The Tasmania Project

‘Don’t Panic!’: Tasmanian COVID-19 coping strategies help them prepare for future food disruptions

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This report presents findings from The Tasmania Project’s fifth general survey (TTP5), open from 24 September – 3 October 2021. In the following months, Tasmania experienced a snap three-day lockdown (15-18 October) and opened its borders (15 December). Just over one month after opening, COVID is rapidly circulating in the community and having significant impacts on the availability of food due to disruptions to supply chains and worker shortages.

Our results show that even before these disruptions, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the way people are shopping for, sourcing and storing food, with many Tasmanians paying more attention to food provisioning whilst navigating the financial constraints and negative self-perceptions of hoarding.

Respondents were asked if they were worried that people in their community would not work together in the advent of a future food crisis. Almost half (48%) of the 1200, mostly female (68%) respondents indicated they were worried, with 12% strongly agreeing with this statement. Almost a third (30%) of respondents reported that they were actively preparing for the impact of future crises on their food supply. Respondents were also asked if they were buying extra food and supplies in case of a second lockdown, with a quarter of respondents indicating they had been.

We now present our analysis of the results of a free text question, which asked respondents why they were buying extra food and supplies (n = 325). Because the majority of respondents were female, we use female pseudonyms to indicate the diversity of responses received.

**Key findings**

The key themes identified in the free-text question indicated many respondents were reacting by adopting a range of coping strategies. These included increasing their store of food provisions, expanding the amount of food grown, and exploring community-based solutions to food supply.

Respondents had negative perceptions about hoarding, but positive perceptions about building up a sensible supply of food. We discuss these three key food coping strategies below.
Coping Strategy 1: ‘A Little Bit Extra in the Pantry’

Most respondents reported wanting to make sure they had a good supply of pantry staples and not needing to visit a shop for different amounts of time, from four days to two months.

Alison (R308) stated ‘I always make sure I have two weeks of food in the house in case we have to quarantine... We had problems getting food during the last lockdown’. Barbara (R2) reported preparing by ‘ensuring around a fortnight’s food is in the pantry’ and Celia (R555) by ‘having a little extra food on hand’.

Most commonly, respondents stocked up on non-perishables, naming tinned foods, flour, rice, pasta, pulses, long life (UHT) or powdered milk, and pet food. Very few mentioned purchasing alcohol supplies, but many respondents reported that toilet paper was part of their preparations for a lockdown or food crisis.

Respondents emphasised that despite taking steps to prepare, they weren’t panicking or hoarding.

Della (R239) observed ‘Over the past year we have bought two of things we only usually buy one of. We’re not stockpiling out of panic and running stores out of stock, just getting a little extra to put a little extra away here and there’.

Erica (R303) noted that they were ‘maintaining sensible, but not hoarding, supply levels of food and essentials at home’. Respondents living in rural areas or who had experience living in remote regions pointed out that they were used to maintaining stocks of food for longer periods. For them, little had changed.

For other respondents, however, lockdowns were an opportunity to alter past habits and adopt new ones, such as learning new skills like preserving fruit, being more creative with cooking such as making bread, and broadening diets, for example, by eating more plant-based foods.

While most appeared confident in their preparations for further lockdowns, some were less sure. It was noted that not everyone could afford to keep extra supplies of food on hand. Fiona (R398) noted that ‘people living week to week can’t stockpile’.
Coping Strategy 2: Realising Backyard Bounty

Thinking about potential future COVID-19 lockdowns and associated food crises, many respondents turned to their backyards to grow fruit and vegetables and keep chickens.

For some, this was the first time they had grown their own food, while for others it was a continuation or expansion of existing production. Several respondents saw it as an opportunity to grow a few extra greens, while others aspired for greater self-sufficiency.

There were also several respondents who saw it as an opportunity to engage in permaculture food production and decrease reliance on supermarkets and ‘just-in-time’ supply chains.

Karen (R667) for example reported that she was ‘participating in a permaculture short course to build personal and community resilience’.

In addition to growing more food, many respondents were seeking food beyond their own backyard by foraging, hunting and fishing.

Provisioning extended to the equipment needed for these activities, with a number of respondents indicating they were purchasing hunting equipment, additional guns and fishing nets.

Georgia (R698) noted: ‘She’ll be right I have a garden and chooks’; Harriet (R222) stated that they ‘can’t afford to buy more food, but am growing a veg garden’; Indigo (R908) claimed that ‘I’ve improved/ expanded my home vegetable garden and learned to preserve, bake, and all those things my grandmother told me I should be able to do!!!’; and Janine (R880) stated that she was ‘Extending my vegetable garden, it’s now double the size!’.
Coping Strategy 3: Community Connections

Community connections were a key part of many respondents’ planning. That is, they saw connecting with local producers and local relationships as a way of securing food supply into the future. For some responders this meant shopping locally.

Lauren (R644) stated that ‘I try to support local growers’ and Mary (R973) reported having ‘built up better relationship[s] with local retailers, to enable online purchasing from local providers if needed’.

Noreen (R955) noted that they were ‘sourcing local food supplies for the things we don’t grow’ and Barbara (R2) that they were ‘seeking local sources of fruit and vegetables so as to not be reliant on supermarkets’.

For others, community connections were based on forms of non-market exchange. Odette (R275) claimed to be ‘growing and preserving my own food’ and ‘swapping with neighbours’ and Paula (R677) mentioned a ‘good community network that shares food surplus’.

Other respondents saw interpersonal relationships as the basis of future security. Quinn (R42) noted the importance of ‘making strong connections with community’; Robyn (R394) of ‘connecting with people in our neighbourhood’; Sandra (R721) of ‘staying connected to local community’; and Toby (R66) of building ‘community resilience’.

These answers are striking when considered alongside our findings that majority of respondents were worried that people in their community would not work together in the advent of a future food crisis, and suggests that many respondents see community as a potential solution.

Further research

Responses to this survey raise a number of interesting questions about the food coping strategies people adopt and how these have changed during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly during lockdowns. To better understand these strategies, it would be interesting to extend the questions we have asked about food provisioning in general to specific types of food such as ‘comfort food’, ‘nutritious food’ and alcohol.

Recent supply chain disruptions impacting food supply since Tasmania opened its borders and due to illness and isolation requirements are posing new challenges and additional research would be useful to assess any shifts in household coping strategies in these new circumstances.