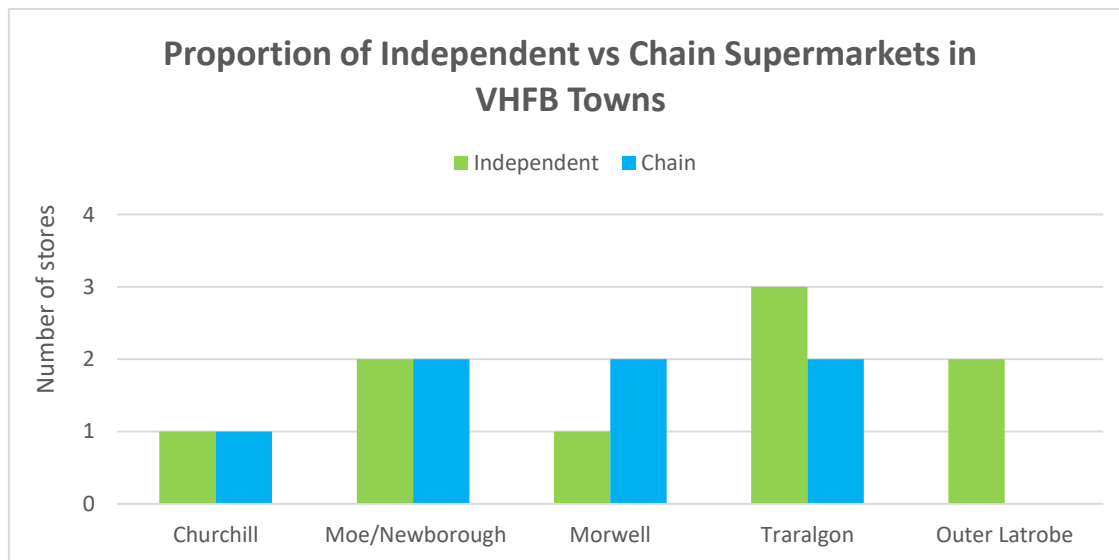


Figure 2. Number of independent and chain stores in the townships of the Latrobe Valley catchment area, 2019.

The average cost of the VHFB for each family type differs among store type; with the average cost of the VHFB higher in independent stores across all towns (Figure 3). For a typical family, an independent store can cost up to \$92 more than a chain supermarket, with single parent families paying up to \$40.15 more when shopping at smaller independent stores (Figure 3).

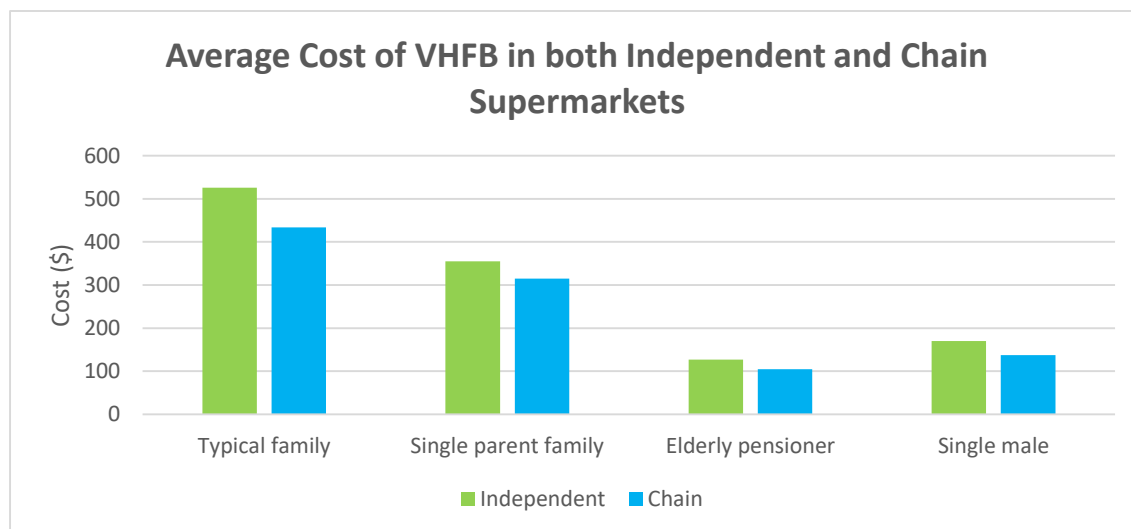


Figure 3. Average cost of basket across chain and independent stores in the Latrobe Valley showing all four family types, 2019.

Affordability

Affordability of the VHFB across Latrobe differs depending on individual townships and the type of family (Figure 4). This variation results in inequitable food costs for families based on where they live; with a typical family living in Outer Latrobe spending 36% of their fortnightly income on food (Table 2).

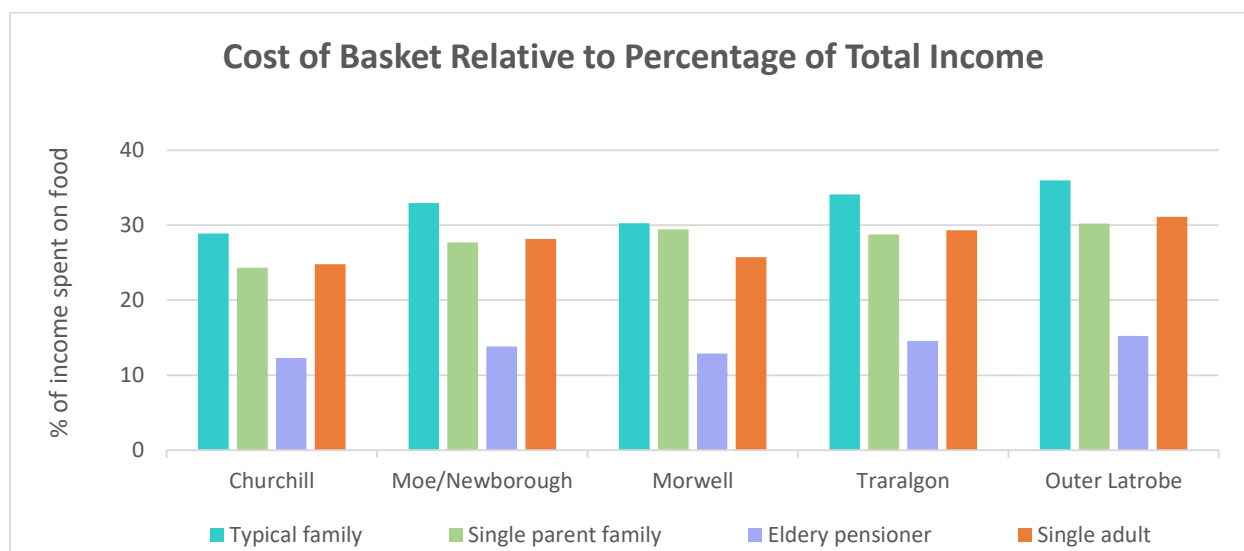


Figure 4. Percentage cost of basket vs. income, for four family types in the townships of the Latrobe Valley area.

All four family types are on average spending close to, or over a third of their total budget on food; with the exception to this being the elderly pensioner, who on average needs to spend 14% of their income on food (Table 2). Families living in Outer Latrobe, Traralgon and the Moe/Newborough region need to spend more of their income to purchase the VHFB compared to families living in Morwell and Churchill (Table 2).

Table 2. Mean cost (\$) of total basket, and proportion of income (%) per townships and family types, 2019.

Family Type	Churchill	Moe/ Newborough	Morwell	Traralgon	Outer Latrobe	Latrobe Average
Typical family	\$429.275 (29%)	\$489.54 (33%)	\$449.64 (30%)	\$506.68 (34%)	\$534.93 (36%)	\$485.56 (33%)
Single parent family	\$290.24 (24%)	\$330.485 (28%)	\$351.05 (29%)	\$343.35 (29%)	\$360.46 (30%)	\$337.08 (28%)
Elderly pensioner	\$104.725 (12%)	\$116.712 (14%)	\$108.96 (13%)	\$122.74 (15%)	\$122.395 (15%)	\$116.99 (14%)

Single adult	\$137.95 (25%)	\$156.635 (28%)	\$143.15 (26%)	\$162.90 (29%)	\$172.815 (31%)	\$155.75 (28%)
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Cost of food over time

The cost of the VHFB has consistently increased across all townships in Latrobe from 2008-2014 (Figure 5). However the most recent survey identifies that from 2014-2019 there was a slight decrease in the cost of the basket in all towns except for Moe/Newborough; which has increased on average \$22.05 (Table 3).

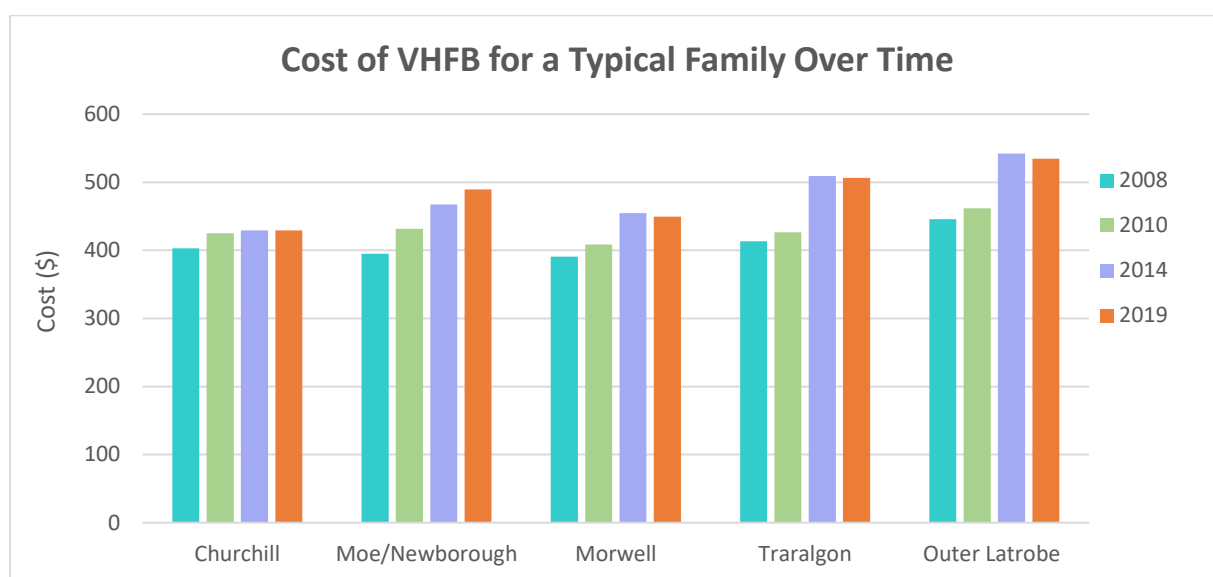


Figure 5. Cost of basket for a typical family, across Latrobe from 2008, 2010, 2014 and 2019.

In 2019, the VHFB is \$7.15 less for families living in Outer Latrobe than it was five years ago, with Morwell and Traralgon seeing decreases of \$5.11 and \$2.51 respectively. The cost of the VHFB for those living in Churchill has stayed relatively level; decreasing just \$0.10 on average since 2014 (Table 3).

Table 3. For a typical family, the cost of the healthy food basket from 2008 to 2019.

Typical family	2008	2010	2014	2019	Cost difference 2014-2019
Churchill	\$402.98	\$424.93	\$429.175	\$429.28	-\$0.10
Moe/Newborough	\$394.78	\$431.57	\$467.49	\$489.54	+\$22.05
Morwell	\$390.89	\$408.65	\$454.65	\$449.54	-\$5.11
Traralgon	\$413.14	\$426.44	\$509.19	\$506.68	-\$2.51
Outer Latrobe	\$445.84	\$461.99	\$542.08	\$534.93	-\$7.15

The average cost of the VHFB across the whole of Latrobe City has reduced for a typical family and elderly pensioner; although as elderly pensioners have not received the same percentage of income increase, they are still spending 1.9% more of their total income on food (Table 4). Single parent and single male family types are spending slightly more on the VHFB in 2019 when all townships are combined to represent a Latrobe-wide average.

Table 4. 2014 - 2019 cost and percentage of income variation of the healthy food basket.

Family type	Average cost (\$) variation of VHFB 2014 - 2019	Average percentage of income spent on VHFB 2014 - 2019
Typical family	-\$5.68	-3.6%
Single parent family	+\$0.96	-3.9%
Elderly pensioner	-\$1.29	+1.9%
Single male	+\$1.02	-2.9%

Discussion

Over the last five years the average cost of the VHFB within Latrobe has decreased slightly for a typical family and elderly pensioner; while showing a small increase for both single parent and single male family types (Table 4). However as a percentage of income, these results identify that food is slightly more affordable for all family types with the exception of elderly pensioner. While this trend is encouraging and indicates that for some population groups healthy food is becoming more affordable; the reduction in cost is not significant with the greatest price reduction just \$5.68 per fortnight. Though this indicates a positive change, it is unlikely to contribute to greater food security when taking into consideration the rise in living costs; including rental affordability and the cost of utilities.¹³ The cost of living is especially high for those on low incomes as in addition to the cost of healthy food, they are often required to contribute a significant amount of their income to rent and increasing energy costs.^{13,14}

Data trends show that over time (2008 to 2019), government payments for all four family types have increased; however many family types are still struggling to make ends meet as the increase in payments has not significantly impacted the percentage of income required to purchase the VHFB; with a typical family of four is still spending on average 33% of their income to purchase groceries each fortnight (Table 2). These findings are consistent with previous VHFB surveys undertaken in Latrobe indicating that the cost of the VHFB for a typical family can range from 25%-45%.² In order to be considered affordable, the cost of purchasing healthy food should not exceed 30% of total income.¹¹ When families or individuals are required to spend greater than 30% of their income on food they begin to struggle to afford other essential living costs such as rent, fuel, electricity, health care, transport, clothing, and household services.⁴ On average, smaller townships in Outer Latrobe with no or limited access to chain supermarkets are more expensive with single parent, single adult

and typical families spending 30% or more of their total income on food; resulting in unaffordable food prices (Table 2). Elderly pensioner is the only family type that is able to purchase affordable food, spending on average just 14% of their total income on the food. This may be due to the 9.19% increase in government income, and the reduced nutritional requirements for a single pensioner compared to the other family types.¹¹

While in some cases the cost of food has decreased between 2014 and 2019, the overall general trend shows increasing food costs from 2008 to 2019. The cost of the VHFB has also increased for a typical family in all areas; most notably in Moe/Newborough (\$94.76), Traralgon (\$93.54) and Outer Latrobe (\$89.09). This trend is concerning as those living in Outer Latrobe do not have access to chain supermarkets which often results in limited availability and variety to fresh produce and generally more expensive; which has been clearly identified in this research.¹⁶

Though a significant contributor, income is not the only factor impacting food security; with a wide range of social and behavioural factors influencing health and wellbeing.¹⁵ The 2017 Victorian Population Health Survey (VPHS) reports that the percentage of residents in Latrobe meeting fruit and vegetable guidelines is substantially lower than the Victorian average. Reasons behind this health gap may also be a result of a combination of lack of education around the benefits of a nutritious diet, health issues, geographical location and access to transport.⁴

In 2019 there were 16 participating stores in the Latrobe City region with 7 chain stores (Woolworths, Coles) and 9 independent stores (IGA, Ritchie's and FoodWorks). The ratio of chain stores to independent stores was consistent in all Latrobe areas other than in Traralgon (3 independent: 2 chain) and Outer Latrobe (2 independent: 0 chain).

Large chain supermarkets such as Woolworths and Coles continue to show lower average costs of the VHFB when compared to smaller independent stores (Figure 2). Many areas across Latrobe do not have access to chain supermarkets, such as the townships of Glengarry, Boolarra, Tyers and Toongabbie (Outer Latrobe); therefore residents living in these towns are required to pay more to purchase the same healthy food options. Communities that experience limited access to affordable foods are often situated in higher SEIFA towns; meaning that those experiencing greater disadvantage are also required to pay more for healthier food options. Those living in Moe/Newborough are paying on average \$22.05 more despite living in an area of higher disadvantage (Figure 1). Findings show that the availability of a wide range of healthy foods that meet the VHFB requirements remains inconsistent throughout Latrobe, with townships such as Boolarra, Yinnar and Tyers and Toongabbie lacking stores that supply many of these food items.

Key findings

- The cost of the healthy food basket has increased on average of \$72.47 from 2008 to 2019, with the highest increase occurring in Moe (\$94.76).
- In 2019 a family of four needs to spend an average of 33% of their fortnightly income to afford basic, nutritional groceries.
- An elderly pensioner is able to spend a significantly reduced proportion of their income on food compared to other family types.
- The average cost of the healthy basket is higher among independent stores.

- There are more independent stores in higher SEIFA index suburbs (Traralgon and outer Latrobe such as Glengarry and Yallourn North).
- A typical family can spend up to \$92 more when shopping at an independent store

Recommendations

The report findings show a need for a range of initiatives and strategies that promote and increase the availability of affordable, nutritious foods to all residents in the Latrobe Valley. Key recommendations include the following;

- Regularly conduct the VHFB in Latrobe City to monitor trends around the price, availability, and access to nutritious foods.
- Outer Latrobe suburbs such as Glengarry, Boolarra, Yinnar and Yallourn North lack access to affordable VHFBS food outlets. This could be improved by increasing public transport options, investigating council-based transport to and from large chain supermarkets or prioritising more VHFB food outlets in these areas.
- Investigate the logistics of increasing the supply of fresh, affordable produce to outer townships and disadvantaged areas and provide the foundation for more public health strategies that focus on increasing local access to nutritious foods.
- Continue to encourage the development of community gardens, particularly in smaller outer towns.
- Use the Latrobe Food System Geographical Information System (GIS) mapping information identified in the 2014 'Shifting the System' report to inform future town planning and development to ensure that there are acceptable levels of access to fresh food outlets.¹²
- Encourage Latrobe City Council to raise awareness and emphasise the importance of food security to the community, relevant stakeholders, and throughout their own policies and strategies.

Conclusion

The cost of the VHFB in Latrobe has decreased slightly in all areas with the exception of the Moe/Newborough region. The broader trend however identifies a continual increase in cost over the past few years (2008-2019) and this is projected to continue to rise in the future (Table 1).⁸ To better align income payments to support increasing expenses, government benefits have increased over time; aiming to better assist families to afford basic living expenses.⁹ However despite this rise in income, many family types are still struggling to afford the VHFB. Townships in Outer Latrobe experience reduced access to affordable foods, as smaller independent stores are the only source of groceries (Figure 2). The VHFB was found to be more expensive when purchased at an independent store, compared to a chain supermarket (Figure 3). In 2019 a typical family of four is spending on

average 33% of their income on food; which is considered unaffordable.¹¹ Single parent and single adult families are spending on average 28% of their income on food, however this figure is higher in certain towns such as Traralgon, Morwell and Outer Latrobe (Table 2). While this figure is considered affordable by definition, it is still a significant proportion of fortnightly income leaving many family types having to choose between purchasing nutritious food and other living expenses.

Report findings indicate a need for tailored initiatives and strategies targeting the availability, affordability and accessibility of nutritious foods in Latrobe. Latrobe City Council, key stakeholders in the food system and other major partners can contribute to be part of a positive change towards a more equitable food system.

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Appendices

Table 5. Average, median, minimum and maximum cost of total basket, standard deviation and proportion of income (%) per townships and family types, 2019.

Township and family type	Average Cost	Median Cost	Minimum cost	Maximum cost	Standard deviation	Proportion of Centrelink income (%)
Churchill						
Typical family	\$429.275	\$429.275	\$423.80	\$434.75	\$7.74	28.89%
Single parent	\$290.24	\$290.24	\$287.03	\$293.45	\$4.53	24.34%
Elderly woman	\$103.725	\$103.725	\$102.55	\$104.90	\$1.66	12.29%
Single male	\$137.95	\$137.95	\$136.11	\$139.79	\$2.60	24.82%
Moe/Newborough						
Typical family	\$489.54	\$489.945	\$424.54	\$553.73	\$53.01	32.94%
Single parent	\$330.485	\$330.415	\$289.74	\$371.37	\$33.39	27.71%
Elderly woman	\$116.712	\$115.09	\$102.87	\$133.80	\$13.21	13.83%
Single male	\$156.635	\$155.815	\$134.24	\$180.67	\$19.95	28.18%
Morwell						
Typical family	\$449.64	\$426.41	\$421.75	\$500.76	\$44.33	30.25%
Single parent	\$351.05	\$338.89	\$287.86	\$426.41	\$70.07	29.44%
Elderly woman	\$108.96	\$103.47	\$102.11	\$121.32	\$10.71	12.91%
Single male	\$143.15	\$136.03	\$133.58	\$159.84	\$14.50	25.76%
Traralgon						
Typical family	\$506.68	\$545.32	\$424.74	\$573.95	\$73.01	34.09%
Single parent	\$343.35	\$368.78	\$289.39	\$388.72	\$48.07	28.79%
Elderly woman	\$122.74	\$132.07	\$103.46	\$139.03	\$17.23	14.55%
Single male	\$162.90	\$176.34	\$134.91	\$185.31	\$24.87	29.31%
Outer Latrobe						
Typical family	\$534.93	\$534.93	\$509.47	\$560.39	\$36.00	35.99%
Single parent	\$360.46	\$360.46	\$340.46	\$388.72	\$28.28	30.23%
Elderly woman	\$112.395	\$128.53	\$122.24	\$134.82	\$8.89	15.23%

Single male	\$172.815	\$151.235	\$166.36	\$179.27	\$9.12	31.10%
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Table 6. List of VHFB supermarkets in the Latrobe Valley area, 2019.

Store name	Street address	Suburb/post code
7 Ways Supermarket	Main St.	Glengarry 3854
Friendly Grocer	211 Grey St.	Traralgon 3844
Ritchie's	5-8 Georgina Way	Churchill 3842
FoodWorks	Henry St.	Traralgon 3844
FoodWorks	Hyland St.	Traralgon 3844
FoodWorks	61 Bridle Rd.	Morwell 3840
FoodWorks	25 Boolarra Ave.	Newborough 3825
FoodWorks	42-44 North Rd.	Yallourn North 3825
IGA	41-45 Elizabeth St.	Moe 3825
Coles	92 Albert St.	Moe 3825
Coles	82 George St.	Morwell 3840
Coles	166 Franklin St.	Traralgon 3844
Woolworths	Anzac St. and Cnr George St.	Moe 3825
Woolworths	Midvalley Shopping Centre/Drive	Morwell 3840
Woolworths	Seymour St.	Traralgon 3844
Woolworths	Marina Drive and Monash Way	Churchill 3842