



Police Federation of Australia

The National Voice of Policing

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Inquiry into food pricing and food security in remote Indigenous Communities

Introduction:

The Police Federation of Australia (PFA) is the national body representing the professional and industrial interests of Australia's more than 64,000 police officers, across all state, territory and the federal police jurisdictions.

We note that this Inquiry is currently being held at the same time that the Productivity Commission (PC) is conducting an Inquiry into Remote Area Tax Concessions and Payments. The PFA has made a submission to that Inquiry. Much of the information provided to the Productivity Commission Inquiry will have like relevance for this Inquiry.

All jurisdictions who provided information to the PFA for this submission indicated that while remoteness of communities made food supplies a complex issue, invariably, weather, road and sea conditions, generally outside of anyone's control, added additional complexities to the supply of food products.

Queensland:

In the PFA's submission and those submissions from several of the PFA Branches to the PC, we made specific mention of the high cost of living in such locations. In particular the Queensland Police Union (QPUE) pointed out the differences in the Queensland cost of

living indexes in locations outside Brisbane which clearly identify the higher cost of living (excluding housing), the further you move from Brisbane, to a point where some locations are considered to have cost of living variances of greater than 10% to that of Brisbane.

Food pricing, in particular in remote locations is exorbitant due to issues such as freight costs, power, maintenance costs and the cost of doing business on a small scale in such communities. Computer access and on-line shopping are virtually non-existent.

In Queensland, the provision and purchase of food in the more remote communities is made through the retail network Community Enterprise Queensland (CEQ), a statutory body of the QLD Government, who is responsible for the running of more than 20 remote stores across the State’s indigenous communities. However, this service does not reach all remote communities.

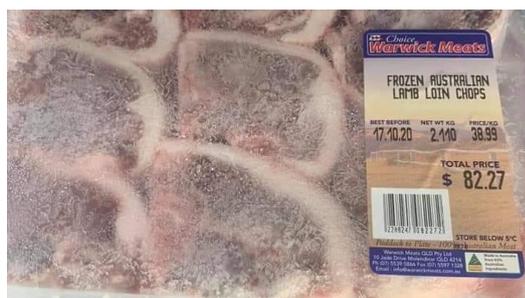
In August 2018, the ABC ran a story in QLD where they compared receipts for food purchases from Brisbane with Doomadgee.

	Doomadgee	Brisbane	Difference
200g jar coffee	\$27.63	\$9.00	\$18.63
1L washing liquid	\$15.80	\$5.00	\$10.80
300g baby formula	\$38.99	\$29.99	\$9.00
1kg milk powder	\$13.57	\$5.70	\$7.87
500g mixed biscuits	\$9.00	\$4.50	\$4.50
1kg instant oats	\$8.88	\$5.00	\$3.88
190g toothpaste	\$10.36	\$7.00	\$3.36
16 pk throat lozenges	\$8.53	\$5.50	\$3.03
150g Vegemite	\$4.96	\$3.30	\$1.66
2L milk	\$4.19	\$2.99	\$1.20
Total	\$141.91	\$77.98	\$63.93

Note: Food prices were sourced in Doomadgee on June 26 and compared with the same/equal brands from a major supermarket in Brisbane City on July 2.

ABC NEWS: “Government-controlled supermarkets accused of ripping off remote shoppers”

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-08-13/supermarkets-charging-remote-shoppers-nearly-double-city-prices/10107060>



On the 1st of March 2020, NITV reported a story of a photo posted on Facebook that showed a pack of lamb chops costing \$82.27 at CEQ store in the indigenous community of Palm Island. CEQ stated that the lamb meat pack identified was incorrectly labelled by the supplier. It should be noted that QPUE members in these communities, report unusually high prices for food.

<https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/article/2020/03/01/fair-price-meat-remote-community>

Police stationed at Doomadgee report that generally officers that have any dietary requirements (i.e. vegetarian, gluten free, etc) find it very difficult to locally source appropriate food items and food preparation is often completed with long life products or UT. They also report on the lack of freshness and ongoing shortages with basic fruit and vegetable items.

Similarly, at Normanton, where they experience very high food prices. It is reported that it is not uncommon for police and other locals to drive to Atherton or Mt Isa to obtain items because even with the cost of fuel, purchasing items there was still generally lower than if purchased in the community. Reports also suggest that the supply of items is often sporadic, and it is not uncommon to go without essentials like milk and bread for a week.

Western Australia:

Information provided by the Western Australia Police Union (WAPU) reports that one remote community store owner suggests, an order of \$2,500 worth of food, costs \$2,000 to transport, suggesting supply chain costs and poor infrastructure have resulted in these costs being passed on to the local community through food prices.

The WA Food Relief Framework published in October 2019 was developed by the WA Council of Social Services. That Framework developed a Food Stress Index to map food insecurity risks across the State. Food stress occurs when a household must spend a quarter of their disposable income on food that meets a basic healthy meal plan. The Framework found remote indigenous communities having among the highest levels of food stress anywhere in WA¹.

Some of the Framework's other findings in relation to remote communities were:

- An average basket of healthy food being **26 per cent** higher in price compared to the Perth metropolitan area;
- Supply chain costs were the main reasons for high prices;
- Funerals can result in local households having to share food relief with visitors from outside the community; and
- Poor store infrastructure and commonly occurring power outages also affected food quality.

It should be noted that the Framework also draws on the findings of a joint Curtin and Notre Dame University study published in September 2014². That study surveyed 33 remote community store managers in WA of whom **64 per cent** said there was no food insecurity in their community. However, **52 per cent** said there was still hunger in their community because people did not have enough money to buy food.

¹ WA Food Relief Framework (2019): p 26

²

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/265344549_Understanding_food_security_issues_in_remote_Western_Australian_Indigenous_communities

Similar to other reports, the Framework does not mention the role of police officers nor law enforcement implications.

Whilst police officers stationed in remote indigenous communities are, on average, financially better off than the average resident, the price and availability of fresh food is frequently raised by them as one of the major disincentives of working in those communities.

For example, the community of Kalumburu, the northern most settlement in WA, fresh food and other supplies are imported by barge from Darwin on a fortnightly basis. However, supplies at the wharf must still be transported along an 18km access road prior to reaching the community. Flood damage from Cyclone Marcus in December 2018 showed just how tenuous this supply line can be³.

While not indigenous, the town of Eucla on the SA border is one of WA's most remote communities. Fresh food is delivered once a week by road train. Police stationed there report they must order online a week in advance of delivery given there is no community store to buy food from.

Several remote indigenous communities have a roadhouse where food can be purchased. But the vast majority of that food would not be considered "healthy" by nutritionists. Consequently, police stationed in or visiting those communities also do not have any access to healthy options.

Northern Territory:

Information provided by the Northern Territory Police Association (NTPA) reports similar issues being faced in remote communities, bearing in mind the vast differences between those communities.

For example, Santa Teresa is approximately 85km's from Alice Springs v's Kintore which is 638km's from Alice Springs, deep into the Tanami. The cost of fuel to service such locations adds significantly to food costs. And when talking Island communities, the Tiwi Islands are six hours by barge from Darwin v's Groote Eylandt at 96 hours.

The range of food available in such locations is limited, fresh food is not available all the time and prices are much higher than in the larger towns. However, major centres such as Darwin, Katherine and Alice Springs are very well serviced by the major supermarket chains.

In the even more remote areas, residents had to place their food orders in time to be processed, packed and delivered by local transport companies. On Groote Eylandt, this could mean ordering two weeks in advance of barges departing the mainland and then up to four days at sea before delivery.

One of the major issues raised in the NT as far as groceries were concerned, was in educating the communities on using fresh food. Police report that too often local

³ <https://www.facebook.com/ABCKimberley/posts/will-kalumburu-get-food-supplies-today-the-18km-access-road-to-the-communitys-ba/10156213350107156/>

communities use the local takeaway outlet for their food source instead of utilizing fresh foods. In some remote locations, the indigenous corporation owned local stores have limited the capacity for takeaway to encourage the purchase and eating of more fresh foods, only to see many locals still sourcing takeaway style food from distant locations and townships.

Police in some locations report attempts by locals to develop market gardens and grow their own fresh produce, which is often of a very high quality, only to see those attempts undermined by other community members.

Clearly greater dietary education and support in growing fresh produce could see major advances in food security and diet in many remote indigenous communities. This would lead to healthier communities and potential employment opportunities for locals.

Impact of COVID-19:

All jurisdictions noted greater difficulties accessing food products during COVID-19. This supply was made all the more difficult, preventing people in communities leaving to access supplies but then being potentially subject to isolation provisions upon return to the community.

In Queensland for example, these communities included: Aurukun, Cook, Hope Vale, Kowanyama, Lockhart River, Mapoon, Napranum, Northern Peninsula Area, Pormpuraaw, Torres Strait island, Torres, Wujal Wujal, Buke, Doomadgee, Cherbourg, Mornington, Palm Island, Woorabinda and Yarrabah.

As a result of restrictions, QPS officers were tasked with discreet community patrols that prevented movement in and out of the community. These patrols were augmented by QPS officers flown in from other parts of the State. Only essential service workers who carried an approved 'human biosecurity management plan' at entry and a 'remote communities pass' were exempt from the 14-day quarantine rule.

These checkpoints were implemented quickly and with little or no time for planning for food and amenities. As a result, officers were required to shop locally placing further burden on local consumption and purchase of available products.

Doomadgee; like many of the discreet communities' report that during the lockdown there were many empty shelves and that the stores had turned off some of its refrigerated space as they simply did not have items to be kept chilled.

Island communities in QLD were unable to leave the island as the biosecurity area ended at the high tide mark. This prevented members of the community fishing and supplementing their food supply.

Qld relaxed some restrictions on 1st May 2020 which allowed fishing but due to the fact that places like Palm Island were controlled by the Commonwealth Biosecurity Determination this relaxation did not apply to these communities. After continued consultation on the 15th May 2020, a Virus Proof Fishing Zone was established that allowed community residents to

recreational fish on Saturday and Sunday after obtaining approval from the Chair of the Disaster Management Group and following strict procedures launching, landing and fishing in a designated area.

Many of the communities that were affected by the shutdown were dependent on sourcing food items from larger centres. These included many of the communities not assisted by CEQ. As a result, these communities were frustrated with incidents of protest due to the inability to purchase food as other Queenslanders were able to do.

Due to the suddenness of the shutdown to these communities, plans and protocols were not immediately identified. For instance, it was reported that in Yarrabah, a crucial food truck was turned away for not having appropriate paperwork by police causing concern and protest by the community.

Community assistance and food support has come from some charitable organisations, some of whom had to be granted special access after clearing temperature and health checks.

Conclusion:

Food pricing and food security in remote indigenous communities is significantly impacted by the weather, road and sea conditions which increases supply chain costs such as freight costs, power, maintenance costs and the cost of doing business on a small scale in such communities. These raised costs are then passed on to communities at point of sale. While some price increase is inevitable with living remotely there is some suggestion that pricing can be excessive and requires monitoring.

COVID-19 also effected the access and availability of fresh food in remote areas. A lack of early planning and protocols in place made the situation worse. Access to healthy food is a fundamental starting point for general good health and wellbeing and everyone should have the same access to it. Greater dietary education and support in growing fresh produce in remote communities could also play a part to advance food security, encourage healthier diets and provide employment opportunities in remote areas. For our members the price and availability of fresh food is frequently raised as one of the major disincentives of working in these communities.

We thank the Committee for the opportunity to make this submission on behalf of Australia's Police. The PFA offers any further support to the Committee that you deem appropriate including appearing to give evidence if requested.

Sincerely yours

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. Weber', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Scott Weber
Chief Executive Officer
30 June 2020