



“Let’s Talk About Food”

The Impact of Rising Cost of Food on Shopping and Eating in the Illawarra and Shoalhaven

RESILIENT & SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS RESEARCH GROUP |
UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

November 2024 | Prepared by Dr Katherine Kent and Professor Karen Charlton in collaboration with
Kelly Andrews and Grace Potter from Healthy Cities Illawarra





SUMMARY

The "Let's Talk About Food" survey, conducted with >700 households in the Illawarra and Shoalhaven regions aimed to understand the impact of rising food costs on consumer shopping behaviours, diet satisfaction, and the barriers they face in healthy eating.

Key findings reveal residents have significant concerns over the increasing prices of essential food items, leading to notable changes in food purchasing behaviours, dietary adjustments, and emotional stress. Only a fraction of respondents eat enough fruits and vegetables.

This report proposes strategic recommendations to support the community in maintaining a nutritious diet despite financial constraints. The survey findings have spurred the establishment of the **Illawarra Shoalhaven Food Futures Taskforce**, a network of health experts and community advocates working collaboratively to promote a healthier, more accessible regional food system.

THE LET'S TALK ABOUT FOOD SURVEY

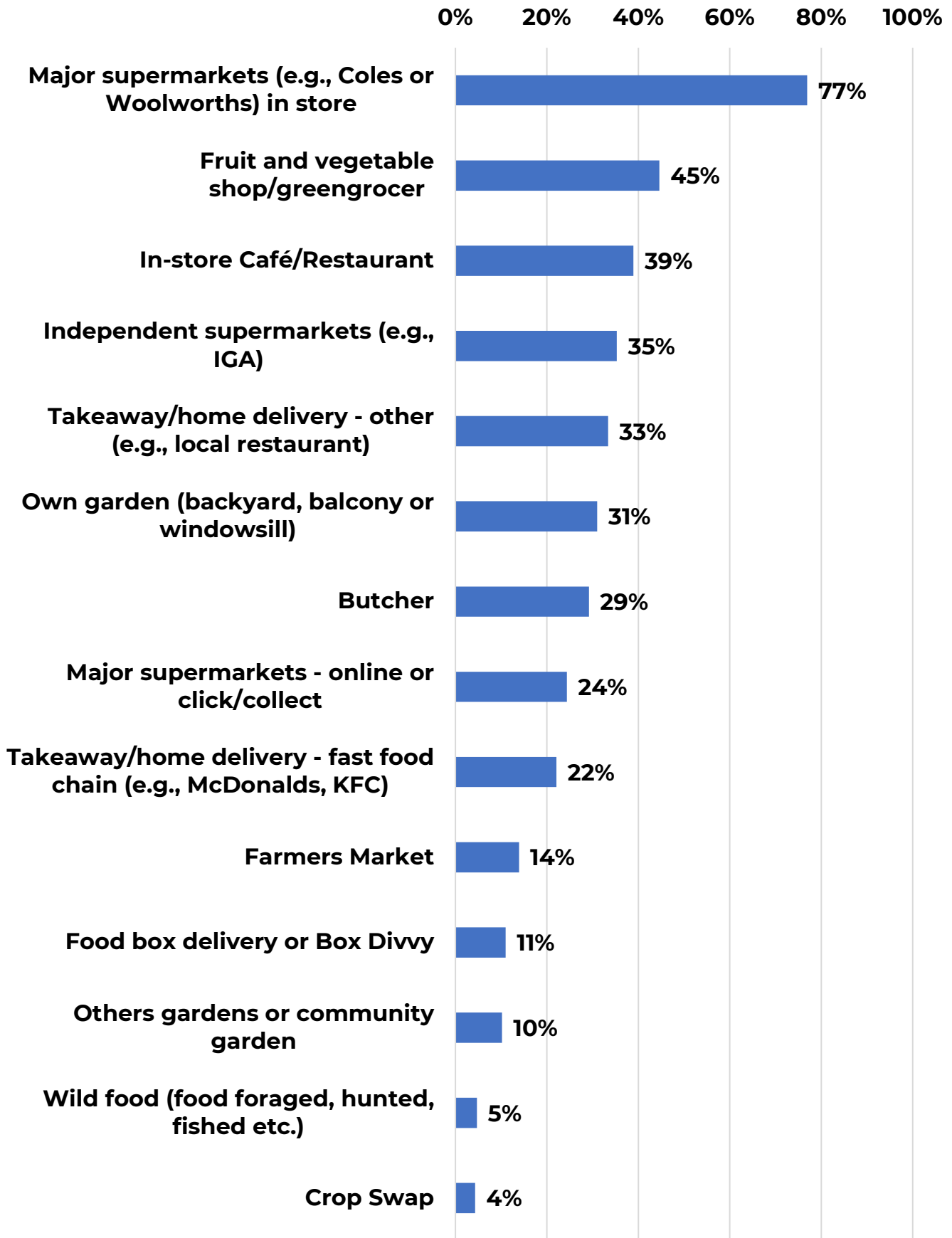
[Previous UOW research showed food prices increased substantially between 2022-2024](#). The rising cost of living, especially significant food price hikes, is a critical issue impacting households. This survey, developed by [UOW's Resilient and Sustainable Food Systems Research group](#) in partnership with Healthy Cities Illawarra, Food Fairness Illawarra aimed to understand how increasing food prices are impacting consumers. Respondents provided insights through both quantitative and open-ended questions, including:

- Frequency and sources of food purchases at various food outlets.
- How rising costs impacts their food purchasing, eating habits, and experiences of food insecurity.
- How challenges such as cost, supermarket access, time constraints, cooking skills, and inadequate facilities is impacting their diet.
- Their intake of fruits and vegetables.

Results of the "Let's Talk About Food" Survey

FOOD SHOPPING

Traditional supermarkets remain the primary food source for most households, with 77% of respondents shopping in-store at major supermarkets like Coles or Woolworths. Alternative food sourcing such as fruit and vegetable shops, independent supermarkets, and takeaway options also play significant roles in the community's food shopping (see figure below). A smaller percentage of the population engages in alternative agriculture initiatives like growing their own food or participating in food swaps, highlighting a smaller trend towards local and self-sufficient food sourcing.





IMPACT OF INFLATION

When asked to describe how the cost of living has impacted their eating and food purchasing, five main themes emerged. These themes reflect the various ways individuals are adjusting their food budgets, altering their cooking and shopping habits, and experiencing stress due to increased food costs.

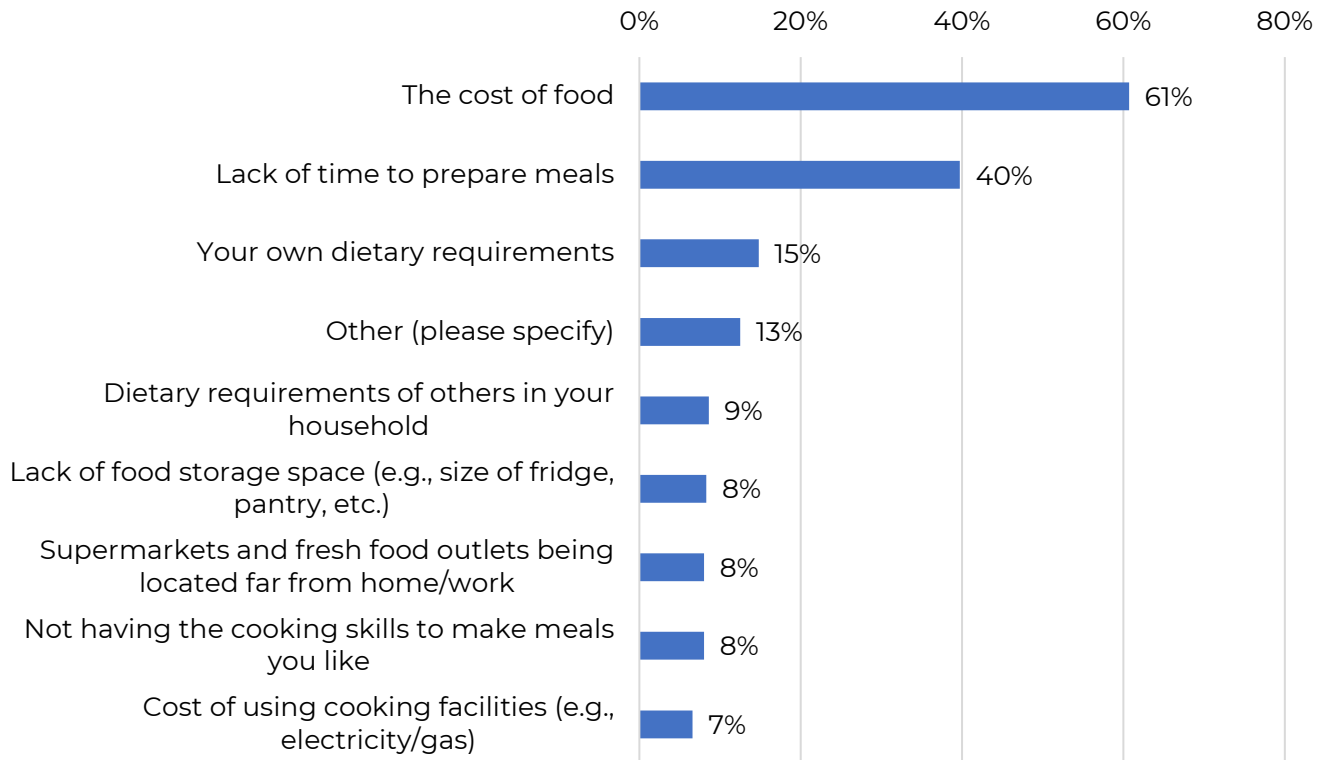
<p>Budget Adjustments & Sacrifices</p> <p>Many people expressed making significant adjustments to their food budgets, often opting for cheaper, less nutritious food options or reducing their food portions. Many are sacrificing quality & variety, particularly in fresh produce and meats.</p>	<p><i>"We now choose from cheaper food. We used to buy more organic products and have more diversity in choices, but the cost is way too high for that now."</i> <small>(35 – 44 years old, Wollongong)</small></p>
<p>Increased Home Cooking & Meal Planning</p> <p>Home cooking and meal prepping are increasing as strategies to combat rising food costs. This includes cooking in bulk, planning meals around sales and discounts, and reducing takeaways and eating out.</p>	<p><i>"I'm doing more meal prep so cooking a big batch and freezing half ... We eat out less often as it's so expensive to get take away, so I've learned to cook homemade versions of my family's favourite take aways"</i> <small>(35 – 44 years old, Kiama)</small></p>
<p>Forced Into Cheaper, Unhealthier Diets</p> <p>Due to the high cost of meat, there's a shift towards vegetarian meals or filling out meals with cheaper, processed alternatives. Rather than a deliberate choice, this shift is described as a necessary compromise as eating a balanced diet grows increasingly challenging.</p>	<p><i>"I'm not able to eat much meat due to the cost... I'm more reliant on cheaper alternatives like lentils and beans which require more time to cook, which I don't always have."</i> <small>(25 – 30 years, Shellharbour)</small></p>
<p>Strategic Shopping Behaviours</p> <p>Many people are becoming more strategic in their shopping including buying in bulk, waiting for sales, and opting for store brands or discounted items. People also are shopping around, going to discount stores or local markets where prices are cheaper.</p>	<p><i>"Constantly monitoring for items on special. More regular shopping to buy what items we need in the short-term rather than stocking up on non-perishables. Buying smaller quantities of fresh foods to avoid spoilage."</i> <small>(55 – 64 years old, Shoalhaven)</small></p>
<p>Stress and Mental Strain</p> <p>The financial pressure from the cost of living is causing considerable stress, impacting not just food choices but overall well-being. Consumers report the emotional burden of having to make tough choices about food, which can affect their mental health.</p>	<p><i>"I have been unable to purchase fresh fruit or vegetables which in turn has left me heavily fatigued and has worsened my mood and anxiety disorders."</i> <small>(35 – 44 years old, Wollongong)</small></p>

BARRIERS TO HEALTHY EATING



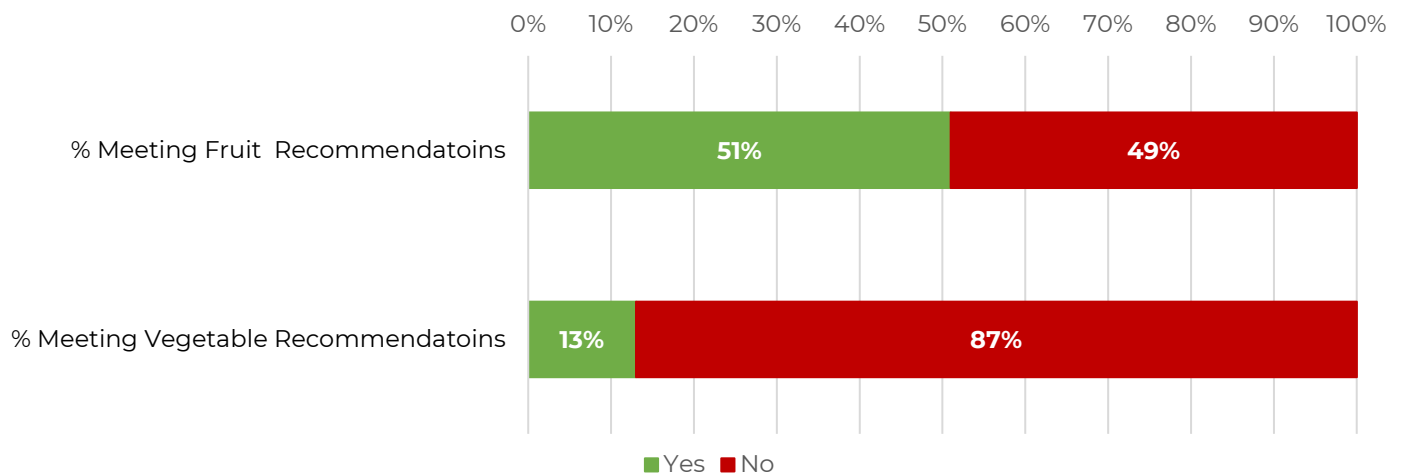
Resilient and Sustainable Food Systems Research Group

The most significant barrier residents face achieving a healthy diet by a substantial margin, is the cost of food, affecting 61% of respondents. Lack of time to prepare meals is the second most common barrier, reported by 40% of respondents. A lack of cooking skills and the cost of using cooking facilities are the least cited barriers, each impacting around 8% and 7% of individuals respectively.



DIETARY HABITS

While over half of the respondents are meeting the fruit consumption recommendations, only a small fraction is adhering to the vegetable intake guidelines, which suggests a significant gap in dietary habits related to vegetable consumption



WHERE NEXT?



Resilient and Sustainable Food Systems Research Group

These findings from the "Let's Talk About Food" survey highlight a clear connection between the cost of food and barriers to healthy eating. In response, the **Illawarra Shoalhaven Food Futures Taskforce** was established. This network brings together health experts, community advocates, nutritionists, and policy influencers with the practical goal of improving the regional food system to make it healthier, more equitable, and more sustainable. Strategies that address both the affordability and accessibility of nutritious foods to support healthier eating habits in the Illawarra and Shoalhaven regions are needed.

Moving forward, UOW, in partnership with the Illawarra Shoalhaven Food Futures Taskforce, aims to focus on advocating for and implementing sustainable food initiatives. For example:

- Supporting and developing urban agriculture projects and community gardens to increase local food availability.
- Developing resources and conducting educational workshops and cooking classes that teach budget-friendly and nutritious meal preparation.
- Advocating for a regional food strategy that unifies efforts to make healthy foods more affordable and accessible, aligning local government and community organisations towards common goals.